



STEALING
THE ALPHA'S
HEART

SKYE WILSON

STEALING THE ALPHA'S HEART

A REJECTED MATES ROMANCE

SILENT RIDGE PACK

BOOK 1

SKYE WILSON

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Stealing The Alpha's Heart

BOOK 1

LYSSA

“Oh my gosh, can you believe that? How cringe, right?”
“Right? What was that? *‘Like wolves, we are pack animals, and it is our differences in strengths that make us better together.’*”

“Honestly, I think he just wanted to hear his own voice. Since when does a walk-through graduation mean your principal is practicing his furry fantasy?”

“Oh em gee! I totally bet he is furry with all that wolf talk! Like I was expecting him to start howling at the moon!”

“What did you think of that weirdness, Lyssa?”

I nodded absently, hardly listening as my friends verbally eviscerated our principal. I couldn’t bring myself to care, my mind already planning the million and one things I needed to do.

I tried to keep on top of things in my life, but sometimes my plate was so full that it felt like I was drowning. And I was in one of those times. My high school career was coming to an end, everything was getting more expensive, and I still didn’t have a job.

“Hello! Earth to Lyssa!”

I blinked, pulling my head out of my locker. “Huh?”

“What did you think of our principal’s ten-minute diatribe about how we need to embrace our inner wolf or whatever?”

“Uh... it was a little strange,” I offered before returning to my task. I didn’t feel like making fun of the middle-aged man for trying to be a little outside the box. As far as school administration went, he was a nice guy and had shot me money for lunch a couple of times without making me feel like a

beggar.

Thankfully, my friends didn't expect me to be overly verbose, and the conversation kept right on rolling.

"Hey, does anyone want to go out?"

That was Sarah Jane, my bright and bubbly friend that I'd met freshman year. That whole thing had been a little weird. She'd marched right up to me while I was reading a book in the library after school, announced that we were friends, then slid me a soda. I was too surprised to tell her that wasn't how things worked, and I would have been wrong, considering she was still in my inner circle four years later.

Which was quite impressive, if I was being honest. I wasn't exactly prone to trusting people.

A chorus of positive answers rose from our group, and I kept myself busy pulling things out of my locker so I wouldn't have to answer. I was broke as a joke and had so much to do, but I hated saying no to my friends.

Not that they bullied me or anything. They were pretty understanding as far as teenagers went, but I always had a slight pang of missing out whenever I had to come up with some excuse why I couldn't join in on their little outings.

Sure, I supposed I could just ask one of them to spot me, but I wasn't keen on that. Call it pride, call it whatever. I just preferred to keep my business to myself.

"Oh, oh, I heard earlier today that there's a party at Matthew Rigdon's house!"

That caused the jubilation in their group to stop awkwardly and Vanessa, the girl who'd been excitedly talking, blushed.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"Dude, that's Lyssa's ex."

I sighed because how could I not? Matt was indeed my on-again, off-again, on-again, and off-again once more boyfriend. I liked him okay, and he was cute, but we were fundamentally opposites as people. Not to mention that he wanted completely different things than I did. Probably because he was a rich kid with parents who supported and loved him while I was... well, *me*.

He always wanted to be closer than I felt comfortable, always wanted our lives intertwined in ways I wasn't ready for. We weren't even in the same spot regarding sex, so that had never happened between us either.

“Guys, it’s fine. We’re still friends; we’re just taking a break to explore our options.”

“That’s what you said the last time…” Sarah Jane pointed out in a sing-song voice, returning to cleaning out her locker.

“And the time before that,” Stacy added.

“Aaaaand the time before that.”

“All right, guys, I get it,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You can give it a rest.”

Sarah Jane popped her head back out of her locker, smiling broadly. “So, we’ll see you tonight then?”

I paused for a moment, trying to mentally rearrange my schedule to see if I could do it. Logic said I shouldn’t, but my heart was fully on board. After all, since we were graduating, our time together wouldn’t remain the same. Everyone was moving on to the next phase of their life while I was still floundering, just trying to survive. We’d all go in different directions, and while we’d always be friends, I’d be stupid to pretend everything would stay the same.

“Yeah, you’ll see me tonight. Could you remember to bring me your brother’s old cap and gown? I forgot to get my own before the deadline.”

That was a lie. I just couldn’t afford it. But once again, that was my business and didn’t need to be proliferated around my friend group.

“Yeah, sure! It’s no problem.”

Not for the first time, I was incredibly grateful for how generous my friends were and that they didn’t ask too many questions about any of my requests.

We all finished cleaning out our lockers and then made our way to the exit. While a couple of us walked, most of my friends had their own cars, or their parents picked them up, so the parking lot was our real goodbye spot. With a wave and some promises not to be *too* late, I headed off.

But I didn’t head to where I was staying just yet. Instead, I went right towards the main shopping area, going into the first restaurant I saw.

“Hello, can I help you?” the hostess said, all bright and bubbly. Maybe I’d be chipper too, if I had a job. But as a high schooler, I was having a hard time getting hired anywhere.

“Yeah, I was wondering if I could speak with your hiring manager?”

I knew that was unorthodox. Usually, people were supposed to ask for an application first, but I was eager to skip some unnecessary steps.

“Uh, he usually doesn’t talk to people directly. Not without going through

our online portal first.”

I nodded, giving her what I hoped was my sunniest smile. “I know, but it’s kind of an emergency situation. You’d be doing me a huge solid.”

The girl hesitated for a moment, chewing her lip, and I gave her my best puppy dog look. “All right, I’ll be back. But I’m not promising anything.”

I clapped my hands together in a praying gesture, half-bowing. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

Maybe I was laying it on a little thick, but I was desperate for a job. Sure, I was pretty good at skirting the law to keep myself fed and in some form of shelter, but it didn’t mean I *liked* doing it. It would be a lot less stressful to be on the up-and-up.

“You can wait in the booth over there.”

She pointed to one near the corner that was in intense, direct light from a window. Yeah, it made sense that one would remain empty.

I headed over, trying to sit straight and look like a model employee. What exactly that was, I wasn’t entirely sure, but maybe that was why I wasn’t getting hired.

About ten minutes later, I was surprised when a tall, broad man with a ruddy face came out from the back. Oh, I’d half expected to be told to get lost. But he spotted me and just a beat or two later, sat down across from me.

“Jessica tells me that you’re looking for work?”

“Yes! I know the job market is pretty tough, so I just wanted to introduce myself. Make an impression, you know?”

“I see. And what hours are you looking to work?”

“During the day, mostly. I’m doing online school at night, and as a young woman, I don’t really want to walk around the city on my own at night.”

“You don’t have a car?”

I could hear the apprehension in his voice instantly, my stomach twisting. “No, but I live just down the road! Less than a five-minute walk. That’s one of the reasons I thought this would be a great place to work.”

“I see. Well, we’ve gotten away from paper applications, but there is a way for me to flag applications that come through our online portal as a priority. I just need your phone number.”

“Would an email work? Mine’s pretty unique.”

“Uh, sure.”

Whew. Thank goodness he didn’t call me on that. Sure, my email was some cutesy thing from when I was a freshman, but that wasn’t why I used it.

I'd learned after my first three failed interviews that possible employers didn't like when someone didn't have a phone. In fact, for a lot of them, it was an automatic disqualification.

"Great!"

I spelled out my email for him, and he wrote it down, my heart pounding in my chest. Maybe it was stupid to be so concerned about something as simple as an informal meeting with a possible boss, but I really wanted a job.

"All right, well, if that's it, that'll be all, Miss...."

"Lyssa!" I said quickly. "Lyssa Clarence."

"Right, I'll be in contact soon, Miss Clarence."

Goodness, I could only hope that he was telling the truth and not just gassing me up.

"Thanks! You have a good day now!"

"You too."

With that, we shook hands and I headed out, feeling a little more hopeful. But I wasn't the type to put all my eggs in one basket, so I headed right to the next place.

And then the next place.

And then the place after *that*.

By the time I hit up every restaurant and place with a hiring sign out, my back was killing me. It turned out hauling everything that was in my locker home was a pretty intense workout. But I kept going nonetheless, my drive pushing me until I'd spoken with every manager I could.

Most of the meetings went pretty well, enough for me to not feel like the entire trip was a dud, and I finally headed home.

It wasn't the longest walk, thankfully. Certainly longer than I'd told the first manager, but not more than fifteen minutes. By the time I arrived, I was exhausted through and through. Goodness, I just wanted to lie down until it was time to go out again with my friends.

"Hey there, Lyssa! You look beat!"

I managed to flash the doorman a genuine smile. He was a sweet bean, for all that he was kind of nosy.

"Hey there, Mr. Connors. I've just had a crazy day. I can't believe I'm graduating!" It was more conversation than I wanted, but I needed to stay on friendly terms with the guy.

"It's an important time of your life. Are you excited to spread your wings and leave the nest?"

Goodness, excited was probably not the word I would use. Endlessly terrified had a much more honest ring to it.

Naturally, I didn't say as much.

"For sure! I can't wait to live out my own!" Not like I hadn't been doing that for several years already...

"Ho, ho! And what about your parents? Are they as excited as you?"

"Oh, ya know, they're coping. My mom sobs over my baby clothes while my dad pretends nothing is happening."

More lies, but at least they were cute ones. And ones I had to keep up, considering the doorman had seen me walk in with a family and assumed they were mine. In reality, they'd just been holding the door open for me since my hands were full with the one box of possessions I'd had at the time. Naturally, I let his assumption keep up, and I had no idea how the family hadn't corrected him. I was sure that he must have said something about me to them. Maybe they had social anxiety or just thought the doorman was a little off his rocker, however, because he still seemed none the wiser.

"Aww, how sweet. Many people would give anything to have parents who cared for them like that."

Oof, if that wasn't an arrow right through my heart. "Yeah, tell me about it."

With a vaguely awkward goodbye, I made my way to the mailroom where I managed to rent a PO box. It hadn't been easy, but luckily a six-month contract was surprisingly cheap. It took me about three full days to peruse as much of the city as possible, collecting bottles and cans to recycle, but it was most definitely worth it.

While I was able to skirt rules and obstacles pretty consistently, I'd found that I couldn't get around needing somewhere to receive mail reliably. Whether it was official documents, school stuff, or aid requests, having a place all of that could go had considerably improved my life.

Usually, there wasn't a ton in it, but considering the big milestone I was approaching in life, there had been at least one thing in it every day. Unlocking my little box, I pulled the three or so letters out and sorted them while I headed to the elevator.

It turned out none of it was important. Just junk mail and ads for stores that I never could hope to afford.

But I sure have stolen from them.

The thought made me giggle, and I placed a hand over my mouth even

though I was alone as I walked out of the mailroom. I didn't *like* that I had to steal, per se, but the adrenaline rush of it could sometimes be kind of fun. Probably not the best attitude to have, but I liked to think of it as looking on the bright side of life.

I paused at the exit to throw away the junk mail, only to have my attention drawn by something... *peculiar*.

I couldn't say what made me look up, but I did, my eyes connecting with a man who had just walked into the lobby. He was a tall, uptown-looking fellow heading for the far too fancy restaurant below the lobby. His hair was a deep, royal brown like the earth itself and his eyes were an intense, foreboding umber. With his broad shoulders, strong features, and impeccable outfit, he would fit right into the expensive bistro. It was the kind of place I would never be allowed, where I imagined sirens sounding if I dared to even step onto the premises.

And for a moment, just a moment, I felt inexplicably drawn to him. For some strange reason, I was reminded of science class in sixth grade, when the teacher had put two strong magnets at either end of his desk and let them inevitably pull towards each other. I couldn't explain it; I didn't have words for it. All I knew was that my entire mind was suddenly honing in on the handsome stranger across the room.

His eyes sparkled with an intensity that had me frozen, and I swore I could smell his cologne from where I was standing. But it wasn't a cloying, choking scent like the overabundance of Axe that the high school boys around me abused. No, it was woodsier, more natural, but with the undeniable musk of *man* and *strength* that had me salivating.

What the hell?

Snapping out of it, I jerked my head down and power-walked to the elevator. I must be tired because that had never happened to me before. How embarrassing! My pulse was pounding like I'd run a marathon, and my body reacted like I'd just gotten out of a heavy petting session. All the stress definitely had to be getting to me.

Thankfully, the elevator ride was enough to recover my dignity, and I felt more like myself as I exited onto my floor. Taking a deep breath, I stepped off, checking the notice on the community board to see when the next scheduled tours were.

Goodness, I loved that the building's owners were so transparent. It made my life as a squatter so much easier. I could see that there were tours of

prospective apartment renters scheduled throughout the weekend, but as long as I got up and left during a decent hour, they would never know I was there.

Then, once they were long gone, I could come back at night to at least one of the three apartments I floated through. Sure, I would have to hide what meager stuff I had, but I was used to that and had all sorts of borrower nooks and crannies to which no one was any the wiser.

Double-checking the schedule multiple times to commit it to memory, I headed to the first apartment, knowing I would be fine for the night there. Which, you know, was pretty important considering I had a graduation to prepare for.

Once I was finally in my ill-begotten refuge, I dropped my bag and sighed in relief. But there wasn't much time to rest because I *definitely* needed a shower. I knew I'd really exerted myself, but I felt like I smelled much stronger than I usually did, even after a good workout.

Strange.

It was probably the stress, so I hurried to take a nice, cool shower and followed it up with one hotter than the fires of hades, as all sane people did.

I was in the middle of it, recuperating from my stressful day, when I heard one of the realtors letting people into another apartment. I couldn't pick out her exact words, but she was merrily doing her schtick. Not for the first time, I was very grateful that she wasn't observant enough to wonder why the sound of running water was coming from a supposedly unoccupied dwelling.

But as I scrubbed, I couldn't help but wonder who she was showing around. Was it a wealthy couple looking for a home away from home? An internet celebrity that wanted to move to the big city? Whoever they were, chances were that they were loaded. People in the buildings were great hits for pickpocketing, or at least they would be if it weren't for the cardinal rule of not picking where one lived. It was too easy to draw attention to myself that way, and the last thing I wanted was a bunch of cops sniffing around trying to figure out why so many theft reports were coming from the same building.

No, I would just have to keep my hands to myself until I was far from where I was squatting. It had kept me safe, and safety was one of my top priorities.

When my shower was done, I toweled off and sat down to write thank you letters to some teachers who had done kind things for me. Whether it was helping cover sports equipment back when I was younger, lending me lunch

money, or even writing me letters of recommendation for colleges I would never get into, I wanted to show my appreciation. The world was a dog-eat-dog place, so I wasn't going to let their generosity go unappreciated.

That took me a long while, and I didn't quite have time to finish them all before I needed to start getting ready, so I put them to the side for the time being. Grabbing all the makeup samples I'd managed to squirrel away and stuff my friends had given me over the years —expiration date what? — I started putting on my 'glamour face', as Sarah would say. I wasn't an expert by any means, but I'd learned a thing or two from my friends over the years.

When I was satisfied with my simple eyeliner, eyeshadow, and bold lip, I moved to my hair, plaiting it into a smooth braid. In a way, it almost felt ritualistic, and some of the anxiety in the back of my head ebbed as I pulled out some baby hairs and styled them so the curls accentuated my look.

All in all, I felt pretty. If I had any luck, some of my friends would get pictures on their phones that I could later ask them to send me. Even if we all moved on with our lives, I would always cherish the happy times we had together.

With one last glance at the clock I'd managed to steal last year, I hid all of my things away in their hidey-holes then headed out early.

MAHLAN

I picked up another tie, regarding it before setting it down again. I felt ridiculous mulling over my outfit choice like a teenager going to prom, but I wanted to look my best, considering I was meeting several older, local alphas.

Which meant powerful, put together, in control, and successful. That was a lot for a single suit to say, which was half of what was contributing to my trepidation.

In the end, I just chose generic black. It was imposing, simple, and classic. Besides, I was tired of thinking about something as banal as fashion when I had real things to worry about.

Gathering everything I needed out of my relatively underutilized walk-in closet, I set all the item pieces out and proceeded to pace my living room for nearly ten minutes. A vital part of the dressing process, naturally. Physically, I may have been at home, but mentally I was already at the meeting, practicing exactly what I was going to say.

“I realize the previous alpha had big shoes to fill...”

No. That wasn't it. While it was true that I'd only recently come into my role due to the untimely death of our previous pack leader, Bertram Sawyer, saying that right out of the gate could be seen as gloating, which was not the foot I wanted to start on. Only the weak and posturing needed to lord over the dead in such a way.

Even if the previous alpha had absolutely screwed us over, he'd been killed in a raid that cost our pack our moonstone. And with no direct heir, he'd left a beta in charge, one John Thomas, until I stepped in to take over.

As a natural-born alpha, I was primed to lead, but that didn't mean I wasn't a bit... nervous.

But I had to get that under control because if I showed any weakness, all the more established alphas would pick up on it, and that was the last thing my pack needed.

I paced for another few minutes before I moved back to putting my suit on, and I carefully tied my tie in the mirror. Once the ensemble was completed, I felt better, a little more polished and in control — which was exactly what I needed.

Checking my watch, I realized I was cutting it close if I wanted to make it to John's house on the edge of town. This wasn't some social event where being late was a fashionable thing. Oh, no, wasting the time of the elder alphas would be incredibly rude and not the first impression I wanted to give.

I wasn't going to grovel, that had never been my style, and it never would be. And I wasn't going to become some brown-nosed sycophant who did whatever he could to ingratiate himself to them. But I did believe in showing the proper respect and appreciating how well the elders had led their packs.

Hurrying out, I hopped into my car and headed to John's house. Considering we both had vehicles, it might have been more expedient to have him meet me at my place. However, since we still hadn't found the man who'd killed Bertram, we were being a little more cautious about the predictability of our schedules.

So, if that meant I drove to John's to switch cars and have him act as my chauffeur to the alpha meeting, so be it.

I made it in record time, and if that was because I sped a little, no one was any wiser. Thankfully, John was already dressed and ready to go. I parked my car in his small, but well-kept, garage and then slid into the back seat of his subtly armored transport vehicle.

It didn't look much different than a particularly classy black SUV, but I knew that it had reinforced glass and metal plating in several of the doors. Not enough to stop a full-on attack, but enough to buy time to evaluate the threat and get into a better position. And if there was one thing I learned, sometimes mere seconds meant life and death when it came to battle.

"Any progress on the search?" I asked as John drove. It was still somewhat miraculous to me how he didn't need a GPS to navigate the city; most of the streets and locations were committed to his memory.

"Having the video helped, but it's still slow going," John answered

honestly. “We might have found a connection with a company we were looking to be involved with before, but nothing solid.”

“Ah, that’s the one where Theo has been corresponding with the CEO?”

“I believe so, sir. He’s set up a meeting, correct?”

“Yes. Fingers crossed we’ll be able to obtain their financial records to see if they have any suspicious payments. Life-ending payments.”

“Yes, sir.”

The conversation shifted to other things, primarily busywork and incidentals from running a pack. When I’d been a young alpha, I’d always thought being a pack leader was all running in the moonlight and hunting in a coordinated attack. If someone had told me it was a lot of politics and diplomacy, I probably would have been pretty discouraged.

But I liked to think I was handling it well enough. I just had to hope the elders all agreed. Not that I was going to kowtow to them, of course. But I’d rather not go to war with a rival pack in my first year of being alpha.

It didn’t take long to get to the Langhouse building the restaurant was under. It was a high-rise of upscale apartments that my financial company owned. I was flattered that the elder alphas were willing to meet in a place deep in my territory. It was a sign of trust that I wasn’t sure I had earned, but I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Drop me off at the lobby. I just want to walk the perimeter before I go to the restaurant.”

“Are you sure you want to be alone while I park the car?”

“Yeah, it should be fine.”

John gave a nod and proceeded to do as I asked. Straightening myself one last time, I strode towards the door.

But before I could open the door, something *delicious* hit my senses with the force of a freight train. I stood there momentarily, my mind whiting out except for the intense, mouthwatering scent.

It was indescribable, but at the same time, my mind was desperate to parse whatever was bewitching us. Lavender, blueberry, and chamomile, perhaps? But then I’d catch something citrusy. Then something more subtle, like earth or pine after a rain. It was a puzzle, enchanting me like a siren’s song.

I couldn’t say how long I stood there, breathing deeply like I was struggling with asthma. Eventually, I was able to get a hold of myself and open the door. I didn’t want any of the visiting alphas to see me huffing

outside like some feral, out-of-control beast.

“Sir? Is everything all right?”

I blinked, John drawing me back to reality. For some reason, he didn't seem like he could smell anything, which was outright baffling to my brain.

Was I going mad?

“Let me get the door for you.”

“Right. Of course.”

I took a step back and let him do just that, shaking the last of that beguiling scent out of my head. Was it some sort of sabotage by the other alphas? Did one of them have a mysterious vial of potent pheromones that they'd dumped outside the building's door? I had to admit it was a pretty good way to rattle me.

But I wouldn't be fooled, and I steeled myself against it. Or at least I did until I walked inside and my eyes landed on exactly where it had to be coming from.

There, just across the lobby from me, was a young woman, most likely in her early twenties. She had brown hair and blazing green eyes that were boring into mine, my entire body responding to her presence like she was a lightning rod to my energy.

I was vaguely aware that John was talking as he entered behind me, but I had no idea what he was saying. There was only the woman, her intoxicating pheromones, and far too much space between us.

It was like my inner wolf was trying to burst out of my skin so it could cross the scant space between them. I felt my mouth begin to water and my teeth ache like they wanted to be buried into her skin. If I could smell her so strongly from across the spacious lobby, what would it be like to be right up against one of her scent glands? Like the small one in her wrist? Or the oh-so-sensitive one on the side of her neck? My body jolted at that thought, elder alphas all forgotten. But before I could do anything about it, the woman broke eye contact and hurried to an elevator, disappearing from my sight.

Huh.

I was going to need to come back and find her. She had to live in the building, considering that she'd been coming out of the mail room. But fortunately enough, her absence allowed her pheromones to clear quickly, and I remembered why I was at the building.

“Sir? Is something wrong?”

John's voice drew me back to reality for the second time in just a couple

of minutes.

“No, no, I’m fine. Let’s go downstairs.”

“Of course, sir.”

The two of us descended the stairs, and I was pleased to see that I was the first one there. No elder alphas to witness my embarrassing display with a random woman in my territory. Sure, I liked the fairer sex as much as the next guy, and I always appreciated feminine beauty in all its different forms. But there was a difference between admiring a woman and being rooted to the spot, transfixed by her scent and presence.

Naturally, the staff knew us on sight, and I was taken to the back room, which I used whenever I had a private meeting. They brought me cool water as well as my signature whiskey, which allowed me to collect myself and put all thoughts of the young woman out of my mind for another time.

Frederick Cyprus arrived first, an impressively old alpha whose wrinkles were deeper than some people’s wallets. But even in his elderly years, he still maintained the posture and commanding presence that screamed alpha. He was the end goal for all of us, considering that the life span of a pack leader was significantly shorter than anyone else among wolf shifters.

“Alpha Cyprus,” I said, standing and offering my hand. “Welcome to my table.”

“Alpha Reese,” the man returned, taking my hand firmly. “It’s been most interesting watching your rise to this position.”

“It has been a quick one, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, but you are handling it well.”

I hadn’t expected an outright compliment, so I just gave him what I hoped was a polite nod. “Here, have a seat, please. Whatever you would like, my staff will provide.”

“Your hospitality is noted.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

And that was that. The elder alpha sat and started to settle. The next alpha arrived a few minutes later, and another after ten minutes. Then the rest filed in pretty quickly until I looked at a table full of established, confident alphas.

“Thank you for meeting here tonight,” I started, sounding commanding. “I know we have much to discuss.”

“That we do,” one of the elders, Jackoby Belcroft, said, his voice a low, wizened rumble. “For starters, what do you plan to do about your moonstone situation?”

Of course, they honed right in on that. Without the moonstone, I had nothing to swear in on. And while I thought a lot of the ritual around alpha meetings was overdone, there was no ignoring that lacking a physical connection to the moon was hard to work around.

“My pack and I are willing to do a blood oath.”

There was a moment of silence, not that I could blame them. While swearing-in on the moonstone was considered incredibly binding, a blood oath was on an entirely different level. Breaking such a thing was said to call curses that could wipe out entire packs and lineages across continents.

“And what of Sawyer’s beta?” That was Christian Guivant, who was one of the youngest elder alphas.

He meant John, who had served the previous leader dutifully, and I couldn’t help but feel a streak of protectiveness even though it was a perfectly valid question. “I have a couple of prospects I am exploring as his replacement, but currently, he has been a vital part of our pack’s transition.”

John, to his credit, remained quiet and calm from where he was standing against the wall. He was a great beta and had more than earned his retirement.

“Have you considered keeping him longer?”

Oh? That I hadn’t expected. Usually, when a pack transitioned from one alpha to another, the leader was expected to establish their beta and the rest of their support system pretty expediently.

“I am interested in knowing why you would advise that,” I said diplomatically. I liked John, but I’d thought that delaying the usual proceeds would make me look weak in front of the elders.

“You are young, are you not, Mahlan?”

“Alpha Reese,” I corrected as levelly as I could. Normally, I didn’t care about such things, but I needed to establish that I was an alpha just like the men around me, and I would be respected as such. “And I’m twenty-six, currently.”

“Ah, I remember when I was twenty-six,” Cyrus mused, sipping his bourbon. “What I wouldn’t give for the knees I had before my thirties.”

There was a chorus of agreeable sounds, and I couldn’t help but wonder what sort of lumbar issues were in my future. If I lived long enough to develop any, that was. Considering what happened to the last alpha, my future was less than assured.

“Twenty-six is quite young, and John has the expertise to aid you and train whoever you choose as your long-term beta. It would be prudent not to

waste such a resource.”

“I see your logic and I agree,” I said like I wasn’t intensely relieved. Even a year with John helping out would be a huge boon to me.

The conversation continued, and I could tell bit by bit that I was winning them over, especially when I got into my plans to build up our financials and security. As the leaders of wolf shifters, one of our biggest goals was to make jobs and safe spaces for other wolf shifters. Places where they could take time off for their natural, biological functions among people who understood. Places where they could build community and the vital bonds that helped so many packs keep peace with each other.

Only a couple of hundred years ago, having so many wolves in a single area would have resulted in an endless, bloody war. Territory fights were no joke. But with the increasing number of humans taking over anything and everything, our people had been forced to adapt.

Sure, there were still plenty of conflicts, evident with our dead pack leader, but we did try to avoid that for the most part.

“Well,” Alpha Hiro Watanabe said, possibly the first time he’d spoken since he arrived. He was a taciturn man whose father had immigrated to America and become the first Asian alpha in our state. He was a strict but fair leader, from what I’d heard. “I am satisfied with your plans, and I suggest we meet again in three months for an update.”

There was a chorus of agreement all around and relief flooded through me so thickly I knew that they could smell it. Oh, well, let them know that I was happy. It wasn’t a sign of weakness to be pleased that we all could reach an accord.

“In that case, let my staff get you all something to eat.”

Another chorus of positive responses. If there was one universal truth among wolf shifters, it was that pretty much everyone was always at least a little hungry.

Perhaps an hour or so passed, I wasn’t keeping track of the time, but eventually, the men wrapped up and started to leave. A few trickled off on their own, but I walked the main group out the door and to the valet station like a proper host.

Except we didn’t quite make it there. Only a few steps out the door, that same arresting scent hit me, stopping me dead in my tracks. Turning, I saw the girl exit the door and stride straight towards us.

The rest of the world fell away for a moment, leaving just her and me. I

tried to move through the alphas towards her, sure that she was just as captivated by me as I was by her. My heart thundered in my chest, my body trying to jump into its wolf form as some sort of release from her pull.

But before I could get close enough, she tripped, colliding with one of the elder alphas.

I reached out, hoping to catch her, gripping her arm to make sure she stayed on her feet. A faint blush spread across her lovely features as she sent the elder a sheepish grin. I wanted her to look at me, so I cleared my throat and spoke.

“Miss! Are you all right?”

Her head swiveled towards me and... something happened. I didn't know her nearly well enough to understand her expressions, but it seemed like a million played across her face at once.

“Oh, sorry, I'm fine! Just wasn't paying attention!”

“That's all right, darling,” Cyprus practically purred, which was not a very werewolf thing to do. Pervy old man. “You're good.”

“Aw, thanks!” With a strange look in my direction, she hurried off. Almost as if she was scared of something. Of someone.

... of me?

And that was how I met my soulmate.

LYSSA

“**W**hy, don’t you look lovely this evening!”

I sent the doorman a grin, doing a little spin. His comment might seem creepy coming from anybody else, but he was such a genuine, friendly older guy that it didn’t set off my alarm bells. He was almost like Santa if Santa went on a diet and cut his hair short.

“Thank you!” I said brightly. I still felt pretty and was excited to see my friends.

“You have fun now, and don’t forget to stay hydrated!”

“I will; don’t you worry about me!”

I headed to the door but spotted a group of well-dressed men before I exited. They were all rather strapping gentlemen for being older, broad-shouldered with somewhat imposing auras surrounding them.

But I didn’t care about that as much as I cared about how wealthy they looked —especially the gentleman with the large, black duster. I could recognize the genuine leather even from where I was standing and knew it must have cost quite a pretty penny.

I knew I wasn’t supposed to pickpocket around where I lived. I *knew* it. And yet the temptation was almost irresistible.

That amount of money was borderline life-changing. Wait, no, I knew it was *certifiably* life-changing. I scrimped and scavenged for everything I had. The idea of just being able to buy groceries for the month without obsessively calculating what everything cost was mind-boggling. I could afford to take the bus instead of walking everywhere! Maybe even get some new shoes!

I could even lie low for a long while. The issue with being a good

pickpocket was that doing it too much in one area was dangerous. Although I worked hard to hit different places all over town, it would be nice not to have to.

Still, I knew I shouldn't risk it.

Even if I really, really, and — add a whole lot more *really* — wanted to.

Don't do it, Lyssa... I warned myself.

Easier said than done, and that same temptation grew that much stronger when the guy in the duster pulled out his wallet, and I spotted the thickest, fattest stack of cash I'd ever seen out in the wild. That was far too much to pass up. I'd have to be a saint, and I was *far* from a saint.

And yet I still found myself exiting the building. Still found myself walking toward them. Still found myself eyeing them from the corner of my eye to try to find my mark.

And I still tripped and ran right into one of them.

Oops.

It was old hat by now, picking a pocket, and I made the move as easily as I breathed.

Naturally, he rushed to catch me, as most men did, and so did the men around him. It was only then that I realized that one of the well-dressed rich guys was the same man I spotted in the lobby.

Suddenly all I could smell was his scent, rich and inviting. It filled my nostrils, dragging me into feelings of familiarity and nostalgia. And — wait, was I drooling? I was pretty sure I was drooling, but I couldn't be bothered to care. I wanted to be closer to that man, closer to that scent, to let it envelop me until all my worries about money, my future, and everything else was just a distant echo.

“Miss! Are you all right?”

Oh, wait.

I shook my head, realizing the man was holding my arm, looking at me with concern. Right, I was in the middle of pickpocketing. I needed to get clear of the scene before anyone realized what was happening.

“Oh, sorry, I'm fine! Just wasn't paying attention!”

But it was hard not to be completely captivated by the man gripping me, his scent and presence swirling around my head like a specter.

“That's all right, darling,” my mark said in a borderline sleazy way. And by borderline, I meant completely. Totally. Without a doubt, sleazeball. Why were old men so gross sometimes?

Well, I didn't want to stick around and find out just how grody he might be, or to have him catch me, so that was my cue to leave.

With little more than that, I hurried off, ducking my head to try to stop them from being able to see my features. Although it was probably too late for that, considering I'd been staring like a dodo while getting drunk off the guy's scent.

Which was utterly bizarre. I'd always had a somewhat sensitive sense of smell, but it had never been so extreme that I was frozen in place by a guy's cologne with a mark's wallet thick in my hand.

Maybe it was some sort of psychosis brought on by stress. Maybe the guy just had *really* good detergent. Who knew? All I was certain of was that I needed to get away.

I ducked into the closest alley and power-walked toward my ex's. I would enjoy our last party before graduation much better with the serious windfall I just had.

"May I have your ticket, sir?"

I hesitated momentarily, my hearing — which was already pretty keen without being hopped up on adrenaline — picking up what had to be the valet.

"One moment, I put it in my wallet."

Shit.

My heart immediately started racing, and I picked up the pace. It was important not to run from lifting scenes because it would draw undue attention, but at least I was out of sight.

"Wait, my wallet isn't here!"

"Did you leave it in the restaurant?"

"No, I just checked it. It must have been..."

"The girl!"

Yeah, I had been made.

Footsteps started to rush after me, and I broke into a full-blown sprint. I hadn't been caught in years and wasn't anxious to repeat that experience. It was much easier to slip out of handcuffs when I was a kid.

"She went this way!"

Crap! I didn't know how they were following me so easily, but I quickly darted into another side alley and then another. I hoped my zigzag pattern would lose them because what could rich people know about the city's backstreets?

My plan seemed to work as I made a good distance. I paused, trying to quiet my breathing so I could hear. It was hard to make out anything over the thundering of my heart, but it seemed like I was in the clear.

Heaving a long sigh of relief, I wiped my forehead and turned around the corner. It was nice to take my pace down to a brisk walk and catch my breath. Only to have a pair of hands grab me and pull me into another alley.

“You!”

And suddenly I was face to face with several men from the group I’d just lifted from, including the one in the duster. How had the geezers caught up to me so quickly? I was pretty athletic, and they were... Well, they were *old*.

“Hey, let go of me!” I yelled. I’d been in several close scrapes in my life and knew the last thing I wanted to do was admit guilt. There was always the chance of bluffing in a situation or even returning the wallet to his person on the sly.

But before I could do any sleight of hand to get myself in the clear, the man started to search my pockets. I jerked in the grip of whoever was holding me, but their hands were like iron bars. Geez, these old men were strong!

It didn’t take the man long to find the wallet and pull it out, cash almost glistening to me. Internally, I cursed myself, wishing I’d tossed it into a trashcan to come and collect it later. That would have been the smart thing to do. Since when did I take such stupid risks?

“Do you have any idea who you’ve dared to mug?”

The man’s lips curled in anger, and I could feel danger rolling from him. Uh... I may have bitten off more than I could chew.

Fear bubbling in my stomach, I tried to get free again, yanking this way and that, but I was stuck fast. That wouldn’t do, so I lifted my foot and slammed my heel right into the top of my captor’s shoes.

“Ow!”

Whoever it was let me go, and I darted to the side, ready to bolt while I could, but I was caught again almost instantly. I fought back, pushing and shoving, but his grip was like iron.

“I want to help you, but you’re gonna have to calm down,” the man hissed. I finally looked up to see that it was the man from the lobby. His voice was so low that I doubted any of the others could hear, especially since I barely could.

Oh.

His scent was even stronger face to face, and my eyelids fluttered as it

flooded over me. I felt drawn to him in a way that couldn't be resisted. It was as inevitable as it was enticing, like a whirlpool slowly tugging me in. But I was so terrified out of my mind that the drooling and haziness didn't overcome me as it had before.

"You're going to learn a painful lesson today," the duster guy growled, his voice more animal than man.

But the man from the lobby cleared his throat, giving the advancing elder pause. "Alpha Cyprus, I apologize deeply for this. Please, let me handle this since this is my territory."

Alpha? Territory? What is he talking about?

My gaze fluttered between the two; my body so hopped up on adrenaline that I thought I was going to be sick.

I couldn't help but think of my friends. If something happened to me, what would they do? Would they worry about where I was? Would they think that I just ghosted? I didn't have a phone, so it wasn't like they could text me to see if I was okay, and I certainly had never invited them to the apartments I squatted in.

But the advancing older man, Cyprus or whatever, was apparently not buying whatever lobby-man was selling because he just shook her head.

"No. No one disrespects my pack or me. I haven't lived this long by allowing anybody to make us appear weak!"

There was more of that strange language. Had I inadvertently gotten myself involved with the mob? Was that even a thing anymore?

I was prepared for lobby-man to push me forward, because why would he stick his neck out to defend me from a guy who clearly was powerful and used to getting his way? But instead, he let out a low growl. It was almost animalistic, and something within me reacted as if he'd just shouted that he wanted to tear my guts out with his teeth.

That... that was a strange sound for a human to make, right? And it was even stranger that it made my body respond like it was interested, my blood rushing through me in a very different way than earlier.

"I apologize if I phrased that as a question. It was not. I *will* be handling this situation."

Lobby-man's tone was suddenly just as scary as Cyprus's, and I couldn't help but wonder exactly what I'd gotten myself involved with. It seemed kinda gangster-ish, and yet they didn't look or sound like what I envisioned someone like that to be.

Whatever the truth, I was caught between a rock and a hard place, and I had no idea which side would be better.

“Mahlan-” Cyprus started.

But suddenly, Mahlan shifted his grip on me, grabbing me by the back of my neck. And *just* as suddenly, I was filled with a floaty, comforting sensation that made me want to nap. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been so relaxed, and my eyelids fluttered yet again.

Maybe I should not go to the party and lie down instead. Or take a nice hot bath. Then again, it felt like I was in a bath already, all warm and comforted. Surely, nothing bad could happen when I felt so *nice*.

His scent came over me again, five times more potent than before, and every urge I had to run away pretty much evaporated. How could I ever not want that smell in my life? It spoke of power and safety. Strength and *home*. Things that I’d desperately longed for longer than I could say.

But then I was yanked in close to the... What was his name? Melon? No, that wasn’t right. Mehron?

Mahlan! That was it!

My moment of triumph was undercut, however, when his grip on me tightened, and I felt his lips at the side of my neck. That was all the warning I had before suddenly he *bit me!*

I let out a scream as his teeth sank into the side of my neck, alarm burning through the ephemeral sort of contentment that had clouded my mind. Trust my luck to accidentally pickpocket a group of cannibals or something like that! I was going to die. I was going to die alone and be made into a meat pie for some rich, old geezers to gobble up!

But then the man’s sharp, *sharp* teeth sank further into my skin and something impossible happened.

Pleasure, undiluted pleasure shot through me, along with a pervasive wave of happiness. Out of nowhere, I felt like I’d just shot up a million and one drugs all at once, sending me into the stratosphere of euphoria.

I couldn’t stand on my own anymore, and Mahlan went from holding me in place to supporting me entirely. But I didn’t care about any of that mess anymore. I just wanted to curl up with a wonderfully warm blanket and let myself enjoy the pleasure racking my body.

I could somewhat blearily make out Cyprus looking at me, Mahlan, then me again.

“She’s mine now, so I will be handling her.”

Wait, what now?

But I couldn't quite focus on it as my hand pressed against the bite mark on my neck, more endorphins rushing through me at the movement. Did he inject me with something? It was the only logical thing my sluggish brain could settle on. It wasn't like human bites typically had psychedelic side effects.

"And things were going so well...." Cyprus remarked, plenty of threat in his tone.

"There's no reason this has to escalate."

But Cyprus didn't look like he was calming down, and Mahlan held me closer in response. Conflicting feelings trickled through me along with the happiness, and it was hard to make sense of it all.

On the one hand, I was pretty sure I was getting kidnapped, which definitely wasn't good. But I also felt like I could trust the man holding me; he was a refuge from the advancing threats.

Why, oh, *why* had I gotten greedy? I knew better!

That answer didn't come to my addled mind, even as Cyprus's visage grew redder and angrier.

"You really would mate yourself to a street rat? Is that the way you want to start your pack as a new alpha?"

There was that weird-ass language again. What were they talking about? They didn't look like the normal gym-bros who used that kind of talk. Although, it was kind of funny to imagine the elderly, well-dressed men all banging out some heavy sets with a barbell.

"I will concern myself with that."

"This is foolish, young man."

Many things happened all at once. Out of nowhere, Mahlan handed me over to another man I hadn't noticed. He was slighter than the rest of them, and his aura was less threatening.

But with me out of the way, it was Mahlan's turn to suddenly advance on Cyprus, startling the older man backward as he snarled.

"This is *my* territory, and you would do well not to overstep your bounds!"

"Are you an idiot?" another one of the older men snapped.

"No, but I will not stand by and allow my mate to be talked to like that or threatened in the heart of my territory! I will make sure that she is properly reprimanded, so *leave!*"

The authority in his voice made me shiver, which caused the pleasant furor in me to rise higher. I *liked* that he was all bossy and strong in a way that I couldn't understand or explain.

What the hell was going on with me?

"Come," the man who was holding me gently said. "We should get some distance."

"Herrmm?" I asked sloppily. *Oh, yeah, totally brilliant. I'm a real diplomat with that one.*

But the smaller man helped me stumble/float a few feet away, so I was less in the thick of it. And just in time, too, because suddenly the men in front of me *exploded into wolves*.

"What the hell?"

That couldn't be right. I blinked and blinked again, yet that was exactly what happened. One moment they'd been two human males, and then the next, fur had erupted from their skin as they fell forward, their arms and legs bending, cracking, and making all sorts of sounds they shouldn't make. It happened too fast to be possible, and yet it stood out as a horrific montage in slow motion in my mind.

I was definitely going to have nightmares for the next few months.

The shock of it was finally able to cut through my euphoria like a hot knife through butter. They must have given me a hallucinogen because the alley suddenly had a pair of dueling wolves twice the size than they should have been.

I couldn't be there a moment longer, that much I knew. It burned through every functional part of my mind.

Desperate, I elbowed the man holding me in the stomach, then swung my head back, so my skull connected with his chin. It wasn't enough to drop him, but it did give me enough slack to rip myself out of his grip.

Wild out of my mind, I didn't look back as I sprinted off. I didn't know where I could be safe from drug-peddling mobsters who also were somehow animals, but the only thing I could think of was going to the school.

Surely there, I would be safe.

MAHLAN

I snapped my jaws as Cyprus lunged in the direction of my new mate. My new mate that was currently racing away from me at top speed. Part of me was incredibly hurt that she was abandoning me, but thankfully it was a small part. Most of me knew I needed to focus entirely on my opponent. After all, I had marked her, so we were bonded in an irrevocable way.

Sure, Cyprus was a lot older than me. He wasn't as strong, as fast, nor could he heal like I could. But he had years and years of experience on me. The stories of fights in his heyday were legendary, and I needed to take him seriously if I wanted to survive.

"You're really challenging us over a nobody?" another one of the elders, maybe Hiro, asked. I couldn't spare my attention long enough to figure out where the voice was coming from.

Because even with my conflicted feelings, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I needed to protect my mate. Sure, maybe she had tried to steal from one of our most venerated leaders. And yeah, perhaps she was bolting away as if her life depended on it, but none of that mattered. I needed to smell her scent again, to feel her body against mine.

When I'd bitten her neck, I was surprised that I hadn't fallen over from the shock. Instantly, I'd been swamped with those bonding chemicals that I'd always heard about but scoffed at. Suddenly I went from enjoying her scent and wanting more of it to *needing* it. Like water. Like the air itself.

Idiot! I heard Cyprus hiss, vicious and judging, in my head.

That was all the warning Cyprus gave before he lunged at me. I jumped backward, my wolf body responding quite well despite the fact I hadn't been

able to use it lately.

I wasn't delusional; although I'd trained plenty for this possibility, I'd never actually fought an alpha one on one. If I wanted to come out on top, I had to make sure that I didn't miss a beat.

Cyprus pressed his advantage, surging to try to snap at my throat while I was still in the middle of landing. But I managed to do a barrel roll to the side, fighting my wolf's instinct to never end up on his back during a fight.

And that move turned out to give me just the edge I needed. Cyprus skidded to a stop, his knees shaking as he tried to kill his momentum, and I blindsided him with a rush.

I didn't want to maim him when everything went so well, so I kept my jaw closed and used the blunt part of my head to slam into his side.

Cyprus went flying from the sheer force of it, crashing into one of those industrial dumpsters and denting it with a thundering crash. It was deafeningly loud, enough that even humans would no doubt be drawn to it.

Which meant we had a very limited time to finish things before risking exposing ourselves to a random citizen.

Not wanting to lose my advantage, I leaped over to Cyprus while he struggled to get to his feet, opening my jaw so my teeth could rest just over his jugular.

That was it. Somehow, I had won without either of us being injured.

Thank the moon.

I backed off, shifting back into my human form. Not for the first time, I was more than grateful that the magic of our condition allowed our clothing to return after a shift. Within reason, of course. I had heard of watches, diamond necklaces, and even wigs being lost or destroyed in the transition, but no one was left stark naked. That would complicate things in a way that would make it very hard for us to remain under the radar as a people.

Perhaps fortunately for me, Cyprus shifted back too, the rest of the alphas helping him to his feet. It was only when he tilted his head to bow in front of me that I realized the full ramifications of what I had done.

Wolf politics were intense and complicated things, but one of the tenets that all packs shared was that whoever won an alpha fight held dominance and authority over their defeated opponent. Even though I knew that, it took another beat for my mind to come to terms with the ramifications of what that meant.

I had a higher ranking than Cyprus. *I* was at the head of the table now.

The thought was dizzying, but I tried to tuck it deep within my mind. I'd accidentally changed the power structure of our little city, so I didn't need my ketones giving off signs of weakness.

I was well aware that I had just drastically complicated my life, as well as the lives of my pack, but I couldn't deal with it at the moment.

I had a runaway mate to find.

"You are all dismissed. Go home to your packs, and we will discuss more of this later."

I could tell that while some of the other alphas were in shock, several were *incredibly* displeased with what had just happened. I wasn't exactly thrilled either, but my hand had been forced.

I couldn't explain why, but I'd been inexplicably drawn to that woman ever since I saw her in the lobby, and once I'd bitten her... well, it was pretty much game over. I'd heard other shifters discuss their claiming bites before, sure. Plenty of them used flowery language or overwrought poetry that always made me roll my eyes. I remembered thinking that they were exaggerating. While the act could be fun, thrilling, or even erotic, there was no way it could be *that* good.

But biting the pickpocket *had* been that good. No, more than that. It was an indescribable tempest of pleasure, desire, and *belonging* that my inner wolf was desperate to feel again.

I waited until the other alphas turned and began to leave begrudgingly before following my mate's scent. I hated the acrid tones of fear that underlaid it, but otherwise, her trail was exhilarating. The perfect ambrosia, I felt like I could float along the pheromones like a cartoon character, tongue hanging out of my mouth while I drooled. Thankfully, real-life physics didn't work that way, and I could keep my feet on the ground while replaying all her features in my head.

She was stunning — I knew that much. But there was a power to her form that I liked. She had to be an athlete, that was for sure. And there was a sharpness to her green eyes that intrigued both me and the wolf within. She had the gaze of a real hunter, someone cunning and bright.

I ran as fast as possible through the scent markings, not caring if anyone stared at the well-dressed man streaking through back alleys and side streets. Clearly, she knew where she was going, which made the chase all the more fun.

And the more I followed her, the stronger the scent was, telling me I was

growing closer.

Emotions swirled through me, making a thick concoction of feelings. Pride at her hasty retreat and her excellent instinct. Arousal at how her body called out to mine. Rejection, sharp and sour that she didn't seem nearly as afflicted as I was. Exhaustion and worry at how her actions had caused me to upheave the somewhat tenuous peace in our conglomeration of packs. They mixed in a confusing mishmash, but I didn't let it distract me from the task at hand.

And that was when I spotted her, darting out from between two buildings and towards a high school across the street. I practically flew across the street, cutting her off and herding her back towards the alleyway.

To her credit, she seemed unfazed by me, just spinning on her heel and running the other way. I had to admit I was a little surprised, considering a bite was supposed to cause a blissful, euphoric state. I could have been wrong, but she certainly didn't look relaxed or happy to me.

Finally, I managed to get her to a dead end, and she turned to face me with defiance. My inner wolf bared his teeth as if trying to tell her to obey her alpha. But I knew better than that, especially if adrenaline was causing the woman to ignore the joy of a claiming bite.

Besides, there's something different about this woman.

I could tell she was a shifter without a doubt, but my inner wolf couldn't call out to hers as Cyprus had done with me. Almost all shifters could silently communicate with each other in their animal forms, but when my wolf tried with my mysterious mate, there was just a staticky sort of nothing.

With her staring at me, I stepped closer, trying to exude protection and calm. But she stepped back, nearly tripping on some uneven concrete. My instincts demanded I rush forward and catch her, but I managed to stop myself. She looked so damn terrified; I didn't want her to be any more frightened.

"Look, I don't want to hurt you."

"You *bit* me!"

Her sheer shock was bizarre to me. She had to be a shifter. I could tell from her pheromones to the sheer magnetic pull she had on me. Bites were a part of nearly all shifter cultures. Whether mating bites or otherwise, there was a history going back far longer than anyone's memories.

And yet she looked like she had no idea what was going on.

What if she didn't?

The idea made me sick to my stomach. What kind of history did she have not to know even the most basic shared rule amongst shifters? The neglect...

I shook my head and cleared my thoughts. I needed to concentrate on calming her and could worry about the why of everything later. All I knew was that my entire hindbrain was screaming that I needed to protect her. To comfort her. To wrap her up in soft things and feed her rich food until those too-sharp angles of her face rounded out.

“I did that to protect you.”

“Bullshit!”

It took quite a bit of willpower not to sigh. “I know this is a lot for you right now, but we need to go.”

I took another step towards her, not trying to look intimidating but also projecting that I was not to be argued with. While I had plenty of natural inclinations of how to treat my mate as an alpha, I didn’t exactly have a lot of experience in that department.

“Like hell I’m going with you!”

While I was trying to be patient, there was a line, and I was worried about my mate’s long-term effects of ignoring the chemical rush of the bite for an extended period. I’d never heard of such a thing, so naturally, it made me leery.

So, I reached down within me and pulled out a trick I hadn’t used in quite a while.

“You *will* come with me,” I said, using my alpha voice. I saw it affect her nearly instantly, her eyes glazing over as her shoulder relaxed ever so slightly. “There you go. Don’t worry; you’re safe now. I promise.”

I reached into my pocket to call John, but the moment our gazes broke, she tried to bolt past me.

“Hey now!”

Only my reflexes from battle training allowed me to grab her, hauling her back into the alley.

Why is she so scared of me?

I didn’t know, and answers didn’t come considering the girl was writhing, hissing, and cursing her head off.

“Let me go! Please! You have to let me go!”

I hated how shrill her voice was. The thought of upsetting her, of making her afraid, made my stomach twist. I was supposed to be *protecting* her, providing for her — not terrorizing her.

“Please! Tonight is important! You don’t understand!”

The crack in her voice brought me to a standstill, and I finally looked at her outfit. She was dressed quite nicely, and a lightning-hot strike of jealousy cracked through me.

Growling slightly, I backed her into a wall, trying to tell if I could catch anyone else’s scent on her.

But no, nothing. She must have just showered because all I could smell was *her* and her laundry.

“If you give me just a few minutes to get somewhere secluded, we can talk. It’s imperative.”

“Are you kidding? I’ve watched enough True Crime docs to know that being taken to a second location is instant death!”

The absurdity of it all forced a bout of laughter out of my mouth. “I’m not going to kidnap or kill you!” Didn’t she understand how incredibly *important* she was to me? That I would sooner cut off my head before purposefully hurting her.

She really had no idea what was going on, which was impossible! And yet...

“You...” she rubbed her hand over her neck, eyelids fluttering slightly. The small sign of being affected by the bite bolstered my pride. At least she wasn’t *completely* impervious to me. “You must have drugged me or something. I’m lucky it faded off!”

“Oh, no, *no*, I would never drug you. Or let you be drugged! I don’t want to harm you!”

“How in the hell do you expect me to believe that?”

“Because it’s true!” I could feel myself growing more exasperated by the second. I’d never heard about someone having such trouble with a mate. But from how I was drawn to her, to the bite itself, to her reaction, nothing was going how it should! “Just... just think about it and feel the mark on your neck. Please.”

To my great surprise, she did, her fingers gently running over the mark. Once more, her eyes glazed over, growing foggy with gentle bliss.

“I put that mark on you to protect you, and you’re now my mate. We’re linked together, some say, by fate itself.”

She still had that hazy look, so I pressed forward with my explanation. “That bite is fresh, so it’s still releasing endorphins into your system. You should get a little zap of happiness every time you touch it. Or perhaps...” I

hesitated for just a moment before deciding to take a minor gamble. "...even arousal."

She kept gently stroking it, and every press of her fingers made me want to do the same myself, to feel how I'd permanently marked her as mine. But I kept my hands to myself. Considering just how tenuous the moment was between us, I knew there was a limit to how much I could press my luck.

"Will it scar?" she asked. I couldn't quite decipher her tone, which was unusual for me.

"It is permanent."

"...oh."

She swayed slightly, and the last of my control waned. I closed the distance between us, drawn like a comet caught in the gravitational pull of a celestial body, raising my hand slowly.

"If that feels good now, it's even better when your mate touches it."

"My mate?"

"Yes. Let me show you."

My heart was thundering in my chest, and my inner wolf was practically howling as I slowly, ever so slowly, reached out to cup her cheek.

By the *moon*, her skin was so soft. Little crackles of pleasure sank into my palm, making goosebumps raise all along my arm. It was like my entire body was wired to respond to her, and my brain could barely keep up.

And yet I liked it. I liked it *a lot*.

As careful as ever, I tenderly ran my hand down from her cheek to her neck, gently trailing my fingers over her mark. There was nothing that could have possibly prepared me for what that was like. The moment I made contact, it was like I was feeling everything she was, hazy pleasure falling over my every sense like the world's most lovingly crocheted blanket.

It was electric. It was warm. It was everything I never knew I'd been missing in my life and more. I could feel it rewriting my DNA instantaneously, completely changing my brain's wiring and my wolf.

And yet I wasn't scared of it. No, I wanted to embrace it, bury myself in it until I forgot what it was like before.

Thankfully, my mate didn't flinch away. Didn't recoil. Instead, her eyes slid closed, and she moaned, beckoning me in.

I couldn't help it, nor did I want to. I leaned in, barely brushing my lips across the mark. It was even better than my fingers, drenching my every cell in desire and protectiveness.

Our bodies pressed together, it was like the lobby, the bite, and everything combined. I had no idea it was possible to feel things so intensely. No wonder people got so obsessed with finding a mate.

Like a man possessed, I couldn't stop. I lazily kissed at her mark, drinking in every sensation, reaction, even every twitch. I was drunk on her, and yet I wanted to drink more.

"T-touch me."

It was the tiniest breath of a request that froze me in place. I pulled away, ever so slightly, even though it wasn't what I wanted to do. "What did you say?"

Her sweet, slightly raspy voice floated from her mouth again in a tantalizing whisper.

"Touch me, *please*."

Who was I to deny a request like *that*?

My free hand settled on her shoulder, and I swore I could feel her heart thundering below my palm. It was an intoxicating feeling, just like every other part of her, pulling me further into her intrigue.

I let it sit there for a moment, the weight telling her that I was real, anchoring her to the moment even though I was sure all the endorphins made her want to float away just like I'd wanted to earlier.

Once I was sure she was somewhat attached to the moment, I let my palm trail over her form — the softness of her curves, the strength of her lithe muscles. I could feel far too many of her bones sticking out more than they were supposed to, and the desire to provide for her pushed to the front of my brain again.

She was so *perfect*. Everything I ever wanted and more. My body screamed for her, deafening all my worries and concerns for the future.

"More," she moaned, the need practically dripping from her words. "*More!*"

It was so tempting too. And it would be so easy. But her scared expression flitted through my memory, and I knew I didn't want to take advantage of what was happening. Especially since she clearly didn't understand what was going on.

A whimper escaped her as I pulled away, and it took all of the strength within me not to give into everything my body wanted.

"Hey, we need to go."

"No, no, just *touch* me! Why aren't you touching me?"

She grabbed my hand and guided me down to the edge of her dress. I could barely feel its hem against my fingertips, and the urges rose again.

“Please,” she begged, saccharine and needy. “*Please.*”

She began to grind against me, and I struggled to draw in a steady breath. I’d never been so affected by a woman, but I was completely caught in her web. I didn’t know where I got the strength, but I pulled my hand away, instead kissing her on the mouth.

Oh.

Oh!

I thought I knew what a kiss was. I was wrong. Because there was nothing, absolutely *nothing*, like kissing my mate. It was fire. It was comfort. It was thrilling and calming. It was everything all at once, filling me with sensation from my head down to my toes.

I could have stayed there forever, our lips locked together. And maybe I would have if her legs didn’t suddenly go out from under her.

“Hey!” I cried, startled as I rushed to pull her close to my body. It wasn’t until I was steady on my feet again that I realized she’d fainted.

There were those consequences I was worried about. Ignoring the pull of the mating bond had stressed her system out.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you,” I whispered, determination running steely through me.

Bending, I picked her up, listening to her heartbeat as I did. To my great relief, it was slowing to a much calmer rate. With a simple call to John, he arrived a few moments later with my car. As carefully as possible, I slid my mate into the back seat before getting in beside her. It took a bit of arranging, but eventually, I managed to get a seatbelt around her prone form and her head in my lap. I couldn’t be too careful when it concerned the woman I was bonded to for the rest of our lives.

“Drive,” was all I said, not even looking at John. Because how was I supposed to take my eyes away from the woman beside me? She’d become the new center of my universe, someone I was willing to upend the entire power structure of the city for.

“Yes, alpha.”

The car lurched back into traffic, nothing but the woman’s soft breathing filling the back seat.

“So, I see you’ve found your mate, sir.”

“It looks like it.”

It certainly looked like it indeed.

LYSSA

Consciousness floated to me slowly, each like a tiny step towards lucidity. I was vaguely aware that I'd had some incredibly intense dreams, but I only began comprehending them as I drew towards wakefulness again.

But then, when I finally opened my eyes, I realized that maybe my dreams were less dreams and more something else entirely.

Where am I?

I certainly wasn't in any of the apartments I usually hid in. It was far too comfortable, stylish, and decorated.

Shifting, I tried to sit up to figure out what was wrong, only to become very aware of pressure across my waist. Freezing in terror, my brain supplied that the weight seemed to belong to an arm.

But *whose* arm?

My adrenaline must have finally kicked in because my entire brain was suddenly flooded with memories of everything that had happened before I blacked out.

I'd been drugged or... or something. And then there had been wolves. Actual wolves in the city! There was a lot of other stuff, but it all combined into a messy collage in my brain. And now I was in bed with some guy! Was he sleeping behind me? Was he armed with a dagger or a gun in case I tried to escape?

My heart had a full-on volcanic eruption in my chest, but I forced myself to stay still while collecting at least a few of my thoughts. I needed to get out. I *had* to, even if it seemed like the most terrifying option in the world.

It took me a couple of painful minutes, but eventually, I was able to work up the nerve ever so slowly to try to move. Bit by bit, I shifted until I realized that the man behind me was still asleep. Well, at least there was one little blessing to the whole situation. With just a little bit of coaxing pressure, I got him to remove his arm himself and roll over.

Slipping out of bed, I looked around the room to get my bearings. Had I been trafficked? That was the only thing that made sense to me, which meant I needed to escape immediately.

There were multiple doors, and I rushed to the closest one, throwing it open to find an insanely large bathroom. Seriously, it was almost the size of one of the bedrooms in the apartments I squatted in. Who needed that much space?

However, I didn't have time for further criticism and rushed to the next door. But I didn't quite get there before the man from the day before sat up, rubbing the sleepiness from his eyes.

It was such a domestic, normal sort of thing to do that I slowed — a bit gobsmacked.

“Where are you going?”

Where was I going? I would think that much was evident, but I found myself answering anyway.

“Home!”

Was it strange that I couldn't help noticing how handsome he looked? His hair was slightly ruffled from sleep, and he wore a plain gray sleep shirt with comfortable black sweatpants. I should have been terrified of him, and yet I wasn't. Sure, I was apprehensive and mad as hell, but he didn't feel *dangerous* to me.

And that was incredibly stupid.

Snapping myself out of it, I rushed to the next door and flung that open to just to see a closet. A stupid closet that was also the size of a small bedroom.

How loaded is this guy?

I heard movement behind me and whirled to see that the man had stood, hands loosely on his hips. His frame was even more broad and enticing in his casualwear, evident even though I was trying very hard to ignore everything about his appearance.

“If you'd like to change, you're welcome to borrow my clothes, but they'll probably be a bit big for you.”

How could he sound so casual? He'd *kidnapped* me and put me in his

bed!

Wait... his bed?

It was like it all suddenly clicked in my head, and for a moment, I did indeed run cold with terror. Had he... had he...?

No. He couldn't have. The only sore place on me was my neck and the soles of my feet from all my running. Although I'd never had sex before, I was pretty sure I'd have a lot more pain from my first time — even if I was drugged up to my gills.

But I was more certain than ever that I needed to get away. I needed to get home. Looking at the man, Melon, or Mehron, or whatever his name was, I tried to figure out if I could get to the other door behind him. Naturally, I'd picked the wrong choice twice.

“Hey, hold on a minute.” The handsome fellow raised his hand as I tensed to launch my escape, giving me the slightest pause. But I still glanced between him and the door, my mind trying to calculate a million things at once.

Suddenly his voice turned deeper, every syllable rattling through my bones like the percussion section of a particularly emphatic orchestra. “Sit down and have coffee with me. I just want you to hear me out!”

I shouldn't listen to him; I knew that. And yet I couldn't come up with a good reason not to. In fact, listening to him seemed like a matter of course, so I walked up to his side like everything was perfectly normal.

It wasn't, obviously, and part of my brain screamed that I needed to get away. And yet I felt a pleasant sort of agreeableness at his command.

“Here, this way.”

Like a true gentleman, he opened the door, gesturing for me to follow him. I did, only to step into a lush living room.

I didn't know if it was the act of moving through a doorway or if the shouting part of my brain finally gained control, but suddenly I felt free to act again. I lunged forward, racing away from my captor. A rumbling growl — yeah, a literal *growl* — sounded from him, fueling my panicked fleeing.

But he was impossibly fast, and before I could get far, he grabbed my hand, pulling me to a stop.

“Please, take a seat. It's too damn early for all this without any coffee.”

Once more, that odd feeling of wanting to obey drifted over me. It was so unlike myself that I legitimately just blinked at him for a couple of moments, trying to figure out what was happening.

“My name is Mahlan Reese, and I am the alpha of my pack.” As if it meant something, he held out his wrist, showing a tattoo of something.

Wait, that’s not a tattoo!

The raised flesh told me it was actually a brand, a moon and trees burned into his flesh. I stared, shock flowing through me, only for him to raise my wrist and look at it.

“You don’t have a pack brand.”

“What the hell is a pack brand?”

He let out a soft chuckle, sounding more melancholy than condescending. “You don’t know what it means?”

“Of course I don’t!”

I felt like I had suddenly been launched into another world where everyone used strange words that didn’t make sense in how they were using them. Was this some sort of gang code? Trafficker talk?

“I don’t know anything! Like, for example, where I am!” This time I was the one who was closing the distance between us. I didn’t know where I got the gall, but I was suddenly poking his chest like *I* was in charge. “You wanna answer that one, buddy?”

“We’re in my home, actually.” His apartment. Sure. That would be too convenient. I was probably at some sort of compound. That was where traffickers hung out, right?

“You mentioned you had somewhere to go last night?”

What? Oh, right. All of that had slipped my mind. “My graduation! Do you have any idea how important that is? *Was!*”

He looked properly contrite, but that didn’t please me. In fact, something was coiling in my stomach that told me I should obey him. Make him happy — bizarre stuff.

“What is going on here?” I asked, trying not to sound scared. I didn’t think I was successful, but oh, well, I figured I was justified considering everything.

“I know this is a lot, but I’m a wolf, and an alpha of my pack, as I said.”

I laughed. Because how could I not? He was a man, yet he was talking about being some sort of animal.

Then again... I did see wolves suddenly appear in the alley, hadn’t I? No... that must have been the drugs. He was trying to take advantage of my formerly inebriated state.

“Think hard. I know what you saw when I fought Cyprus.”

“That... that wasn’t a hallucination?”

Mahlan shook his head. “It wasn’t, my dear. I can continue, but I can stop if this is too much.”

I nodded, my words not coming to me.

“Okay, but if this gets overwhelming, you tell me, all right?”

His voice sounded so caring, so concerned that it confused me. How could a stranger feel anything like that for me?

“I marked you, that’s what that bite is. I could scent you across the building above the restaurant, but it’s when you picked the pocket of one of our most venerated alphas in our entire city that I knew for certain.”

Yeah, I always knew being greedy would be the end of me. I still wasn’t buying whatever alpha, wolf thing the guy was trying to sell, but I could totally see how that man had been an important figure in whatever weird society Mahlan was a part of.

“I marked you thinking it would get that alpha to let you go. It was supposed to bring you under my jurisdiction. But, uh, it didn’t quite work.”

It was insane. It was impossible. And yet I found myself believing him, which made me wonder if I was certifiable. Nothing made sense, but something within me was adamant that he was being honest.

Who knew? Maybe we were all crazy.

“I’m sorry that it happened the way it did. It is permanent, which I mentioned before, but I figured it was important enough to reiterate.”

My mind swirled as I tried to figure it all out. The practical, logical side of my mind was trying to calculate a thousand and one different reasonable theories, while another part of me felt borderline enticed to trust the man.

“I know that this is a lot, but there is something I need to know.”

I looked at him blearily, my brain feeling like it was going to melt. “What?”

“You said graduation. How old are you, exactly?”

Somehow, my brain had enough spare juice to feel a little bit snarky. “Nineteen. I started school late.”

Despite everything going on within me, I didn’t miss his relieved sigh. “Worried you marked up a minor? That wouldn’t be a concern if you just *asked* first.”

Now that I’d said it, the thought stood sharp and crisp in my mind. What if I’d started school early? What if he’d found me a couple of years earlier when I was just sixteen? Would it have mattered? Would it have stopped

him?

Rage bubbled up in me, sharp and biting. With my heart thundering in my chest, my head started getting fuzzy.

“You marked me without permission! For *life!*”

To his credit, Mahlan stood back and let me pace while I tried to come to terms with what had happened. My entire world turned inside out, and I had nothing to hold onto. I had so many questions, all piling on top of each other in a panicked heap.

“How is this supposed to work if I’m not a wolf?”

He didn’t answer right away, which made my stomach do a couple of flips. I’d been around long enough to know what an ominous silence was. But thankfully, he spoke before I could spontaneously combust.

“That’s the thing.” He paused, and it was strange to see a flicker of uncertainty cross his confident features. “You have to be a wolf for it to work. There have been legends of certain... fey, I suppose you can call them, being able to take marks from other shifters, but that’s about it.”

“Fey? Are those a thing too? What, ya gonna tell me the boogeyman and the tooth fairy are real too?” I was yelling but was pretty disinclined to care about my volume levels.

“There’s a whole world of people beyond humans, but that’s not important right now.”

“Oh, really, what is then?”

“Me, you, and that mark.”

Right. He actually did have a point with that one. I needed to get caught up with what happened to me before I got caught up with a magical menagerie of mystery miscreants.

“Okay, yeah, the mark. How do we even know it worked at all?”

Suddenly, Mahlan drew himself to his full height, which was nothing to sneeze at. But I didn’t feel intimidated as I should have. No, instead, I wanted to lean in as he took a step toward me. To close my eyes and surrender.

What the hell?

Slowly, as if he really did care about if I was frightened or not, Mahlan lifted his hand and gently ran a finger across the raised bite mark on my neck. Instantly, I felt like I’d been handed a warm, soothing cup of tea, given a full body massage, and a really good hug all at once. I wanted to sink into the pleasant rush of endorphins and never get out.

All the panic in me, as well as the simmering anxiety that had been eating

at me for years, died down to a dull whisper at the back of my head. For once, I could just be *me*. Stress-free and feeling good.

But then his finger went away, and reality came crashing back like the wrecking ball it was. The deluge of all those negative emotions after such sweet bliss was borderline cruel, and I felt my system reacting as if it were in shock.

“I...” It was all too much. I was just nineteen and trying to graduate high school. I didn’t need anything else on my plate. “I have to go.”

It took all of my willpower to break away from Mahlan and his potent draw.

“My friends have to be worried about me. I missed graduation and our after-party!” What if they called the cops? Sure, they would be doing it to look out for me but notifying the authorities of my existence could upheave my life even more than accidentally pickpocketing some wolf mafioso.

I began to pace again as dread built up, my body trying to find a way to deal with the sudden surge of frenetic energy contained within my very *human* form. I was about to have a meltdown, I could feel it in my teeth and down to my toes.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t,” Mahlan said lowly.

Oh, so I was a prisoner after all.

“Why not?”

“Because being marked without finishing the claim makes you an even greater target than just being my mate.”

Great, more weird-ass mumbo jumbo. “What could you possibly mean by that?”

“I mean that others will want to... take advantage of your situation.”

“And who put me in this situation?” Ah, there was my anger again. It was much easier to deal with than the helpless despair and confusion trying so desperately to take hold within me. “I didn’t ask to be some alfalfa’s mate!”

“Alpha’s.”

“Like I care! Do you think I needed or wanted this? My friends are worried about having their last fun summer before adulthood and moving into college dorms. Because of you, now I have to be worried that I’ve been marked for life by some madman or a literal *werewolf!*”

I could feel that my emotions were in a sharp tug of war between the panic and the rage, sending me hurtling towards a full-on mental break. But before I could get there, a knock sounded at the door.

With my luck, it was probably Krampus himself on the other side. And why not? It wasn't like my world could get any weirder.

MAHLAN

My mate was taking everything relatively well for a shifter that had been locked out of her own culture, but I could still feel that she was potentially one small breath away from launching off a cliff into a total meltdown.

I felt guilty — I did. In a perfect world, I would have wanted to wine and dine her, to win over her affections until she was breathlessly begging for my mark. Preferably with her legs wrapped around my waist. Or head, for that matter.

Instead, I had a rageful, scared mate trying to come to grips with the sudden news that the world was nothing like it was supposed to be.

Another flare of protectiveness surged through me. Who could have done this to her? Sure, shifters' lives were fraught with danger, and it wasn't entirely unusual for children to be orphaned, but there was always *someone* to take them in. A relative, if a responsible one was available. Or another close family friend. And, if need be, the alpha of the pack themselves. No matter a bear, cougar, wolf, or any other shifter, our society had no true orphans. There was always *someone* who would provide.

But it was incredibly obvious that no one had been there for my mate, which made my heart crumple. She deserved so much, I knew without a doubt. And I intended to give her just that.

Once she calmed down, that was.

“Like I care! Do you think I needed or wanted this? My friends are worried about having their last fun summer before adulthood and moving into college dorms. Because of you, now I have to be worried that I’ve been

marked for life by some madman or a literal *werewolf!*”

And the whole ‘calming down’ thing didn’t seem anywhere in sight.

But before I could soothe her or explain anything more, a knock sounded on the door. For a moment, I debated using my alpha voice, but I didn’t want to abuse it. Some alphas had no problem manipulating their partners this way, lording over them with the booming command of their designation. But to me, the alpha voice was a tool, and like any tool, it should only be used in very specific situations.

So instead, I decided to use my manners and just ask nicely.

“Stay here for a moment, please. I’ll be right back.”

She seemed surprised by my soft request, which I hoped would build some trust between us. I passed by her, intending to go to the door, but I was abruptly gripped by the need to touch her. The demand for physical contact was painful, frying my nerves and making me grit my teeth.

Nothing was making sense. The only thing I could think of was that maybe whatever hid her wolf was also affecting our bond. But I wasn’t familiar with that kind of magic, nor had I ever heard of anything like it.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, voice tremulous. I sensed that it was hard for her to show any weakness at all, so I didn’t take that for granted.

“No, no, everything’s all right.”

Shaking my head, I continued crossing to the door, protectiveness rising within me once again.

Fortunately, there wasn’t any enemy at the door. Instead, it was two of my inner circle, Parker and Kaleb, both of them looking quite concerned.

“Is everything all right, alpha?” Parker blurted, ever the assertive one. “Are you safe?”

I appreciated their concern, and while I would normally remind them that *I* was the one who was supposed to be taking care of them, I could get behind their intent.

“You weren’t answering your phone,” Kaleb added, a bit more calmly than Parker. “When even John said he couldn’t reach you, we feared the worst.”

Damn. I’d let my new mate situation interfere with my duties as pack leader. I should have known better, especially considering our pack’s trauma with our last alpha being suddenly murdered.

I knew some alphas would posture and bluster instead of admitting a mistake, but I wasn’t going to lead like that. To me, a true alpha was able to

own up to errors and fix them rather than living in denial while surrounded by yes-wolves. “Sorry, it’s charging on my nightstand.” I stepped to the side, gesturing for them to come in.

The two did, although they came up short when they saw my mate standing there, her eyes flicking between the pair uncertainly.

“Is... is it okay if we speak if she’s here?” Kaleb asked.

“Yes, continue.” I would need to explain everything that was going on, but I had the impression that they had urgent news to tell me — especially if they’d shown up at my place unannounced to deliver it.

“I’ll be straight with you, sir,” Parker started, his agitation evident. “There was an incident with another pack nearby.”

“Another pack?” I echoed with concern lancing through me. “What happened?”

“Someone attacked three of their female pack members who were out to dinner together. One of them is missing.”

Rage and shock imploded in my chest. I was only the head alpha in our territory for less than a day, but I took my duty to the city seriously. However, I fought to keep my voice steady. Parker and Kaleb were visibly upset, and I wanted to exude strength and calmness. “Do we have any leads? Witnesses?”

“The girls can’t give much of a description. It’s like their memories of the whole night have been erased.”

I paused at that, my mind spinning. “Do you think they were mesmerized?”

“We don’t know. Could have been thrall’d, mesmerized, or who knows!” Parker blurted, cheeks colored. “The only thing we could get from them was that they were out with a witch.”

“A witch?” I practically snapped. “Who? What kind of magic is she aligned with?”

“We don’t know that either because she was taken along with their packmate.”

I took a steady breath in, then out, collecting myself.

“And where are these other girls?”

“They’re in an infirmary being tended to by their pack’s alma. They’re pretty shaken up.”

“I can understand that. Can we send our alma to help tend to them?”

Both Kaleb and Parker seemed surprised at that, and unsurprisingly, it

was Parker who answered first. “We could do that, we just need to wake her up.”

“Then get on it. And I will send a request for an audience with their alpha once the dust has settled. We need to work together if someone is targeting shifters out in the open.”

“Yes, alpha!”

Parker looked ready to run out at my command, but Kaleb cleared his throat. “I know a lot going on right now, but your meeting with the alphas yesterday...”

“Yes?”

“Is there any news about our pack?”

He was right; a lot was happening all at once. Somehow, I’d completely forgotten that I needed to update everyone in my pack on the alpha meeting.

Oh, and that I’d defeated Cyprus in battle. That small factoid was probably important.

“I swear in next week, but without the moonstone, it’s going to be a lot harder.”

“We may need to expedite that process then if this situation escalates. But maybe we’ll get lucky, and all of this will help push things to the forefront.”

I nodded, my lips pressed tight. I knew that asking for a blood oath was an incredibly important and weighty thing among wolves, so it wasn’t something I wanted to drop in passing. Such a thing would bind us beyond normal pack affiliation, strengthening both me and my control over them.

It would be incredibly easy to abuse that kind of power. I knew that I wouldn’t, that it would go against everything I stood for, but they were still going out on a branch to trust me with that kind of intimacy.

I could sense my mate slowly edging closer as we talked, and every now and then, Parker and Kaleb would glance over to her. I admired that they were holding their curiosity back and refraining from asking questions.

“You can come closer,” I said soothingly, offering a hand to her. “We won’t bite.”

She shot me a scathing look, and I realized that probably wasn’t the best choice of words. Nevertheless, she did come closer.

“This is Parker and Kaleb, two of my packmates. Parker, Kal, this is my mate, uh-”

Wait. Did I not ask my mate for her name?

The thought filled me with embarrassment, and I could only hope that my

cheeks weren't a brilliant red. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't," she answered wryly. She was a firecracker, that was for sure, but I liked that. For a moment, I wondered if she wasn't going to tell me at all, but for some reason, her face softened. "But it's Lyssa."

"Right. This is Lyssa, my mate."

To my surprise, neither reacted strongly, instead just nodding their heads. "We could smell as much," Kal said calmly.

"Right, of course you could." Quickly recovering, I moved right along. "Once you finish those first two tasks, why don't you get in contact with our inner pack members for a meeting? And John, naturally."

"Yes, alpha!"

"Oh, and we'll need a witch for what we must do."

"A witch?"

"Yeah, can we source one?"

"I think I know one who could help," Kaleb offered.

"Excellent. You two get on that."

The two tipped their heads and then quickly exited, leaving just my mate and me.

Lyssa.

"I know you just got here, but I don't want any secrets from you. I want you to see how everything works." After all, how could I expect her to believe that I was telling the truth if I didn't *tell* her the truth?

"I'm just, well, I'm really overwhelmed." She looked so worried that I wanted to take her into my arms and comfort her. But I realized that it wasn't the right time or place. Lyssa, my mate, my beautiful mate, needed time to figure things out. After all, it wasn't every day that a person was suddenly confronted with the entire magical world.

"I didn't plan to mark you, you know. I wish I had more time to explain everything and give you the chance to get to know me first."

"Why do it then?"

I frowned. Hadn't I already explained that? Perhaps I wasn't as clear as I thought, or I'd used too much pack-lingo. That was something that I'd have to be cautious about until Lyssa got more acclimated.

"I couldn't let another man, let alone another alpha, hurt you. And Cyprus was very much going to hurt you." I couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. "You know, I could barely focus on my dinner with all the alphas. I'm lucky I own the building, otherwise, I probably would have run into a wall."

“Wait, you what? You own the building I’m squa-, uh... staying at?”

“Yeah, that’s how I know this is fate. What are the chances of my mate being a tenant in one of the buildings I own?”

But instead of laughing, Lyssa almost looked uncomfortable. “That’s kinda the thing. I’m not.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you see, I, uh... I’m kinda, maybe, sorta, possibly...” her voice faded to barely more than a whisper. “...*squatting there.*”

She was squatting? Did that mean she was homeless? The idea horrified me, but I knew we couldn’t get into it with everything else.

But if she was homeless, it would certainly lend to my whole ‘she was abandoned’ theory. No wonder she had so much spark and fight. How long had she been on her own? Providing for herself when someone else should have been there to help her.

“We can discuss this later,” was all I said instead. To my relief, she nodded. “For now, I’m going to get dressed for an inner circle pack meeting.”

“I guess I’ll, uh, wear this?” She gestured to her dress, which was reasonably clean considering all it had gone through the day before. “That sounds good.” But at the same time, in my head, I was resolved to buy her an entire wardrobe as soon as we had a chance.

It didn’t take me long to get ready, and I was pleased to see that Lyssa hadn’t fled. She had to believe me somewhat if she wasn’t trying to launch herself out the nearest window.

“You don’t get car sick or anything, do you?” It wasn’t entirely unusual among shifters. We were much more connected to the moon and the earth than humans, and sometimes using artificial transportation could make shifters headachy or nauseous. Thankfully, I wasn’t one of those poor souls, but I hoped my new mate wasn’t either.

“Uh, no. I’m fine with cars.”

“Perfect. Let’s go.”

I led her out of my place and down to the garage. Usually, I’d have John drive me for pack meetings, but I wanted to get behind the wheel. Everything was moving so fast that I needed to be in control for a little while, just cruising down the freeway.

And I was grateful that Lyssa didn’t object to following along. If I could go a day or two without chasing down my new mate, that would be great.

“Holy batmobile. What are you, Bruce Wayne?”

“Pardon?” As we approached my sports car, I looked over my shoulder to see Lyssa staring with abject shock.

“Uh, this is a really nice car, that’s all.”

“You a car person?”

“No, I’ve just been around enough to know a nice one when I see it.” There was a bit of a slant to the wry grin she sent me, and I could feel myself being charmed by her. I could tell there was a whole sparkling personality behind the walls she built up. I couldn’t wait to ease her worries until she was willing to show me the true her.

“I see. Here, let me get the door for you.”

It was probably silly, but I felt a surge of satisfaction as I helped her into the car. It was a small thing, but I was finally aiding my mate. However, I heard a strange gurgle-wheezing sound almost as soon as I got into the car.

“Was... was that your stomach?” I asked, looking incredulously at Lyssa. She was a relatively small thing for her middle to make a noise that wasn’t that far from a dying animal.

“Sorry,” she said, blushing so cutely that I almost wanted to kiss her right then and there. “I guess I’m a little hungry.”

But as smitten as I was with the adorable blush across her face, a concerning suspicion rose up to meet it. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Oh, not too long ago. I had an apple yesterday for breakfast at school.”

That wasn’t too long? I clenched the steering wheel, wondering what her life was where a single piece of fruit over twenty-four hours ago wasn’t “too long.” Once we had a chance, I would take her to every nice restaurant I could.

“After the meeting, we’ll get you something to eat. You think you can hold on that long?”

Lyssa just shrugged. “Yeah, it’s no big deal. I’ve gone way longer without; you don’t gotta worry.”

Except that made me worry. I definitely needed to get her belly full of delicious food as soon as possible.

But I did my best to play it cool. It was clear that Lyssa was used to taking care of herself and putting on a strong front. If I tried to mother-hen her right off the bat, she would close herself off entirely to me. And to be completely frank, I was enjoying the tiny cracks in her defense that she was already showing me.

I glanced at her face as I pulled out, and I could tell she wanted to ask

something. “Is there something you want to know?”

I almost expected her to deny it, but instead, she nodded again. “Yeah, I guess I was wondering. Well... what’s next?”

Yet again, I was confronted with a surprise from her asking about something that was obvious to me. It was something I would have to become accustomed to.

“We’ll figure that out together. But if I’m completely transparent, you’re pretty much stuck with me.” I meant it humorously, but Lyssa didn’t react. She just sat there silently as I turned onto the main drag.

I wanted to ask her a million and one questions, to tell her I was just trying to inject a little levity into our situation. But I understood that she was probably suffering from a whole lot of too much, too fast. She had to be stressed up to her gills, and without her inner wolf as an anchor in our tumultuous world, I didn’t know how she remained so calm.

She didn’t know it, but it was like someone had cut off one of her arms or stolen her thumbs, then convinced her that she was supposed to be that way. She was living a half-life compared to how it *should* have been, her identity, culture, and people stolen from her.

But I would ensure that whatever was hurting her or holding her wolf captive was dealt with so she could finally be her true self.

After the pack meeting, of course.

The urge to comfort her curled through my middle, my inner wolf pacing within me. It didn’t like the idea of someone attacking shifters just having a night out, and it *especially* didn’t like what was going on with our mate. It wanted her fed, happy, and wrapped up in so many soft things that she turned into a cozy lump instead of the very anxious woman beside me.

“I’m sorry all this is hitting you at warp speed. But I promise it will get easier.”

She just nodded at that. I got the sense that I wasn’t going to get much conversation from her, so although it pained me, I eased off on the talking. She needed time to process, and as her alpha, it was my job to respect that.

It didn’t take us long to reach the office, although there were already some people there. I recognized Ellibie’s beat-up old pickup truck, as well as the whip that Parker and Kaleb shared. John pulled in a slight beat after I did, and we parked next to each other.

“How is the young lady doing?” John asked as he exited the vehicle, his eyes going past me to where Lyssa was sitting in the car.

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?” I said, crossing around to open her door for her, pleased that she waited inside patiently for me to do so. I knew I could have answered for her, but I wanted to give Lyssa more agency in what was going on. She’d been snatched out of her life without warning, which wasn’t easy for anyone. I was sure the more personal responsibility and freedom I could give her, the faster she would adapt. Besides, the last thing I wanted her to feel was trapped. That would be pretty antithetical to the whole *us* trusting each other as mates.

“Lyssa,” I said, offering my hand to help her out. When she took it, it took quite a bit of self-control not to preen right then and there. My whole body lit up with interest as we touched again, and I knew there was a pleased smile on my face. “This is John. John, this is Lyssa.”

“Lyssa, that’s a lovely name,” he said, offering his hand for a shake. “How are you doing, miss?”

“Oh, ya know, dealing with my entire world inverting and finding out my future has been completely hijacked. A bit peckish. I need to brush my teeth. So ya know, a typical Saturday.”

That pushed a surprised chuckle out of me, and John beamed as he looked between the two of us. “Well, we can probably fix two of those pretty quickly. Not the whole world part. That’s a bit more complicated.”

“You’re telling me.”

I couldn’t describe the contentment that coursed through me seeing Lyssa interacting so breezily with John. The terrified woman ready to flee was quickly fading, allowing her to comfortably communicate with members of my pack. It was almost more than I could ask for.

Naturally, John wasn’t the only one who was curious. I was sure the other pack members were interested in who the strange woman rolling up with their alpha was if they hadn’t heard from Parker or Kaleb directly.

Well, Parker, if I was being honest. Kaleb wasn’t one for gossip. The two were such a funny pair, one high-strung and sociable while the other was more collected and full of social anxiety. But they balanced each other well, as it were.

“Aye there, Alpha Reese,” that was Ellibie, basically our pack’s mother who wasn’t actually a mother. She was a middle-aged Southern woman who’d been adopted into our pack when she’d run away to our city at the ripe old age of fourteen. She worked as a mechanic, and although she’d never had any biological children, she was the *de facto* babysitter, orphan raiser, and

otherwise fun auntie that was always ready to throw down whenever a kid was involved. I had plenty of pleasant memories with her, from sleepovers when she was caring for Parker while his human father was dealing with cancer treatments to the summer trips she'd take us on down to a swimming hole outside of the city.

Some scoffed at the silver-haired, almost fifty-something woman without so much as a GED being in my inner circle, but they didn't get Ellibie. She was more valuable than her weight in moonstones.

"Who's this pretty young shifter you've got here with you?"

"Ellibie, this is my mate, Lyssa. Lyssa, this is Ellibie. She's a crackpot mechanic and half the reason my car looks so nice."

"Nah, half the reason is your fat wallet, but I appreciate the compliment." Ellibie offered her hand for a shake and Lyssa took it happily, pleasing me and my wolf even more. "I can tell you've got backbone already. You'll need it, dealing with us."

"Yeah, I'm getting that impression," Lyssa answered in her charmingly sarcastic way. Or maybe it was just sarcastic, and I was already far too lost on her. It was easy to feel myself falling more head over heels for her by the moment. I was pretty sure that the only thing keeping me from being completely gone was the sting of her prior rejection lingering just below that happy surface.

Ellibie continued to talk, but I caught sight of Theo approaching. He was one of my two choices for beta, my right-hand man, once John fully retired. He was as loyal as he was serious, and I appreciated that.

"Alpha," he stated, approaching me with a woman at his side. That had to be the witch that Kaleb was talking about. I was more than grateful that she was able to help at the last minute.

But that was the thing about witches, it was hard to know exactly *who* they were helping. Sometimes it seemed like they were approaching with laurels in their hand only to end up using those same leaves to curse a tribe.

I shifted slightly in front of Lyssa on instinct, but if she thought anything about it, she didn't comment.

"Alpha Reese, your men have told me all about you," the witch said, tipping her head. "Happy to be of service to you and your pack."

"We are most appreciative that you could fill in for our usual contact."

"Ah yes, I believe I'm familiar with him. He's on a pilgrimage with his coven now, yes?"

“As, far as we know.”

She nodded, tilting her head to Lyssa and Ellibie. “Greetings, sisters.”

“Uh... hi?”

“Howdy, sweetums.”

Although it wasn't necessary, I liked that the witch was equally polite to my pack members. I hated when people would show me one face and then disrespect members of my shifter family.

“Shall we go inside and complete the ceremony?”

“Yes,” I answered. “But first, I need to explain everything. My pack must agree willingly.”

“You know we'll follow you to the ends of the Earth,” Theo interrupted, his voice grave. Granted, his voice was always fairly grave. As a gray wolf, his demeanor was similar to the icy tundra his ancestors came from. I never minded, but I knew some found him especially frigid. I preferred to think that he was just intense.

“I would never question your loyalty, but I want everyone's informed consent. No questions.”

“Of course, alpha.”

“Always knew ya were gonna be a fair one,” Ellibie said, already striding towards the door in her no-nonsense way. “Let's get on with gettin' on then.”

She and the rest of the pack headed inside, Lyssa pressing close to my side. Was she already looking towards me as a source of comfort or protection? The thought made my chest rumble in a *very* particular way.

A few moments later, I found myself standing in front of the inner circle of my pack, their eyes attentive as they waited for me to speak. I would eventually need to have the farther-flung and less involved pack members agree to the blood agreement, but all of that would come in time.

“As all of you know, our pack's moonstone was stolen, leaving nothing for you to swear on when you pledge your fealty to me, your new alpha.”

“The way I figure it, we don't need a stone to be loyal to ya,” Ellibie said. “Buncha pomp and circumstance that ain't really needed.”

“While I agree with you, the other alphas don't, and considering the recent strife that's been going on, they're nervous about not having any celestial object to swear on.”

“So, what do we do?” Theo asked.

“The other pack leaders were amenable to a blood pact.”

“Ahhh, so that's why you brought the witchy woman.” That was

Jacobian, the last of my inner circle. We'd grown up together, and I trusted him implicitly.

"Yes. That is why. Now I'm not going to force any of you to do this, nor will there be consequences if you refuse to. But this is the best way for us to move forward with equal standing to the other packs."

I didn't mention the whole part about me defeating Cyprus and changing the power structure of everything. One thing at a time.

"I'll do whatever is needed," Theo said, stepping forward.

"As will I," Kaleb added.

"Me too! I'm down." That was Parker, naturally.

Ellibie, John, and Jacobian followed suit, filling me with the strongest sense of pack I'd had in a long time.

Everyone in the room was deeply important to me. We were all connected, by our blood, by the moon, and now by our explicit choice. I was incredibly proud that they all chose me, trusted me, and I internally vowed never to take advantage of that gift.

"If everyone is in agreement, should I begin?" the witch asked.

"You may," I said, stepping to the side and rejoining Lyssa, who had been standing to the side watching everything proceed. I couldn't quite read the expression on her face, but she didn't look *too* alarmed.

"Someone turn off the lights, please, and everyone join hands in front of me."

Parker rushed to do what the witch said, then we all joined hands as she placed five candles on the floor and lit them one by one. Standing, she faced us with a stern visage.

"Shifters before me, you have come to swear your lives to your alpha. To take in his blood and bind your own blood to his. You will be one unit, one soul, faceted in many vessels."

At that, she reached into one of the pouches at her belt and pulled out five small flowers. I recognized them as lupine blossoms and tried not to chuckle at the connection. Would she have to use catnip if working with cougar or lion shifters?

Thankfully the witch didn't notice my amusement and instead dropped one flower into each candle. Smoke instantly began to stream up from it before wrapping around each of us. I didn't fidget like some of the others, but I felt an unnatural discomfort from the magic's touch.

"Alpha Reese, step forward and bequeath your pack of your body."

I did so, placing my hand in her awaiting one. Next out of her pouch was a small dagger, which she used to cut across my palm.

“It is with your hand that you generously give, and it is with this same hand that you must protect, cherish, and nurture your pack. Should this hand move to harm and break their bonds, may it wither and turn to ash.”

I always thought such wounds were stupid. Hands bled fairly shallowly, and I needed to use them for all sorts of things. It was an unnecessary risk to have a gash in it for a day or so while my inner wolf healed it. But it was pretty clear by the witch’s words that it had to be from my palm.

Then again, that was certainly how magic seemed to work. Overwrought, not very practical, and pretty inconvenient.

With blood welling up in my hand, ruby red and smelling of both earth and iron, she turned it sideways so the vibrant crimson dripped into a chalice she’d pulled from who knew where.

Strangely enough, even though I didn’t have a drop of witch, sorceress, shaman, or any magic user in my lineage, I could still feel the press of it all around us. A small gasp from Lyssa told me I wasn’t alone in sensing the power beginning to coalesce in our office.

“Do you give this offering willingly, alpha? And do you swear your mind, body, soul, and energies to your pack?”

“I swear it,” I said.

She let go of my hand only to pull a vial from a different pouch attached to her utility belt. If there was one thing I admired about witches, it was their plethora of pockets.

“It is with these moon tears that we seal your blood to her power and your people. You shall be their moonstone, channeling her will and energies.”

She upended the vial into the chalice, swirling it a couple of times, before she approached one end of our little semi-circle. She offered Theo the goblet first, tilting it towards his mouth.

“Drink and bind yourself to your alpha and pack.”

Theo didn’t hesitate even a beat, taking a gulp. “I bind myself willingly.”

The witch nodded gravely, then moved on to Ellibie, who mirrored Theo. “I bind myself willingly.”

One by one, they went until my entire inner circle had consumed the mixture of my blood and moon tears.

The entire time I could feel Lyssa watching us curiously. Although I couldn’t entirely read her, I could tell she wasn’t disgusted, which seemed

pretty significant.

Standing back at the center of the group, the witch set the chalice on the floor and then clapped her hand.

“Together as one, a hydra of many fangs and claws, you are now bound. Honor your ancestors and prosper under your sworn alpha!”

With another clap of her hands, all the candles went off at once, cloaking us in darkness. There was a long silence, none of us knowing what to do until the witch cleared her throat.

“Um... that’s pretty much it. You can turn the lights on now.”

Parker was the one to rush to do that, and I had to blink against the harshness of the lights when they flickered on. My eyes adjusted quickly, as shifter eyes tended to, and I found everyone looking at me expectantly.

Huh, were they expecting a speech? Actually, that was probably appropriate considering the situation.

Stepping forward, I turned to address my inner circle.

“I know this past year has been hard for us, with the insidious attack on our previous alpha and the theft of our stone. But I will find the people responsible and make sure they come to justice!” There was a murmur of approval all around, and that fueled me. “But now we are united stronger than ever before. Our lineage will remember this as our pack’s true age of prosperity!”

“Long live our alpha! Long live our pack!”

A chorus of cheers sounded from my inner circle, a wonderful crescendo to the ritual. It lasted perhaps a minute before slowly fading to its natural conclusion.

“Thank you, all of you. Now go home and get some rest.”

But shifter culture was a lot like Southern culture in that we were still in for maybe an hour or so of talking, saying that we should go, then talking more until we actually left.

“Theo,” I said, gesturing him closer. “This is Lyssa, my mate. Lyssa, this is my best friend, Theo.”

“I will protect you as if you were my alpha himself,” Theo said, tipping his head. Lyssa’s eyes went wide as she looked from me to him.

“Don’t worry, Theo just likes to cut to the chase. I’ll keep you out of danger.”

“It’s true. Alpha Reese is incredibly protective of everyone in his charge. He’s saved my life more than once.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” I huffed.

“Right, because chasing off a bear when I was just a pup and taking a wolfsbane dagger for me isn’t a big deal.”

At that, Lyssa’s eyes grew wider, and her face lost its pallor. I didn’t want her to think that our lives were just war and horror, but I wasn’t going to lie to her either.

“He’s making it sound more dramatic than it was. When he was younger he got a bee up his bonnet about proving himself and tried to challenge a bear.”

“A bear?” Lyssa repeated. “A real, honest-to-God, actual bear?”

Theo shrugged. “It seemed like an appropriate target to prove myself.”

“He was a late shifter,” I mock whispered to Lyssa. “Couldn’t change into his inner wolf until he was eighteen.”

“Exactly, I was foolhardy and would have had my head handed to me if it weren’t for Mahlan running in and blindsiding it.”

Lyssa looked a little less terrified, and some color returned to her cheeks. “You mentioned a dagger? With, uh, wolfsbane? Is that dangerous?”

“Unfortunately, the legends are true about that hurting us. It causes terrible anaphylactic responses and can even close up airways and poison blood.” Geez, Theo really wasn’t helping. I didn’t want Lyssa to be scared of releasing her inner wolf before knowing all the good things she was missing.

“We were in a fight with a renegade pack of exiles trying to cut through our territory, and they had a few warlocks with them who armed themselves with wolfsbane blades. I thought I was a goner, but Mahlan took a slice for me and then ended the guy.”

“Warlock? Like a male witch?”

“Actually,” the witch said, looking up from where she was cleaning up after her ritual. “Being a witch has nothing to do with gender. It’s a magic style. Warlocks are magic users who don’t use any particular class of magic, but rather pledge their souls to a celestial or demonic being in exchange for power.”

“Wait, like some sort of magical sugar baby?” Lyssa asked.

The witch froze at that, and I nearly choked on the chuckle that burst out of my throat. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d wanted to laugh so hard.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“Oy, she’s gonna be a fun one,” Ellibie said, waving as she passed by. “But all of you young people can keep on talking. I’m gonna get home to my

cats and my warm bed.”

“Sounds good, Ellibie. We’ll see you around.”

“That you will. And now that you’ve got a mate, maybe you can get on making some more babies for me to spoil rotten.”

I felt Lyssa stiffen behind me and glared very meaningfully at the mechanic. “*Goodnight*, Ellibie.”

“Just sayin’ what I was thinking! Night, alpha, goodnight, Lyssa!”

“Goodnight,” Lyssa answered uncertainly.

“Actually, I believe I shall leave too,” the witch said evenly. “Thank you for trusting me with such an important task. Feel free to call on me again.”

“Noted,” I answered.

That left just Jacobian, Theo, Parker, Kaleb, and me. Oh, and of course Lyssa, but she certainly wasn’t going to be joining any strategic planning.

“Now that we’re all together and sworn, Theo, do you have an update on that company?”

“Yes, alpha. I have a date for us to meet with the CEO, but we’ll need a plan for once we’re in.”

I smiled at that, satisfaction coiling in my middle. “Believe it or not, I have an idea. We have a sort of secret weapon.”

“Secret weapon?”

“Yeah, we’ll need someone on the inside, but I know someone perfectly skilled to get the keys.”

“Really?” Parker asked, looking quite enthused. “Who?”

I looked to Lyssa, hoping she could feel the pride I had for her skill. “My mate here is an excellent pickpocket. She made it past five alphas without getting caught.”

Once more, Lyssa’s eyes shot incredibly wide. “Me? What? What’s going on?”

“We need a key card into the CEO’s office of a company we’re investigating, someone cunning enough to get it while everyone else is busy in a meeting without being noticed.”

“Why would you need something like that? What sort of investigation?” Her eyes began to rapidly flick between us, and I recognized that was what she did when she was sizing up threats. I didn’t want to be a threat to her, so I raised my hands slightly and took a step back.

“We believe this company has info on the man who murdered our last alpha and stole our moonstone.”

“Oh...” Her expression turned conflicted at that, and I hoped it meant that she understood at least a little.

“Having a pickpocket could be key, but I still think we need to get someone on their payroll to watch and research from within.”

“Do you have a suggestion for the role?”

“How about that intern, Addison? She already works with your finance team, right? She could probably do that over there, and you know how she is, she — could probably do cartwheels around there unnoticed.”

Parker had a point. Addison was a tiny, slight thing with coke-bottle glasses and a sense of style that went out sometimes between the fifties and sixties. She was smart as a whip, though, and acutely aware of the fact that she needed a cane in her human form made most people more than ready to discredit or ignore her.

I remembered pitying her once when I’d first met her. But then I saw her walk into a rival pack’s main hangout, stay in there for about half an hour, then come out carrying a to-go box and phone full of incriminating pictures without so much as batting an eye. Human and shifter culture could be terrible about that.

But hey, if that perception could work in our favor...

“That’s an excellent idea, but Jacobian, I want you to review all of our interns and make the final selection. You’re more acquainted with subterfuge than I am.”

“Yes, alpha.”

It hadn’t always been like that. When Sawyer was alpha, he’d had his own finance team for the pack that he and he alone had owned. When I was being groomed to take over in his footsteps — although the plan was for when he retired, not for when he was viciously murdered — I’d decided I wanted something else entirely, so I’d set it up so that my inner circle and I had an ownership stake in the pack financials. Well, except for Ellibie, but that was by her choice. Apparently, she had zero desire for anything like that and said if we were so inclined to throw money around just to mail her a check for raising our asses.

I’d been well aware that she said it mostly as a joke and did quite well as a mechanic, but that didn’t stop me from sending her those checks anyway.

“You guys have your own financial team?” Lyssa asked uncertainly.

“We own a lot of real estate and work with several large companies,” I answered honestly. Even so, I certainly didn’t expect her to nearly snort at the

information.

“Werewolf businessmen. Now I’ve seen everything.”

“She knows we’re shifters, right?” Jacobian questioned, his eyebrows furrowed. “There’s no such thing as werewolves.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” I said quickly. “For now, we should all get back to the tasks at hand. Needless to say, I won’t be in the office today, so email me if there are any issues.”

Nods all around, and this time there wasn’t all the usual chitchat that came after a goodbye. As the rest of my inner circle left, I offered my hand to Lyssa.

“I believe I promised something along the lines of a full meal?”

At that, her pensive face cracked open into a genuinely excited expression. Food really was the key ingredient to romance. “You most certainly did.”

“Come, I’ll order delivery to my place, and we can cook it together when we get there.”

I tried to rein in my expectations, but the soft, sweet smile she sent me while looking up through her lashes almost made me howl right then and there. Some people went their whole lives without having someone look at them like *that*.

Well, thankfully, I’d have a whole lifetime to experience that over and over again.

Oh, yeah, I was definitely going to spoil the hell out of my mate.

LYSSA

I looked out of the window while Mahlan drove, my mind full of everything that I had just witnessed.

Somehow, somehow, I'd definitely just felt and saw magic happen. Which was impossible, magic wasn't real. And yet I could tell that the strange, redheaded woman was doing *something* as she lit candles and cut Mahlan's hand. I could feel it the same way I could feel rain or gravity.

"So, would you explain this apartment situation a bit more?"

"Huh?"

I turned to Mahlan, who I could tell was *trying* to act nonchalant and not really pulling it off.

Nerves bubbled in my stomach, and I didn't answer right away. I'd been plenty aware that one day I'd probably have to face some consequences for illegally squatting, but I never thought I'd have to explain the whole mess to the literal *owner* of the building. In my head, it had always been some detached middle manager or superintendent.

Some part of me was *very* pleased that he cared. He shouldn't, but it was clear to me that he did. Logically, he should have been angry, or maybe even shocked, but none of that was there.

However, even with all that caring, it wasn't exactly easy to open up. I'd never told a single soul about it. Well, except for one person I'd bonded with at a shelter almost a lifetime ago. Me being homeless and bouncing around living areas had been such an essential secret for so long that my body was flooded with unease at the thought of someone finding out.

And yet I answered anyway. There wasn't a single logical reason for why

I was so inclined to be agreeable to Mahlan. I should hate him. And yet there was a fizzing sort of satisfaction to pleasing him, to making him happy.

Gross.

“Well, I’ve been hiding in the apartments for the last three and a half years.”

For a moment, I thought we were about to swerve into traffic as Mahlan reacted. “Three and a half years!”

“Yeah, most of high school, basically,” I tried to sound chill about it, but I didn’t think it was helping. For being a practical stranger, Mahlan sure seemed interested in my well-being.

“Aren’t there frequent tours through most of the floors? How did you manage that?”

“I would always check the notices and change which apartment I was staying in based on that. There were always at least three show apartments on the floor I preferred to stay on, and if there was something crazy like renovations or inspections, I’d just move up to the higher floors.”

I expected a scolding, or maybe even a lecture on theft, but Mahlan just shook his head. “You’re a genius, you know that?”

A genius? That was a new one.

“Nah, hardly. I just overheard one of my friend’s moms talking about the tours and what a waste it was to have such expensive places stand empty for so long.” Now that the words were out, it was like I’d broken a seal, and they just wouldn’t stop. “They were a safe place to stay, and I even figured out how to make it an address for school and other stuff.”

Okay, I was pretty proud of that. Having a legal place of occupancy had been a huge boon to my life.

“As admirable as all of that is... why?”

“Why?” I repeated dubiously. “Look, I get that you’re loaded, but I’m pretty sure even you understand that rent is insanely expensive and people need money to live.”

He shot me a rueful look before he answered. “I mean, why have you been on your own?”

Boy, that was a story and a half, wasn’t it? I decided to go with the Cliff Notes version.

“Before I turned sixteen, I suddenly came home to find my parents packing in a real frenzy. They were totally freaked out and screamed at me to go.”

Although I tried to keep my tone steady, hurt still rose within me. They were my parents, the people I was supposed to be able to rely on no matter what. But I could still see them as clear as day, running around the house like chickens with their heads cut off.

It was hard not to laugh bitterly, but somehow I kept it inside. It had been so close to my birthday that when I'd come home, I thought perhaps they were trying to prepare a surprise party, and I walked in at the wrong time.

But no, it wasn't some celebration of my birth. It was the rejection of me as their child — a complete abandonment by the people I loved.

What a messed-up situation. Sometimes I still couldn't believe that it had happened at all. It had, though, and it still haunted me all the time.

It was burned into my memory how I stood on the porch for nearly twenty minutes, trying to figure out where to go or what to do. I could have called the cops, but something told me not to. So instead, I just walked numbly to the closest shelter I could find. I bounced from place to place for a while, trying to dodge anyone who tried to get me into the system. I had a few friends who had foster families, and only one of them didn't have a horrific time. So, I figured I'd be better on my own.

And I'd been alone ever since.

"So, you just left?" Mahlan murmured, drawing me back to the present.

"Uh, yeah. More or less."

"More or less, huh?" He obviously knew there was more to the story, but I was grateful that he didn't grill me on it. Then again, maybe that was just because we pulled up to his place, where I saw a huge pile of groceries waiting outside the door.

"I thought you said you were just ordering food for breakfast?"

"I did," he answered as if he hadn't just purchased the equivalent of three months' worth of my grocery list on a whim. "And a few peripherals. I wanted to make sure that we had plenty of anything we needed so we wouldn't have to go out unless we wanted to."

"Okay, that makes sense." No, it didn't make sense at all, but rich people never did. If everything he was saying about the mate stuff was right, I was certainly in for an interesting future.

Heading in, I followed the handsome man into the kitchen, where he began to unpack everything on the island. I couldn't help the shock that coursed through me at the sight of all the *food!* And not just cheapy-cheap stuff like I would get. No, there were eggs, milk, fresh fruit and vegetables.

Chocolate chips, three different types of syrup, flour, sugar, pretty much everything I could possibly think of. He must have spent a small fortune!

I knew I was staring, but I couldn't stop. I was already drooling as I imagined everything he could make. Had I secretly died and gone to heaven? If I had, it was a bit weird, but I would happily put up with pack whatever's if it meant a free breakfast buffet!

"Hey, you don't have to stand if you don't want to. Come have a seat."

He grinned broadly at me, and *whoa*, did my body react. The grin made his chiseled features stand out even more, and his deep, earthen eyes shone in an entirely inviting way. That look could make my knees weak and my libido poke its head up ever so slightly.

"Okay," I murmured, sitting at one of the tall stools at the kitchen island. The food smelled even better up close, and he hadn't even started making anything. Sure, I'd always had a pretty keen sense of smell, but I'd grown used to trying to ignore it while I ate expired food or cafeteria slop.

"Do you have any dishes you particularly like?"

I served him up with another shrug. "I haven't had anything for breakfast besides the school's watery eggs, stale cereal, or stuff thrown out by bakeries."

Mahlan paused in his movements, his face a smooth mask, and I was worried I had said the wrong thing. Anxiety bloomed within me, which was silly considering I was hanging with the man who technically kidnapped me.

I was still pissed at him, of course. I'd missed my graduation! The event that I'd been busting my butt to get to for three and a half years. But that was gone along with everything else about my life I'd been looking forward to.

By all rights, I should have picked up the juiciest, ripest tomato on the table and slammed it into his face, then rubbed the darkest berries into his stupidly overpriced carpet. But I was overwhelmed, my emotions were all over the place, and I was really, *really* hungry.

So, I didn't do any of that and instead sat there with my feet dangling, watching Mahlan while he cooked.

"Is your situation why you started pickpocketing?"

I nodded, secrets continuing to flow from my mouth like water. "School can't feed me in the summer, so I had to learn to survive."

He nodded along, and I was relieved at the lack of judgment. I expected a rich guy like him to lecture me on the morality of theft, but he seemed to at least somewhat get it.

“Normally, I would never steal around where I’m living. It’s too easy to establish a trail and get caught that way.”

“As proven by our little encounter.”

“Yeah,” I agreed with a huff. Man, so many years of going uncaught all gone in a poof of smoke. Or a poof of wolf, I guessed, which was perhaps the weirdest expression my brain had ever cooked up.

“I know I shouldn’t have gone after that Cyprus dude, but I saw how stacked his wallet was. He had enough to get me through all summer and probably into the next year. Which I needed, ya know, considering that I graduated, so I’m not gonna get two meals a day from my high school.”

I rested my chin in my hand, my tone turning dreamy. “I probably could have afforded a few classes or even rented a little apartment on my own. It was just too much to pass up, ya know? I don’t want to be some homeless kid forever.”

It was a rhetorical question, so Mahlan didn’t answer right away, instead continuing to butter the pan he’d put on the stove. And if I noticed the sudden increase in tension in his shoulders or the way his hand gripped the spatula much tighter than it needed to, well, I didn’t point that out.

“You’re no longer homeless.”

...I supposed that was true. But I wasn’t sure if I should appreciate that or feel forced into being with him. Sure, I’d always daydreamed about never having to worry about money again, but I wasn’t exactly fond of how it had happened.

I’d been bitten, literally bitten, and absconded without my consent! I’d been sucked into a world of monsters and magic without anything but some vague apologies for the inconvenience.

Boy, my emotions were still in an uproar. I needed a full meal, a good nap, and maybe a trip to the loony bin.

“Do you have anything you need to get at the apartment?”

“Um, just a little bit of stuff. But not too much.” I paused, my brain catching up with the practicalities of the whole situation. “I didn’t think we’d agreed on me moving in with you, though.”

It was a weak shot at independence, but I felt like I was teetering on my brain turning to mush from everything inundating it.

“It would be best if you stayed here or in the place next to mine.” He said it with so much steel that my temper flared. I didn’t like being told what to do like that. But then his tone softened, cutting off my rising furor. “I know you

didn't ask to be mated to an alpha, but here we are, and I'm going to take care of you."

"I've applied for plenty of jobs, and I've gotten good at providing for myself," I objected. "I don't need to be taken care of."

"But you don't have a job yet?"

I wanted to lie, but it just wasn't in my nature. It was already so much keeping my situation a secret from my friends; I didn't have room for any more subterfuge in my life.

"No..."

"Then let me help until you do."

I wanted to decline, and by decline, I meant to tell him exactly where to shove it. But before I could get anything out one way or another, he kept going.

"If you need a job, let me pay you for your expertise. We need your pickpocketing skill to get our moonstone back and information on who killed our previous alpha. If that's not a high-paying freelance contract, I don't know what is."

"You would pay me for that?"

"Of course. Despite how it may seem, I don't want to force you into anything, and I believe in paying people for their worth. And you..." he leveled me with a look so intense that goosebumps rose along my arms. "Are worth more than you could ever know."

Geez, he really knew how to talk to a woman, didn't he? I did my best to swallow my reaction, but once again, my whole body was crying out to close the distance between us and press my lips to his.

We'd only kissed once, but wow, I felt more with that single smooch than all the times I'd made out with my ex combined.

"You mentioned that at your little meeting. You said you needed me to lift a key card?"

"Yes. We've tried to hack in digitally, but we haven't been able to get past their security measures, even with a large-scale DDoS attack on their servers. So, we need direct access. You would be a huge boon to our chances."

I thought about it for a moment. I'd ever expected to get a job offer from my pickpocketing skills, but did it count when the job offer was from my literal kidnapper? Everything was so darn complicated.

"I can get the keycard if you can get me near the right people."

“Huh, you’re being far more agreeable than I expected.”

That makes you and me both, handsome alpha man, I thought snarkily before continuing. “Not for nothing, but what else am I supposed to do? I have nowhere to go; you own the building I’ve been hiding in. You know that I’m basically a criminal and could turn me in. Figure I would go with the flow.”

“I would never do that,” Mahlan said with conviction. “Turn you in. I don’t want to hurt you, Lyssa.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve said as much. But if you’re willing to pay me for the job, I’m willing to do it.” I let my tone sharpen and hit him with a patented *look*. “But don’t take this as me accepting the whole mating without my consent thing. I’m pissed, and we aren’t done talking about that.”

Wasn’t that the understatement of the year?

“But while I process this whole shifter thing and everything else, we’re gonna table that whole conversation.”

“You’re a wolf too, you know.”

I held up my hand, having more than enough of that nonsense. “Nope. That’s an *ixnay* with a capital ‘I,’ my friend — literally impossible.”

“Your magic is suppressed, but I’m telling you the truth.” Well, he certainly seemed earnest. “That’s why you’re influenced by my alpha commands and mating bond suggestions.”

His what now? “Is that why I’ve been compulsively doing what you want?” Mahlan’s expression grew slightly guilty, and I had my own eureka moment. “Don’t do that again. I don’t like it.”

He didn’t answer for a long moment, and I was totally willing to throw down over it, but then he cleared his throat, his voice gentle. “I will try my best only to use it if I think it’s the only way to keep you safe. I won’t use it for everyday things.”

Well, that was a compromise, I supposed.

“Good,” I said with all the finality I could muster.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conversation faded after that, leaving me to sit and simmer in the delicious smells drifting from the stove. By the time Mahlan put a nearly overloaded plate in front of me, I was practically drooling.

“Let me know if you want more.”

“More?” I parroted like he’d just started speaking ancient Latin.

“Yeah, I made plenty in case you wanted seconds.”

My heart sang I looked at my plate's borderline mountain of food. He'd just given me more calories than I usually ate in three to four days. I couldn't imagine having more.

But I sure as hell was willing to try.

I dug in, and it was impossible not to groan my appreciation. It was the best thing I'd had in years — the eggs were rich, buttery, and perfectly seasoned. The bacon was salty, crispy, and the fat melted across my tongue like a dream. Pancakes? Light and fluffy. Fruit and granola parfait? A revelation.

I devoured it like a starving woman, which I guessed I was. Occasionally I looked to Mahlan, expecting an expression of disgust or judgment, but instead, he just appeared pleased as punch at my voracious inhalation of his fare.

"Where did you learn to cook?" I asked between mouthfuls, taking in the sight of him in his black apron. Goodness, he wasn't fair. His broad, strong form filled out the dark colors of his button-up and dress slacks, and his hair was lazily swept to the side in a way that made me want to run my hands through it.

Did I have Stockholm syndrome?

No, that wasn't even a real thing. I remembered reading about the case it stemmed from, a 1973 bank robbery. Psychiatrist Nils Berjerot had coined the phrase without even talking to any of the victims, and it did a fair bit to undermine human's natural reactions to violence and trauma.

Right. Because that factoid really matters right now.

"You sure you don't want seconds?" Mahlan asked, looking almost hopeful. Weird guy. Devastatingly handsome but weird.

"Nah, I'm full to bursting."

"I'll leave these on the stove if you get hungry later."

I made an affirmative hum while I rubbed my very stuffed belly. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten so much food, and whenever it was, it certainly hadn't been half as good as everything I'd just scarfed down.

"Would you like to get your things today?"

I perked up at that. Sure, I wasn't sold on his insistence that we live close to each other, but the idea of having what few meager possessions I did own was comforting. "Yes, I would." The last thing I wanted was for some maintenance guy to find it in the air vents. Even if I never went to that place again, I didn't want to ruin the free space for any other homeless kid who

might stumble across it.

“I’d also like to shower and change. Do you have any clothes I can use?”

“While your dress does look quite lovely on you, yes, that can be arranged.” His eyes slid over me as he said that, but somehow it wasn’t in a creepy way. No, I felt appreciated, like a beautiful painting or even a bit of a movie star. How could he make me feel that without even blinking? It was uncanny!

“You saw where the bathroom was in my room. Why don’t you go shower now while I clean up in here, and my assistant will bring an outfit for our trip to the Langhouse building.”

“Okay, sounds good to me,” I said, hopping off the stool only to instantly regret the way my very full belly bounced.

“Please, take as long as you want. There are some errands I’ll have to run while we’re out, so it’ll be best for you to be nice and refreshed.”

“Should I take a bath then?” I *loved* baths, but I couldn’t take them too often at the apartments because the sound of the water draining was about ten times more noticeable than a shower.

“Whatever you want. Check the closet in there for hygienic supplies. I have plenty.”

“Really? You don’t look like the metrosexual type.” Not that he looked grubby either. But there was a rugged sort of look to Mahlan, a natural kind of roughness that couldn’t be tamed and piqued my interest in all sorts of ways that it probably shouldn’t be piqued in.

“I’m an alpha. It’s not entirely uncommon to have pack members stay here after celebrations or tragic events. I like to make sure I have something for everyone if they’re in my home.”

I bit off my prepared snark, surprised by his sincerity. Despite the whole hijacking of my life, Mahlan seemed like a really nice guy.

“Can’t argue with that policy.” I said before hurrying off.

I made my way to the bathroom, thoughts flying through my mind in a never-ending tizzy. Ever since I’d woken up, they’d been ricocheting between liking Mahlan and intensely distrusting him. Wasn’t that a thing with psychopaths? Weren’t they supposed to be insanely charismatic? What if I was just being duped like everyone who liked Jeffrey Dahmer was?

Ugh, I did *not* like that thought.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that by the time I got to the comically oversized bathroom, I just stared at my reflection for a bit. I wished

that someone had prepared me for what to do in such a situation, but last time I checked, the school library hadn't had anything on how to prepare for sudden, forcible bite-mating by magical creatures in business suits.

A knock on the door nearly startled me out of my skin, and I opened it to see Mahlan standing there with a shirt and pair of boxers in his hand. He wasn't trying to shower with me, was he? That was a big no for me. The most naked any male had seen me was in a worn one-piece that one of my friends had given me after she got hit with a Mack truck level of puberty and couldn't fit in it any longer.

"Yeah?" I asked dubiously.

Something about my stormy expression must have given the man caution because he held the clothes out to me without getting any closer. "Here, in case you finish before my assistant returns."

"Oh, thanks," I said with relief, accepting them.

"No problem," Mahlan responded as I grinned up at him. Why did he have to be so likable?

My smile must have sent the wrong message, though, because he did step forward to place a small kiss on the top of my head and rest his hand on my waist.

My body reacted like it was hooked up to the world's most pleasurable electric cable. I could feel the static of it crackling along my skin, and yet again, I was nearly consumed with the desire to press our bodies together and learn about everything I'd been missing out on.

But there was something else besides the attraction and desire. It was that same acrid anger that had burned in my throat ever since he bit me. Sure, my belly was full of the amazing food I could never hope to afford on my own. And yeah, I was getting brand-new clothes handed to me by his fancy assistant like it was nothing. But none of that changed the fact that he had forced my hand. Literally *forced* me.

I moved on instinct, grabbing his hand and squeezing it as I pulled it off of me. I got the feeling that he could have easily resisted, and there would be nothing I could do, but he didn't fight me. Instead, he just stepped back respectfully.

"Our hot water heater is pretty robust, so you shouldn't worry about the water going cold."

"Thanks," I said awkwardly, trying not to cringe inwardly at the moment. Thankfully he headed off before we had to soak in it any longer, and I was

finally free to check out the closet he mentioned.

Mahlan wasn't kidding about hygienic supplies. He basically had an entire bath and body shop in there, from body washes to soaps, oils, and even some bath bombs. But that would have to wait for another day if I ended up stuck in the place. I wasn't nearly comfortable enough to soak naked for an hour in a strange man's tub, but I could see myself someday getting there. Eventually.

I shook my head at the errant thought. The last thing I needed to worry about was making some Lyssa soup.

Instead, I focused on picking out what I wanted to use. With so many choices, it was easy to get overwhelmed by everything. But then I caught a scent that was unmistakably *Mahlan*.

Reaching in, I pulled out what had to be the body wash and shampoo that he used. I'd always been pretty sensitive to strong scents, but his was perfect. Woodsy, with a sort of masculine musk that probably shouldn't have smelled good but still very much did. I happily hurried to the shower, and man, if those things tickled my fancy in the bottle, they were about ten times more potent once I added hot water and steam.

And goodness was the water *hot*. I had a penchant for liking my showers as hot as the lava rivers of Mordor, and I actually had to turn the temperature down. That was an entirely new experience for me, and I loved it.

How long I spent in there was between me, the Lord, and Mahlan's water bill, but when I came out, I was pleasantly pink and nicely wrinkled. I was almost a whole new woman, and entirely happy about it.

True to what Mahlan expected, the assistant wasn't back, so I changed into his shirt and boxers. It probably should have been awkward, but it wasn't at all. Instead, a fizzing sort of contentment bloomed in my middle, spreading through all my limbs and making me smile. I liked how his clothes felt on me, and I liked how they smelled.

For so long, I'd felt like an alien walking around with humans, trying to fit in. But I didn't feel that way in Mahlan's clothes, which made zero sense.

But my mind was tired of questioning everything, so I sauntered out to the kitchen, looking forward to talking to Mahlan again so we could maybe see a bit more eye to eye on my living arrangement.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting once I got out there, but it wasn't for there to be a petite blonde girl leaning against the island and grinning at Mahlan like he was the sun himself. I ground to a halt in the doorway,

looking between the two.

It was the woman who saw me first, pausing mid-sentence, and a strange flare of possessiveness rushed through me. What the hell was that about?

“Of course you got a hot mate,” the girl grumbled, wrinkling her nose. “Did I mention I hate you?”

Mahlan laughed like she was just the funniest thing, and I couldn’t quite read their dynamic. Was she an ex or something?

“You might have once or twice.”

I drew closer, looking them over. “Is this an old girlfriend?” I asked, trying to sound bored. I liked to think I nailed it, but I couldn’t deny that there was plenty of jealousy in my thoughts.

Which, again, made less sense than life vests on kitty cats who lived in the mountains. Mahlan had stolen away my life with a single bite. I should hate him and be more than happy that an ex was around to take him off my hands and let me return to what I was supposed to do.

But I didn’t hate him and was very much not happy to see an old romantic partner.

“Hardly,” Mahlan said, still chuckling. “This is my assistant, Taylor.”

“And I’ve never dated this jerkhole,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him. “We’re just old friends because I have terrible taste.”

“I’m gonna remember you said that the next time you ask me to reach the top shelf,” Mahlan joked.

“It’s not my fault that your cabinets are ridiculously high! We’re wolf shifters, not giants or Joten!”

Mahlan just rolled his eyes and leaned back against his counter. “I believe you have something for my hot mate?”

“Oh, right!” The girl lifted some bags, beaming brightly at me. “I had to guess, considering Mahlan’s horribly unhelpful descriptions, so I got a lot. Men, amirite?”

“Uh... yeah,” I agreed uncertainly, quickly catching the high-end names on the bags. Had Mahlan gotten me designer clothes? That seemed awfully exorbitant, rich or not.

“I’ll take these to his room so you can choose whatever you want. If you realize you’re looking for something in particular, just let me know, and I’ll get it for you!”

“Thank you,” I said, partially in shock but also meaning it. Although I couldn’t deny the envy still bubbling in my gut, I did appreciate her niceness.

“I’m sure everything is lovely.”

“Aw, you’re a sweetie. Way too good for this ol’ alpha.”

“I’m only three years older than you,” Mahlan chimed in.

“I *knooooow*, you’re practically *ancient*,” Taylor shot back as she trotted off. Once she disappeared down the hall, Mahlan sent me a soft smile that made the bitter feelings melt and fade to the background of my mind.

“Why don’t you go get changed, then we’ll leave?”

“Okay.”

I didn’t know what else to say, so I headed down the hall where I found Taylor in Mahlan’s room, setting out several outfit pieces.

“I didn’t know exactly what your style was, so I went with something classic and simple for today,” she said breezily, pointing to the white button-up shirt and denim cut-offs she had laid out on the bed.

“You wanna try them on?”

“Sure,” I said as she handed me a bra, underwear, and the items. Heading to the bathroom, I mournfully slipped out of Mahlan’s clothes and then redressed in the new stuff. It had been so long since I’d had new clothing that it felt so unnatural on me. Everything seemed too big, and the bra was at least a cup size too large.

“Blech,” I commented, feeling frumpy and self-conscious as I stepped back into Mahlan’s room.

“Oh, honey, lemme help,” Taylor said, rushing over. With a practiced expertise, she rolled my sleeves up, tucked in the front of the shirt, and pulled the shorts up a touch higher to sit at my natural waist. When that was done, she dropped a pair of trendy flats at my feet and took a step back.

When I looked in the mirror, I saw that I did indeed look a lot better. It was amazing how a subtle change in style could shake things up.

“Hey, just so you know, I have zero interest in Mahlan.”

“Huh?” I asked like that very thought hadn’t been swirling around my head.

“I don’t exactly bat for his team if you catch my drift. I just figured you might like to know.”

My cheeks colored with embarrassment, and I couldn’t help but be a little sheepish. “Was I that obvious?”

“Not at all! But I know unfinished mating bonds can make people a little crazy. I figured a little extra assurance wouldn’t be remiss in this situation.”

For being a bunch of people who had essentially kidnapped me, everyone

was so *nice*. Was this what it felt like to be a family? It had been so long that I'd almost forgotten.

"Thanks for telling me that," I murmured, looking over Taylor's neck and shoulders. It wasn't like I could do a full investigation, but as far as I could tell, she didn't have any mark herself.

Huh. I wanted to ask, but I felt it would be rude. Before I could decide either way, Taylor exited, leaving me to admire my reflection for another few moments before rejoining Mahlan in the kitchen.

"Ready?" he asked, grinning at me like I was the center of the world itself. *Oof*, that was a powerful look, and I felt my body viscerally respond to him.

Down girl, geez!

Technically, I was still a teenager at nineteen, so I was going to blame everything on my teenage hormones and leave it at that.

"Ready," I agreed, following him out to what was basically the batmobile but flashier. Geez, he really was loaded.

We didn't talk much on the ride to the apartment, but it was a bizarrely comfortable sort of quiet as we zoomed along. I didn't feel the need to fill the silence, just letting my brain catch up with everything happening.

I supposed I was adapting as well as anyone could be expected, considering I'd seen a bunch of men explode into wolves and a woman perform some sort of intricate blood ritual. Someone should give me a gold star and a cookie.

Actually, I better not tell Mahlan because he'd probably buy me an actual star and a cookie cake from a five-star bakery.

The thought almost made me chuckle, but the looming shadow of the Langhouse Apartments removed most of the levity from the moment.

"Here we are," Mahlan said unnecessarily.

"Yup," I said contritely. Even though Mahlan knew pretty much everything about my situation, I was incredibly nervous about showing him my stolen abode. No one in my life had ever seen any apartments I squatted in, mainly because none of them could know what I was going through. Sure, it was pretty damn isolating, but it was necessary.

"Are you all right?" Mahlan asked. "We don't have to do this now if you don't want to."

"No, I want to," I said, searching for a way to express my feelings. But I was so emotionally and mentally exhausted that the best I could come up

with was a little bit of a white lie. “Just nervous walking into the building with the guy who owns it. Seems like a pretty big deal.”

“Don’t worry about that. No one will recognize me beyond the doorman.” I gave him a skeptical glare, but he just grinned at me blithely. “Lyssa, did you know what the owner of your building looked like in the entire three years you were here?”

“No,” I answered begrudgingly.

“And did you expect him to look anything like me?”

“...no,” I admitted even more begrudgingly-er. I didn’t know if that was a real word, but I was making it one.

“Exactly. It’ll be fine. Now come, let’s go get your stuff. If we need to order a U-Haul or anything, I can call John.”

A U-Haul? Oh, geez, Mahlan had no idea what my life was really like. Well, he would be figuring it out pretty soon, considering how determined he was to integrate our lives.

Ducking my head, I followed him inside. Sure enough, the doorman noticed Mahlan, but I was able to slip by behind him and hurry to the elevators before he realized we were together. Perhaps it was silly to get social anxiety about the doorman, but he had always been nice to me and made me feel like an actual resident, not a street rat who found a loop in the system to exploit.

We reached the elevator without much incident, and I hastily pressed the button for my floor. If Mahlan noticed my urgency, he didn’t comment on it, and I was grateful for that.

The halls were quiet as we headed to the apartment where I’d left my stuff, and this time it was me who led him in. He looked around at the blank space with plenty of surprise, which struck me as odd, considering he had to know what the inside of his building looked like. ...Right? Or was that terribly naive of me?

“Where’s all your stuff?”

Oh, *that* was what he was concerned by. He *really* didn’t get it.

“I have to hide it every time I leave in case someone comes in while I’m gone. I try not to spend any time here during daylight hours if I can help it.”

“Hmmm,” his sound was noncommittal, so I ignored it. Although he hadn’t outright judged me yet, I could tell that something about my homelessness bothered him. He’d mentioned a couple of times that he wanted to provide for me, but I couldn’t my brain wrap around that. Nobody wanted

to provide for strangers out of the goodness of their heart. That wasn't how the world worked.

"I'll go get my stuff."

Hurrying to the vent, I thought I would feel mournful at losing the places I'd called home for so long. But I found that wasn't on my emotional radar at all. Sure, I was chewing at the bit about Mahlan's insistence that I move, but much to my surprise I didn't hold much sentiment for my squatting place,

However, I didn't let it distract me and pulled out the duffle and small reusable bag that constituted my whole life. Trotting back to Mahlan, I shot him what I hoped was a peaceable grin.

"Got it!"

Mahlan didn't react how I anticipated. I thought he'd be pleased with how quickly I'd gotten in and out, but instead, he looked at me, the bags I was holding, then behind me. "Where?"

I lifted my arms slightly, making the plasticky material of my bags rustle. "Here!"

It was like something out of an overacted romcom as his eyes shuttled from me to my belongings. "That's it?"

"Hey, it took a lot of work to get these!" The inflatable air mattress was an especially huge boon. Before that, I'd been sleeping on two yoga mats I'd pulled from a gym's dumpster. But when Sarah's mother had decided to replace their outdated camping bed with a newer one with a quieter blow-up motor built in, I'd happily taken the old one off their hands.

Mahlan looked like he couldn't tell if I was joking, and it was starting to get insulting.

"Hey, not all of us have assistants and finance teams and fancy-pantsy homes with bathrooms an entire family could live in."

"Sorry," he said quickly, seeming to snap himself out of it. "I didn't mean anything by it, really. I just..." He shook his head and collected himself. "We need to go shopping. I am very impressed by your resourcefulness, but frankly, you need more things."

"I've gotten by just fine with all of this." I didn't know why I was protesting. Hadn't I always dreamed of having more money to afford more things? If Mahlan was willing to throw down, why on earth would I object?

"Lyssa, I realize you are an incredibly strong woman, but you need more things. Firstly, you need clothes you can wear in a professional setting, especially if you accept a freelance contract to help my pack. And multiples

of those outfits, considering I want to take you to upscale places and test your skills.”

I dropped my bags and crossed my arms, my stubbornness welling up. “You don’t have to test me. And if you wanna play it that way, I could always teach you or someone else how to do it so we can skip all the clothes business entirely.”

“There’s not enough time, and I’m far too recognizable as a new alpha.” He paused for a moment, and I could feel him sizing me up, which I also hated. “How about we make a wager?”

“A wager?” I repeated. I was doing that a lot lately, but I felt like I was always about five steps behind whatever Mahlan was talking about.

“I bet I can purchase more than you can steal at every store.”

“That’s not fair! You could buy several carloads from the store, and I can only do what’s on my person.”

“That’s a good point.” He seemed to consider my words, and that helped me settle down. For being so adamant about some things, Mahlan did appear to respect my opinion on others. “How about I can only buy things you physically touch?”

“What if I go in a store and touch nothing?”

“You do need to act like a normal shopper.”

I probably shouldn’t have asked, but it was in my nature to want things to be fair. “All right then, you have a deal.” I offered my hand for a shake. I was about to show Mahlan just what I could do.

His larger, warm hand gripped mine, sending those little zings of energy into me. “Game on then.”

Filled with determination, I lifted my bags to take them to the car. But Mahlan took them from me, giving me a look that challenged me to say something about it.

I didn’t, though. I knew when to pick my battles, and this wasn’t one of them.

Instead, I just followed along and got into the car, already planning different techniques I would trot out. Hitting a store was a lot different than pickpocketing individuals, although it was the less guilt-inducing one.

I was completely unfamiliar with where Mahlan was driving me, but I could recognize that the boutiques we were passing were growing more and more high-end by the second. I trekked to such areas maybe once every couple of months. While my haul was always insanely high, the risk was that

much higher. Cops in rich people's spaces were much more vigilant and violent, a combination I didn't need.

And poorer areas of the city were no good either. One, I didn't want to steal from other people who were struggling. Secondly, cops were also liable to be much more vigilant and violent there too.

No, the best place for me to target was middle-class places. Granted, those were disappearing at an alarming rate. It used to be I had about six or seven great spots I could go to and get enough money to get me through the month, but recently it had dwindled to three. But three wasn't enough to space out my lifts enough, which was one of the biggest reasons I'd sprung for that Alpha Cyprus dude.

If I'd known what that would lead to, I would have covered my face and ran away as fast as my legs would take me. But considering I didn't have a time machine, I was stuck with the consequences of my actions.

At least for the moment. Who knew what the future held?

MAHLAN

“**W**e need to get you a little bit of everything, so the first store we go to will be a sort of trial run,” I said as we drove along. Lyssa hadn’t spoken much since we’d gotten in the car, and I got the impression her mind was full.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, clearly only half paying attention to me.

I didn’t answer entirely honestly, but that was only because I was pretty sure she didn’t want to hear about my temptation to pull her into my lap and kiss her senselessly on the side of the road. I felt like a teenage boy again, caught up in everything she was. The slight upturn of her lips whenever she thought she was saying something particularly clever. The way her brow furrowed when she thought hard. The slight cant to her hips and the way she crossed her arms when she was presented with a challenge.

Perhaps it was just the chemicals of our bond, but I felt like she couldn’t have been more perfect for me if she was built to my specifications. And the fact that I was about to be able to provide for her in a way that she hadn’t been in so long pleased my inner wolf.

Yeah, she didn’t want to hear any of that.

“Some casual clothes would be a good start. I figure it wouldn’t hurt for you to have more stuff to lounge and hang out in.” I should have stopped it then and there, but my mouth kept moving without me. “Maybe on casual dates.”

I could tell I got her full attention at that, her face carefully blank. If there was any expression I hated seeing on her, it was that one because it meant she

didn't feel safe enough to show her true reaction.

Which I desperately wanted. I wanted — no, *needed* Lyssa to trust me. I could feel it writing itself into my bones. I would do whatever was required to prove to her that I was a safe haven. That I would take care of her to the ends of the earth.

“Too soon, I got it,” I muttered, trying not to sound petulant. I was a grown man. The least I could do was respect my mate's emotional needs.

Thankfully, Lyssa seemed to let it go as she nodded.

It went quiet again as we pulled into one of the upscale parking garages. We were in the part of the city where there was almost no parking, and I couldn't help but wonder if that would give Lyssa a harder time or not. Surely, if she could duck into a car right outside a store, it would be easier than schlepping all her stuff to a garage down the street.

Or maybe she was so good that it wouldn't even matter. I was inclined to think the latter, considering how smooth she'd been with Alpha Cyprus. But hey, it was the only way I could think of her agreeing to let me take her shopping.

Which she desperately needed. When I realized that all her belongings in the world could be contained within two worn bags, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Sometimes I felt put out when I ran out of aftershave or if I forgot to put my sheets in the dryer and had to nap on the couch until the load finished. Meanwhile, Lyssa was living her whole life on pennies and garbage scraps.

Well, not anymore. When I decided I wanted to spoil her, I was dead serious. She would never have to want for material things ever again if I could help it.

“Have you ever been to this place before?” she asked as I parked, then circled the car to open her door.

“No, but Taylor has. She says it's one of her favorite places to shop for loungewear.”

A strange expression crossed Lyssa's face, and she eyed me like she thought I was lying. “I'm having a real hard time imagining you in loungewear.”

“You've seen me in my pajamas.”

“Once,” she countered, and I could tell some of her sass was coming back. I loved how fiery and witty she was. I always felt terrible for people whose partners had the personality of wet sponges. “And it was a rather

traumatic time, so excuse me if I don't remember it clearly. Besides, that was pajamas. That's different."

"Uh-huh, sure."

Her beautiful eyes narrowed, but I could tell she was being playful instead of serious. "You callin' me a liar?"

"Well, I might be implying that you're embellishing the situation."

We continued to banter back and forth, which pleased me to no end. Not for the first, or even tenth time, I wished we had met under other circumstances. I would love to take a couple of months for us to get to know each other, to slowly fall in love while becoming a part of each other's worlds.

I could see it in my mind's eye how courting Lyssa would go. It was an enticing, romantic picture in my head, leading me through a tale that would have been right at home in a romance novel. And then, when she trusted me and knew exactly how I felt about her, I could picture her in my bed, sighing sweetly for me until her mewls turned desperate.

The thought made my body respond in ways that weren't exactly appropriate for public, so I quickly clamped that down. The unfulfilled bonding hormones were definitely getting to me.

"Round one, start," Lyssa murmured, and I realized we'd entered the first store. However, we didn't make it far, with my mate stilling just inside the doorway.

"Is something wrong?" I murmured, hand going to the small of her back. I knew she still needed a lot of space and wasn't entirely comfortable with physical touch, but it was so easy to forget when my body called out for her, and my mind was determined to protect her from anything that might harm her.

"I just... I've never been in a place like this."

"Never?" I murmured back. I knew she'd been homeless for nearly four years, but she'd had parents before that. Had they never taken her out someplace nice to shop? Not even for her birthday?

If that was so, I had even more lost time to make up for.

"Never," she confirmed.

"Well, it's mostly just like every store, except a lot have pushy sale people who are hunting for commissions."

Lyssa frowned, her kissable lips pulling downward. "They get that here? It complicates things."

“No, not at this place. I thought we should skip that for our test run.”

I wished I could take a picture of the look of relief on her face. “It’s much appreciated.”

“As are you.”

My compliment seemed to catch her off guard, but she shook her head and strode forward. She had a strange, sort of plastic smile on her face, and it took me a couple of beats to realize that she was pretending to be excited to shop like a regular patron would be.

Yeah, Lyssa definitely knew what she was doing. I was going to have to work hard to outpurchase her. But I liked the challenge. Especially if it meant she got a lot of new things in the process.

The only downside was that it quickly became evident that Lyssa was being incredibly careful about what she touched. At first, I thought that maybe she was just going to give me perhaps one item per display, but after a few minutes, she gave me a sheepish look.

“I don’t know my size...” she murmured, biting her lip like she was expecting to be made fun of.

It probably shouldn’t have been such a cute expression to me, but it made me want to run around and grab everything she could possibly want until she was buried under a pile of newly purchased casualwear. Thankfully, at least one of my brain cells was still functioning with some logic, and I was able to tamp down that urge.

“I guess you’ll have to grab a couple of things to try them on.”

As I anticipated, she narrowed her eyes at me again. I was very quickly growing fond of that scathing expression of hers. “You’re enjoying this.”

“I will neither confirm nor deny.” Oh, I was *definitely* enjoying it, of that there was no doubt.

Huffing slightly, she grabbed a small and a medium of the shorts on display and moved on. My mind might have drifted to what she would look like with her athletic legs in those, and I quickly resolved to purchase them if she didn’t end up stealing them.

Yes, stealing was wrong, but I could always send money for our ill-gotten gains later, once my schedule cleared up. I knew I was fortunate never to need to shoplift, so it didn’t make much sense to gain from Lyssa’s skills. She *needed* to; I was using it as a cover so she would acquiesce to letting me buy things for her.

From there, she took a more leisurely pace, and I realized yet again it was

another strategy to make it look like normal shopping. I felt more confident in her being our secret weapon by the second.

It wasn't for another few minutes that I also realized she was purposefully only touching the cheapest things, so even if I bought it all, I couldn't keep up with her. Sneaky, sneaky. But her first mistake came when she picked up a pair of coral capris, then put them back immediately.

"Didn't see the price tag."

Perhaps I was a bit too happy to pick them right back up and toss them to her. "You touched them, so it looks like you have to try them on so I can buy them."

"Fine, whatever," she said, rolling her eyes. But as we moved on, I could feel her getting more competitive about it, and it was turning into a game.

By the time we ended up near the dressing room, she had the maximum number of items, which pleased my inner wolf and me. There was no way she could lift that amount in her button-up and shorts.

"Do you need a booth?" the attendant asked, giving Lyssa a stellar customer service smile.

"Yes, please," Lyssa answered in kind. I trailed behind her, but the attendant stopped me before I could enter the curtained booth with her.

"Sorry, just one person at a time. We've had... *issues* with couples together in our dressing rooms."

"Oh, he wasn't coming in," Lyssa said firmly, which was a little disappointing but not entirely unexpected. "You can sit out there, and I'll show you what outfits I like."

Even though I wasn't a thief, I knew that her time with no eyes on her would be key to her lifting. I wished I could see her whole process, but that wasn't in the cards.

"Yes, ma'am," I said with a wink, sitting in one of the several comfortable chairs outside the booths.

I knew that shopping sprees were a staple in cheesy romance movies, but I'd never really gotten it until I had to wait for Lyssa to come out in her first outfit. Anticipation and excitement laced through me, making my foot bounce on the floor and my inner wolf to pace.

My hindbrain was screaming to do something, to take her then and there and show her how virile her alpha was. Thankfully, I was evolved beyond that, although the temptation was utterly delicious.

I tried to be patient — I really did. Most of my pack would even call me

the patient sort. But after maybe five minutes passed, I started to get antsy.

“How’s it going in there?”

“Uh, fine. Why?”

“Aren’t you going to show me anything?”

I could hear her snark even through the thick curtain. “Oh? I didn’t know I was putting on a fashion show.”

“Well, that is half the excitement, isn’t it?”

In response, she opened the curtain, looking less happy than I had hoped and much more stressed. Was my plan backfiring? I hoped not. Lyssa had already been through so much that I wanted to make things fun and easier for her.

“Did you not like anything?”

She shook her head, and my mood dipped until she held up a sturdy yet stylish denim jacket. “I’ve always wanted one of these, though. Is this okay?”

The vulnerability in her voice caught me off guard, and I automatically stepped forward to pull her into an embrace. But I caught myself just in time and instead gave her a nod. “That’s perfectly fine. Are you sure you don’t want more?”

She might have just been sabotaging our game, but I wasn’t going to take the chance and push her. A lot had been forced onto Lyssa or was entirely out of her hands over the past twenty-four hours, so if she wanted a jean jacket, I was going to get her one.

“Let’s go pay for it then.”

The woman at the register was quick, allowing us to go outside and head to the next store in just a few minutes.

Lyssa seemed almost dejected as we walked, so I racked my brain with how to comfort her. While I wasn’t emotionally constipated like some alphas, Lyssa was still so new and unknown to me. While I was quickly trying to devour every factoid I learned about her, there was still so much that made her, well... *her*.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll have better luck at the next store.”

Or at least I hoped so. Especially considering that *Lorem Velour* was a high-end boutique that catered to all sorts of underthings. They had everything from shapewear to lingerie, to the best sports bra that money could buy.

“That was just the test run, so it’s not a big deal if I won.”

“...Uh-huh,” was her only reply.

Huh, I never pegged her for a sore loser.

Nevertheless, she marched into the store, took one look around, then grabbed something from the closest rack. I had anticipated a little shock from her at the kind of things around us, but she didn't even seem to care.

"This way," she said, voice full of steely determination.

I followed her to the back where the changing rooms were, and it seemed we were quick enough that the attendants didn't spot us heading there. Before I knew what was happening, Lyssa was pulling me into one of the changing rooms.

They weren't booths like the other store, which made sense considering the nature of their clothing. Shutting the door, I watched with plenty of interest as Lyssa began to strip.

I hadn't been prepared for anything of that nature, but I certainly wasn't complaining. Although looking at Lyssa's undoubtedly beautiful body without being able to touch it would be its own sweet torture.

"Watch this," Lyssa said, suddenly sounding much happier.

"Oh, I am," I said, setting down the bag with the jacket as I leaned against the wall.

Clearly confused, Lyssa turned her head towards me. When she saw my expression of interest and excitement, she just scoffed. "No, you perv. *Look!*"

With that, she pulled off the button-up to reveal an entirely different shirt.

"...you didn't have that earlier," I muttered, starting to put two and two together.

"Exactly," she said, grinning like a goblin. The world's most beautiful goblin, but a goblin nonetheless.

Suddenly, I wasn't treated to a strip tease at all, but rather an impressive discarding of illegally gained clothing. Leggings. A couple blouses. Camisoles. A skirt. Even a pair of shorts I'd never noticed her pick up.

"You cheated!" I said, aiming to sound affronted, although I was really impressed as all get-out. I had no idea she had so much merchandise under her outfit. Incredible! "You told me you only wanted one thing."

"Well, you never said I couldn't tell you what to buy, and you are the one that listened."

"I guess that makes me the loser then."

"Sure does," she said with a wink. God, I loved it when she got saucy. I couldn't wait until we were so comfortable with each other that we could lie on my couch and watch a movie while snarking through the whole thing.

I'd never realized that was something I craved until she kicked me out with all of the stolen goods crammed into the same bag with the sole jacket I purchased. While she dressed, I was more than happy to leave and used the time to walk back to the previous location so I could pay them for their goods. Earlier I had planned to get to it later, but I realized that I would probably forget with everything going on in my life and with the pack.

And wasn't I surprised when it came out to nearly a thousand dollars — five times more than the jacket I had bought her. If I wanted to catch up, I would have to be a lot more crafty.

Besides, the better I did at our little game, the more things Lyssa would try to steal. And the more she tried to steal, the more stuff she ended up having to call her own. It was a win-win situation in its purest form. I just hoped she didn't wise up and end our little wager.

I was about to leave the casualwear store when I recalled something specific. Returning to the dressing rooms, I grabbed the original shorts Lyssa had grabbed and paid for those too. Hey, just because she hadn't gotten them with her ruse didn't mean they had to be left behind.

The whole affair took a bit longer than I thought, but probably because I stopped to buy a couple of other items she'd faked not wanting. By the time I returned, Lyssa was exiting the dressing room with an armful of rejects. Damn, she sure worked fast.

"Ah-ah-ah," I said, rushing to take them from her. "I'm not falling for that again."

She pouted, reaching out after me. "Hey, some of those legitimately don't fit!"

I debated it for a long moment, the more competitive side of me wanting to tell her tough cookies, but that wouldn't be very gentlemanly of me.

"All right, pull out the ones that don't."

She reached for a couple of bras that admittedly looked a little big and a pair of underwear that was less an actual garment made from fabric and more of a casual suggestion comprised of gossamer-like lace.

"Here, I'll tell the cashier those were all the wrong size," I said, offering my other arm. As we strolled, Lyssa noticed the other bag I'd gotten from the store.

"What's all that?" she asked, scooting closer to me. While I appreciated the proximity, I wasn't going to explain it there and ruin everything. "Something I purchased at the last store. I grabbed a little more."

“What? That’s not fair!”

“Hey, I promise it’s not counting towards part of the bet. You’re just mad because I’m clearly winning this round unless you plan to Houdini more out of your undergarments.”

“No, there’s nothing in my undergarments this time,” she retorted with a shrug. “But here, you’re carrying too much. At least let me hold the jacket bag, so I don’t look like a completely spoiled, inconsiderate princess.”

The protector in me wanted to say no, but Lyssa was so used to providing for herself that I didn’t doubt she felt sheepish about not contributing. So, against my better judgment, I handed it over to her.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’m gonna get a receipt for my victory.”

“You do that,” Lyssa said. She sounded borderline nonchalant, which was worrying, but what else could I do? Pat her down in the middle of the store? That sounded like a good way to end our little game and possibly get the cops sent after us.

So instead, I approached the cashier and set down everything in the ‘yes’ pile. But it was only as the woman was scanning that I had an idea. A fairly brilliant one, too, if I did say so myself.

“Hey, these were in the wrong size. Could you grab two sizes down on the bra and one size up on the underwear?”

“Of course!”

“How did you know my size?” Lyssa asked suspiciously.

“Taylor made sure to inform me before she left. But not without lambasting me on my horrible description of you.”

“It’s not your fault,” Lyssa said amiably, hands in her pockets. “Men have practical sizes based around numbers that exist in the real world. Women’s clothing is based on unicorn farts, bigfoot’s diaries, and the exact length of the Loch Ness monster.”

“Is that why you don’t know your size then? Not enough cryptid knowledge?”

She huffed a small laugh, and goodness, if that wasn’t one of the most pleasing sounds I’d heard in a long while. “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

I wanted to keep the banter going because talking to Lyssa was one of the most fun activities of my day, but the salesclerk returned with the correct sizes, and Lyssa busied herself with tying her new shoes. Considering the state of her old, decrepit ones, I wasn’t surprised that she wasn’t used to how

tightly one needed to tie new laces.

It was quite a haul and took a bit for the girl behind the register to check out. I could tell that Lyssa was getting bored, her foot tapping, so I decided it wouldn't hurt to be a bit gracious.

"Hey, would you run across the street and grab me a bottle of water? Get yourself something too."

Reaching into my wallet, I handed her a twenty and saw her face light up. "Sure. But I should leave the bag here with you then. I wouldn't want them to think I was stealing."

She certainly had a sense of humor, my Lyssa.

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that."

She hurried off with a little skip to her step, and if she was that pleased about a free drink, then maybe I should just line my entire place with all the cold sodas, energy drinks, and juices that she could want.

"Your total will be \$1,263," the sales clerk said, drawing my attention back to her. That would certainly help my total.

"Perfect, thank you."

Feeling entirely bolstered as I checked out, I had just finished gathering our growing number of bags when Lyssa skipped back in.

"Oh, good, you're still here!"

"There was a lot to buy and remove the ink tags from," I said, gloating perhaps just a bit. But hey, I'd earned it. "You ready to go?"

"Yup, I am. Here's your water."

She slipped it into the jacket bag since my hands were full before opening her own and chugging some down. I watched the attractive column of her throat bob up and down as she swallowed, caught up in her natural beauty.

Thankfully, I managed to pull myself together before she caught me staring, and we exited. But we were only perhaps a half block away when Lyssa suddenly made a loud exclamation.

"Oh, I think I see a kitty!"

Pulling me along with her, she rushed into a small gap between two buildings, grinning gleefully. I didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out that she was about to show me something, so I stayed quiet when she finally stopped.

"So, about that winning..."

Taking the jacket bag from me, she pulled the denim out only to reveal a plethora of colors below.

“Is that what I think it is?” I asked dully.

“Yup!” One by one, she pulled out underwear, bras, and even bodysuits that I’d never seen her grab. Just like the first time, it was impressive and I had to fight not to look thrilled at the development.

I also had to fight not to think about her dressed in some of the stuff she had lifted. It was all too easy to imagine her in something lacy and demure, sitting on her body like a ribbon on a gift that was all for me.

“You know, since I carried it out, does this even count? You didn’t steal it, I did.” I wasn’t going to begrudge her victory, but I wouldn’t miss out on a chance for more banter.

“Say what you want, but I’ve managed to outsmart you in both stores. I think I’ve more than proven myself.” She beamed at me, and I fervently wished I could bottle how I felt so that I could pull it out whenever I felt stressed or overwhelmed.

“Right, well, you know it’s not absolutely certain you won. I could do the math to see who actually came out on top.”

I was bluffing hard, as I was fairly certain she’d pulled plenty from the jacket bag. But Lyssa was entirely nonplussed by me.

“If you want to waste your time doing the obvious, be my guest.”

She had me there. I didn’t really want to calculate everything, so I resolved to send a check later to the lingerie store. They probably wouldn’t even notice a single dent in their profits, considering the pricing of their items.

“All right, fine. You win. But I want to visit one more store before we head home and catch up on work.”

“Can’t we go home now?”

Perhaps the natural response to that question would have been to firmly tell her no, but her choice of words struck me. *Home*. If she already saw my place as a haven for her, we were further along than I thought.

I was smart enough to hide my reaction, however. Even with all our banter, I could tell that Lyssa’s walls were still high. If I said too much of the wrong thing or crossed her boundaries, she would close up and become more standoffish.

“How about we go to the car, drop all these bags off, then I’ll drive us to the last store?”

“I suppose if it’s that important I can be patient.”

“Your martyrdom knows no bounds.”

“As long as my sacrifice is recognized,” she said primly, nose pointed comically high in the air as she began to daintily walk towards the garage. I laughed, and that seemed to be the response she was looking for because she sent me one of those devastating grins again.

Was it possible for a smile to be a drug? Because I’d only seen her look at me that way twice and yet I was already desperately hooked.

We made it to the car without any cops chasing us down, so I definitely considered that a success. Putting our bags into the trunk, I opened Lyssa’s door for her before getting in on the other side.

I was incredibly proud and impressed by her, but I knew that saying something that strong to her wasn’t the best course of action. “You’re being a good sport about this.”

Her half-smile response was more dry than anything else, very different from the beaming grin she’d given me before. “Obviously, I’m capable of all this, but the amount you’re spending is super stressful to me.”

Poor thing. She deserved so much, but it was obvious that her life had accustomed her to having nothing. I wanted to change that so desperately, but I knew that silly wagers would only take us so far. It was going to take time and trust.

“I can appreciate where you’re coming from, but I promise that it’s really nothing. Hardly more than a percent or two from my free spending account.” Besides, I would happily spend every dime in my possession on her if she asked.

“But still, it’s too much.”

“Nothing is ever too much for a mate.”

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat as I started to navigate our way out of the garage, and I worried that I had said something wrong again.

“I’m still trying to grasp the idea of mates and what it’s all about. It’s so... odd.”

“I know, and I have to say, you are doing amazing.”

“You say that, but it doesn’t feel like it. It’s like my brain has all these world-altering situations queued up in it, and I’m still dealing with the whole wolves bursting out of human men. It’s just not possible, you know?”

My heart felt for her, it really did. I knew some would be frustrated with her constant denial, but I understood that it was all a part of her process. It would be easy to become frustrated with her, but as her alpha and her mate, I needed to be empathetic and supportive to her.

“Have you ever had any temper problems? Like, have you ever blacked out or had things go red? Or would you say that you have control over your emotions in general?”

“Kinda out of left field, but I’ve worked hard to control my emotions.” She bit her lip, and it seemed like she was going to shut down, but after a few seconds she continued. “I used to think that was why I was kicked out. Or that I was crazy and my parents were afraid of me or something.”

“You’re not crazy. But things like that are symptoms of your inner wolf wanting out. We live in symbiosis with the shifter spirit within us and neglecting it has devastating consequences.”

Lyssa looked like she was considering what I was saying, so I pressed further.

“Your wolf is angry, I can feel it. Wolves are not meant to be contained creatures, which is why most of us have to learn to function with it in a way that lets us blend in with human society but also not smother our own nature.”

I could tell that the conversation was growing too serious for me to split my attention between driving and talking to Lyssa, so I pulled over and parallel parked.

“A wolf’s first shift is at sixteen. I think that your family was scared of it, and that’s why they suddenly booked it right before your birthday.”

Lyssa’s lips trembled, and I wanted more than anything to still them with my thumb and kiss away all her worries. I resisted, barely.

“But wouldn’t they be wolves too? Why would they be scared of my shift?”

“That’s what’s not adding up to me. I would like to research your family, and see if I can find any answers, but I want to give you time to come to terms with everything first.”

I’d half expected some resistance, but suddenly Lyssa was practically in my face, gripping my hands like I was her last lifeline.

“You’d do that for me? You’d find things out about my family?”

“Of course. I’d do that and more for you.”

“Please,” Lyssa said, sounding more earnest than I had ever heard her. “I’ve wanted answers for years. I would give anything to know what happened.”

I couldn’t resist any longer; I reached out ever so slowly, cautiously, and gently stroked her cheek. “You don’t have to do anything. I just want you to

be happy.”

She closed her eyes as if fighting something internally before letting out a heady sigh. “I’m trying to believe that.”

Well, at least she was trying.

“That’s all I can ask for. Do you think you’re ready for me to drive again?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I’m good.”

She slowly slid back into her seat, and I pulled onto the road. It wasn’t a long distance to our next location, and this time there was parking behind the building. I pulled into my usual spot, eager to change the mood.

“Uh, is it just me, or does this spot literally have your name on it?” Lyssa asked, pointing to the small sign attached to the wall.

“This is my sister Emmaline’s store. So, it’s fine if you do your thing, but we’re not walking out the door without paying.”

“So you own like a bajillion buildings, and your sister runs a successful high-end boutique?”

“I wouldn’t say a bajillion, but yes, for the most part.”

Lyssa just shook her head. “Rich people are crazy.”

I wouldn’t consider myself ‘rich,’ just comfortable, but I didn’t argue with her as I went around to open her door. I was happy at how quickly that was becoming a habit between us. Hopefully, just the first of many.

We walked in beside each other, and I quickly scanned the store for my sister. I spotted her by the register, speaking to one of her workers.

“Hey, Emmaline!” I called. Her head practically whipped up, her face cracking into a broad grin.

“Mahlan!” She bounced over, smacking me in the arm as she arrived.

“What was that for?”

“For getting sworn in as an alpha without inviting our parents or me! *Rude!*”

“It was an emergency meeting, I didn’t have the chance.”

“Pffft, I know you invited your inner circle, what, you couldn’t add on one more?”

“Technically, Lyssa was the one more,” I said, gesturing to her.

“And who the hell is this?”

“This is my mate,” I answered, trying not to grin. My sister and I had always gotten along, but we loved ribbing each other, as all siblings did.

“Lyssa, this is my sister.”

“Oh my God, your mate? You’re *mated*?” Emmaline took a moment to take Lyssa in, and I could feel the tension building within my mate. Thankfully, Emmaline snapped herself out of it relatively quickly, offering a hand to Lyssa.

“So lovely to meet you. Just so you know, I have nothing against you.” But then her eyes were on me again. “Just my jerk of a brother who couldn’t call any of us to say that he’d found his mate. What the heck, Mahlan?”

“A lot has been on my plate.”

“Excuse you, finding a true mate is so rare. I don’t care if you had the leaning tower of Pisa on your plate!”

Lambasting paused, she turned her attention back to Lyssa. See her switch between the two modes was amusing, and I didn’t take her scolding that seriously. “Welcome to my shop, by the way. You’re so gorgeous. I can’t wait to dress you up!”

But even though I found it funny, that didn’t mean that Lyssa did, and I could tell she was starting to get both agitated and overwhelmed. Putting my arm around her waist, I pulled her in close.

“Lyssa has had a rough couple of days. She needs a little space to acclimate to new places and people.”

“Crap, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to come on too strong,” my sister said, taking a couple steps back. “I just got so excited.”

“I know, but this is part of why I didn’t tell you yet. I wanted to let Lyssa settle in a little.”

“Totally get it, like totally.” Bringing her energy down a notch, my little sister sent a softer smile Lyssa’s way. “What pack are you from?”

Of course she would ask that.

“We’re working on figuring that out.”

“What do you mean ‘working on figuring that out?’”

“She doesn’t have a brand.”

I could see the look of concern and confusion on Emmaline’s face. Yeah, I wasn’t getting away without an explanation, was I?

“Lyssa, why don’t you go ahead and start shopping? I need to talk to my sister about some stuff.”

“Yes, please. Help yourself to whatever you want, and maybe later, if you’re feeling up to it, we can shop a little together.”

Lyssa hurried off with a nod, leaving just us Reese siblings. Withholding a sigh, I gestured towards Emmaline’s office. “Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

I made sure to close the door once we were inside and was hit with about a dozen questions at once. It was impressive that my sister could say so much in a single breath.

“She doesn’t have a brand? What’s going on, Mahlan? Is she not a wolf shifter? Or is she one of those batty rovers from Europe who don’t believe in formal packs? And why does she seem terrified out of her mind? I can smell her ketones all over her. Oh my God, you didn’t force her, did you? Mahlan, in the name of the moon and all of our ancestors, I will dropkick you if you took a captive bride!”

“Whoa, whoa, Emmaline! Would you breathe and let me try to answer you?”

My sister simmered down, but she didn’t look much happier. “Fine! Talk. But you better make it good.”

“The situation is... complicated. As far as I can tell, she is a wolf shifter, but something is blocking her connection to her wolf.”

“What could possibly do that without her knowing?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, it happened before her first shift.”

“Was she adopted or something? Like by humans who had no idea and then someone else interfered?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any way of knowing because her parents are MIA.”

“Not to repeat myself, but what the hell do you mean, MIA?”

“They bounced right before she turned sixteen. Lyssa has been homeless since and living as an exile, which you know isn’t good for a wolf. Perhaps she was punishing herself because she thought they kicked her out due to her temper issues, but I know it was something else entirely.”

“Temper issues, huh? Yeah, that sounds like someone with an angry wolf trapped inside them.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “So yeah, Lyssa doesn’t really know anything about wolves. She’s adapting as well as could be expected, but there’s just so much to learn, you know?”

“Poor thing,” Emmaline murmured, sinking into the chair behind her desk. “I can’t imagine being cut off from my entire culture and people. How awful.”

If there was one thing that I’d always loved about my little sister, it was that she was incredibly empathetic.

“I wouldn’t wish it on any shifter.”

Emmaline nodded, seeming to think for a minute, when an abrupt expression of horror crossed her features. “Wait, if she knows nothing of wolves, how did you end up mated to her? You *bit* her! That requires at least a little knowledge of our kind!”

“Yeah... that wasn’t the most fortunate of situations.”

Emmaline was on her feet instantly, which I wasn’t surprised by. She had just as strong a moral compass as me, and I knew what it sounded like.

“Did you force her?” she asked softly. But not in a kind way. No, I could see my sister’s eyes began to glow golden as they did right before she was about to lose control, and her teeth were growing ever sharper.

While my little sister was plenty safe to be around humans, she’d always felt things so intensely. Hearing that her big brother had potentially assaulted someone was sure to trigger a strong reaction within her.

“I saved her life, Emmaline. She picked Alpha Cyprus’ pocket, and he was going to hurt her. It was the only way I could get her out of his clutches.”

“Oh.” Her eyes stopped glowing and she settled, but she still looked none too happy. “But was that the only thing you could think of?”

“At the time, yes.” She looked skeptical, so I continued. “I think she might be a true mate. Like the kind fate is supposed to set up.”

“Really? That’s so rare! Why do you think that?”

“The first time I met her, we just happened to walk into the same room, and I was riveted. I couldn’t even move. It was like she took up my entire mind.” Even thinking about that fleeting moment had my blood starting to rush within my veins. “And when I bit her? It was more than anyone had ever described before. The world cracked in two and she filled all of it.”

“Oh, shit, that does sound serious. I... wow, I can’t believe that happened.”

I nodded. “I know none of this is ideal, but I believe we were fated to be mates. And since what’s done is done, I’m going to work as hard as possible to ensure that she’s protected and happy. She’s never going to have to be alone again, sleep on an air mattress or eat garbage scraps!”

I might have finished that last part a bit passionately, but Emmaline nodded along as if my impassioned speech was completely normal for me.

“Okay, I can get behind that. I’m still pissed about you swearing in without telling us, but I get this takes precedent.”

“As an alpha, I’m not going to have time to consult with my family

before making decisions. More often than not, I will have to react within the moment.”

“I suppose I always knew that but knowing and experiencing are two different things.”

“They certainly are.”

She sighed, rubbing her temples. “I’m glad you told me all this, though. I don’t want you having so much burden on yourself. But for the meantime, let’s go help your new mate get situated. She’s the first sister-in-law I’ve ever had and I fully intend to spoil her.”

I chuckled, pulling my sister into a side hug. “We definitely are siblings, through and through.”

LYSSA

“Hey there, so what do you think of my shop?”

I looked up from the vests I was studying to see Mahlan’s sister bounce up to me. She certainly was bubbly, which was an interesting contrast to her brother.

“You’ve got a great range here,” I said diplomatically. I wasn’t about to go into a whole explanation of how the prices for some of her things were equivalent to what I lifted in four months. That was awkward and I didn’t need her pity.

“I try. I find most women don’t have a singular style but bounce between two or three for different events.”

“That makes sense.”

“Do you have any particular styles you like? Or color palettes?”

“I, uh, not really. I guess I never had much energy to spare for it.”

“Don’t worry! We can always get you a few basic wardrobe pieces so you can mix and match while you build your closet and establish your style!” She beamed at me, and I started to feel a little more relaxed. Being nonjudgmental must run in the Reese family because they seemed like pretty chill folks.

Granted, I hadn’t met their parents yet. I couldn’t help but wonder what they would think of their son force-biting a possible shifter/possible human who had absolutely no knowledge about wolf culture.

Wait, was I buying into the whole wolf thing? I supposed I was to the point where I couldn’t really deny it. Not with so much evidence and a near cadre of people who also acted as if it were true.

“Mahlan mentioned you needed some professional clothing too?”

“Yeah,” I murmured, fingers still gliding over the vest. “I think there’s something cool about a woman in a tailored suit. And like maybe, um, high-waisted pinstripe pants?” I was in completely uncharted territory, but I remembered seeing a billboard with several women dressed like that, and I admired how strong, confident, and put together they looked. Don’t get me wrong, I loved a sundress and flowy skirt like many ladies, but the image of those three women was burned into my mind.

“Oh. A classic and I can see you’ve got a long torso, so that kind of style will even out your proportions. Let’s see if we can put that together for you!”

Like a welcoming whirlwind, Emmaline led me around her shop, loading Mahlan’s arms with more clothes than it seemed physically possible for a single human to carry. I was going to be in for a real workout with all I was changing in and out of, but for once, I was excited.

I knew the whole thing would cost a pretty penny, but it didn’t make me as uncomfortable since it was from his family. I didn’t know if that made a lick of sense, but to me, family was always supposed to look out for each other, and clearly, Emmaline was doing just that for her big bro.

“By the way, if you see something you like but it’s in the wrong size or color, I have so much in storage in the back. I like my clothes presented in a certain way, but it doesn’t leave a ton of floor space. Plus, I have an online shop that gets some pretty consistent traffic.”

“Oh, that’s fine. This is plenty.”

“You sure?”

“Most definitely.”

I wasn’t nearly good enough to calculate the percentage that my wardrobe had suddenly increased, but it was exponential. I went from two pairs of pants, two dresses, some leggings, and shirts with maybe three days of underwear to... well, a whole lot more than that.

“Okay, let’s go to the dressing room and you can show me each outfit.”

It would be harder to lift anything with Emmaline watching, but I was in the mood for the challenge. Anything to get my mind off the building anxiety from everything else going on.

It wasn’t easy, that was for sure. I had managed to get plenty of jewelry packed into the jacket I’d put on. There were two pockets inside, which was half the reason I’d wanted it. There was nothing like hidden pockets to make my day.

But if I just stuffed other clothes under what I was wearing, Emma would

notice. I needed to distract her if I wanted to shove clothes into my other bags while she was gone.

Luckily, I was pretty good at that.

I changed into one of the suits first. It was blue, with gray pinstripes, a fitted jacket, and a black button-up with gold detailing. I put it on, relishing fastening the gold buttons. It was the first time since our shopping spree started that I was actually excited about the clothes I was trying on.

When I finished, I looked in the mirror and didn't see a lost little homeless girl. I saw a competent woman who looked like she could manage a full-time job in an office without batting her eyes.

And who also had a large bruise on her neck.

I knew it looked better than it had even that morning, but the ugly sight of fading yellow, green, and purple made my stomach twist. I may have been in the middle of a fairy-tale shopping spree, but at what cost?

I stared at my reflection for a long moment, feeling myself grow more and more nauseous until I cut myself off. It wasn't like I could do anything about it in the middle of his sister's dressing room, so I might as well focus on the task at hand.

Which was attempting to pseudo-rob his sister blind.

Stepping out, I did a few poses and she clapped her hands. I didn't know where Mahlan was, but I was grateful for his absence. Not for nothing, but sometimes the way he looked at me made chills go up my spine in the most delicious way, and feeling like that wasn't good for keeping my head clear. And I needed a clear head when lifting from his sister.

"Oh my God, you look so good! Real girl boss energy!"

"Does anyone even say that anymore?" I asked, laughing.

"Who cares if they don't, I say it! But you look amazing."

I beamed at my reflection, agreeing with her. "I *feel* amazing. Hey, you mentioned you had other colors in the back. Do you think you have a red version of this? Or a fully black one?"

"Oh, how bold! And I'm pretty sure I have nearly six different colors." She clapped again and I almost felt guilty for tricking her. However, that was pretty much eased by the knowledge that Mahlan would pay for it anyway, so his sister was due to make a pretty penny off of my skill.

Because I was determined to win. If I was going to be surrounded by shifters who could do magical, impossible things, I needed one thing to cling to that just I could do. Otherwise, I'd feel even more powerless than I already

did, and I *hated* feeling powerless.

“Be back in a few minutes!”

Emmaline rushed off, and I used what little time I did to roll the clothes into the tiniest, tightest cylinders I could, then tucked them into the clothes I came in with. My plan was to ask to wear a different outfit out, stuff as much as I could under that, then request a bag to put my old outfit in and use that to help carry even more items.

But I also had to rush to the closest racks and grab random items so the dressing room still looked pretty full. It was complicated, but I managed to get back and into the next outfit before Emmaline returned with her arms full.

“Oooh! I love that on you! The belt really makes a statement,” she said, setting a green version of the first suit down, followed by another red one, then a black one, and even a silver one. “The trumpet skirt is great too!”

“Is that what it’s called?” I asked, doing a little twirl. Despite the deception, I was feeling wonderful in the black and white striped dress shirt with the burgundy trumpet skirt that fit like a glove. “I like it a lot.”

Emmaline’s eyes practically shone. “You know... I’ve got a blue, a black, and a pink version of that in the back.”

I grinned cheekily at her, feeling bold enough to send her a wink. “Bring it on.”



I NEVER KNEW that it was possible to be completely and thoroughly exhausted by changing clothes. By the time Emmaline and I finished, I was ready to drop. Only the knowledge that I had a truly amazing haul kept me going.

The whole process had taken so long that I was pretty sure there was no way Mahlan could keep up with me. Even if he bought out the entire dressing room I had left, I had made sure that only the cheapest items remained.

“Are you ladies done in here?” Mahlan asked as I came out in the casual outfit that Emmaline said I could wear instead of my other clothes. Thankfully, that part of the plan had gone perfectly, especially since her shop’s bags were large and opaque, a literal jackpot.

But the real boon was when Emmaline started bringing me purses to try with my outfits. Naturally, when I asked her if she had a red and a pink one, I ripped the stuffing out of the bags only to fill them with more of my ill-gotten

gains.

“That we are,” I said boldly. Mahlan’s eyebrows went up, and I knew he could feel my cockiness from across the dressing rooms. “You ready to make a dent in that spending account of yours?”

At least his responding smile was plenty cheeky. I liked when Mahlan got a little snarky with me. I got the impression that he was a fairly serious type, and not many people got to see him in such a way. “More than you would ever know. I’ll just collect everything in your yes pile.” His gaze grew sharp as he looked past me. “You do have a yes pile, don’t you?”

“Of course,” I said, batting my eyes at him. “Whyever wouldn’t I?”

“Yeah, that wouldn’t make sense, would it?” Now it was his turn to wink at me, except my legs nearly went out from under me. That kind of expression, dark eyes and tempting smile were too much for a woman!

Thankfully, I recovered as he picked up every item in the dressing room and hauled it to the register. He didn’t let on if he was surprised by how much there was. Probably because I’d already fooled him twice, and he knew better than to think that everything was as simple as it appeared.

Somehow, I managed to contain my prideful glee until we got to the register. Mahlan set everything down and started talking to his sister as she scanned things, knowing I was stewing in anticipation. He was a bit of a tease, wasn’t he? Well, I could take it.

Trying not to fidget, I watched the number on the register go up bit by bit. It was more than I could ever hope to spend on something as simple as clothing, but it wouldn’t compare to my haul.

“Wow, \$789. That’s more than you’ve ever spent here before.” Emmaline said.

“Well, the occasion certainly calls for it.”

“I’m sure it does,” she said happily. “What are you going to do for the rest of the day?”

“Oh, we’re not quite done here,” Mahlan said with a chuckle. “I believe I’m about to have egg on my face.”

“...what do you mean?”

“How much did you get, Lyssa?”

It was finally my time to shine. “Oh, not much,” I murmured before reaching over to the purses and unzipping them. “Just some stuff there. And there.”

Then I took the bag Emmaline had given me for my old clothes and

placed that on the counter too. “Plus, all of these.”

Then came the rather arduous task of pulling out everything I’d stuffed under my loose athletic clothes. “And then all of these.”

I batted my eyes at him and we both knew that he was beaten. Unfortunately, Emmaline wasn’t quite in the loop, and she stared at both of us as if we’d suddenly grown multiple heads. But who knew? Maybe that was also a thing that shifters could do.

“What the hell is going on here?” she asked, tone vacillating between terse and very confused.

“Don’t worry, I’m going to pay for everything.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t really explain it.”

“Lyssa is an incredibly skilled pickpocket, so you could say that this was her audition for a part in recovering our moonstone.”

“Oh... that does sound like a pretty big deal.”

“It is,” Mahlan answered, making me feel pretty important. “So, if you don’t mind totaling everything she managed to get without you noticing, that’d be great.”

Emmaline began to do just that, still seeming a little off center by the whole thing, but she didn’t say anything further. Mahlan, however, seemed to have plenty to say.

“You know, you might want to consider getting some security cameras or some attentive employees.”

“Excuse you, I do fine with just me. It’s not an everyday thing for my brother to rob me blind.”

“Is it technically robbing since we’re paying for everything?”

“Robbing roleplay, whatever.”

I hated to think that I made Emmaline sore after being so nice, but once she crested the thousand-dollar mark, she seemed to grow more amused than anything, looking at me with a wry smile.

“You’re bleeding him dry, aren’t you?”

I nodded eagerly. “Yes, indeedy.”

“Good. He deserves it. I should charge him a ten percent jerk markup.”

“As long as you charge it to both orders equally,” Mahlan teased. “We wouldn’t want to sway the results, would we?”

“Speak for yourself,” I retorted.

Emmaline cut off whatever Mahlan was going to say by clearing her throat. “Actually, you don’t need it, Lyssa. Your total is \$1,707.98.”

“There’s no way I even came close to that with everything combined,” Mahlan said with a sigh. “Looks like I lost.”

“It was inevitable, really,” I said, doing nothing to hide my cockiness. I figure I’d earned it.

“You know, I was pissed at first, but I gotta say that this is pretty amazing. Now, pay up for this second half, Mahlan, before I kick you out of my store.”

“Aww, we both know you love me too much for that.”

“Yeah, against my better judgment,” she huffed but I could tell that this was more brother and sister ribbing. The two were fun, I had to admit. I wondered what my life would have been like if I had siblings. Would they have been on the run with me? Would they have been able to stay? Yeah, it was probably better that I was on my own.

“Hey, I’m sorry for fooling you. I didn’t mean anything by it.” I murmured, not wanting to get on her bad side.

“Don’t worry, I’m impressed by what you can do, and I’m happy that my brother has someone so competent to help him get the moonstone back. I was just a little surprised, that’s all.”

“Well, you were a very gracious host, and I am genuinely excited by all this clothing.” Actually, it was still pretty surreal. I didn’t think I’d come to terms that I’d just gotten over two thousand dollars’ worth of professional and leisure clothing. It seemed more outside of the realm of possibility than werewolves themselves.

“And I can’t wait to see you in them. Like, when you come to our family’s home for dinner.”

“Down, Emmaline,” Mahlan quickly cut in, saving me from an awkward response. “We’re not there yet.”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying, can you?”

“I suppose it’s in a little sister’s nature to be a busybody.”

Emmaline took the comment in stride, beaming mischievously. “Just like it’s in a big brother’s nature to be a jerk.”

“Hah, all right then. Come give this jerk a hug so we can go home.”

My heart did a weird thing as the two of them embraced. I didn’t feel the usual wistfulness or jealousy that I usually did whenever I interacted with functional, loving families. Instead, I felt a contented sort of warmth. With a start, I realized that I liked seeing Mahlan be happy and treated with kindness.

Weird.

Lost in thought, I didn't say much through the goodbyes, and my body automatically tailed Mahlan out of the store. But I snapped back to the moment when I realized he'd asked me something.

"Pardon?" I asked, blinking like I'd just come out of a sound sleep.

"I was just asking if you'd like to have dinner with me tonight?"

Goodness, the way he looked at me while saying that, and the low timbre of his voice... well, it was easy to get swept up in the romance of it all. What girl didn't occasionally dream of a Prince Charming with a loaded wallet sweeping her off her feet?

But then the cold bite of reality swept in, reminding me of the much less metaphorical bite on my neck, and all that romance turned to ash.

"Do I even have a choice?" I asked brusquely. We were having such a nice day, I hated to bring the mood down, but what else was I expected to do? I was essentially a prisoner, a really spoiled one.

Mahlan looked outright taken aback by my comment, and I felt a curl of guilt in my stomach, but I quickly stomped it down.

"Huh, I suppose not really. But if it bothers you that much, I can eat in the kitchen while you eat in the dining room."

Ugh, what gave him the right to look so hurt, and why was I so affected by it? I wanted to kiss him until all the upset was gone from his eyes and he never had to worry again. Which was moronic, ill-advised, and a whole bunch of other negative adjectives.

"It's whatever," I said begrudgingly, feeling nauseous again from the rush of emotions churning through me simultaneously.

"I could have groceries delivered later if you'd like to cook together?"

As cross as I was feeling, I had enjoyed watching Mahlan cook breakfast for me, and the idea of him making me dinner while wearing that svelte apron wasn't exactly objectionable.

"I guess that would be okay."

"Thank you," he said like I was doing him a huge favor by allowing him to make my food.

Whatever.

Although I wanted to dismiss it, I had to be honest with myself. After fending for myself for so long, it was nice to have someone tend to my meal. To have someone who cared if I'd eaten or not. Even though I wanted to fight my growing attachment to him tooth and nail, it was difficult to do when he

was so *nice*.

“It’s no big deal.”

Except it was a big deal.

I was so into my thoughts that I didn’t realize we were at the car, and Mahlan had finished putting my bags away. Where was I supposed to put all that stuff once we got home? It seemed like a lot.

He opened the car door for me and I slid in. The first time he’d done it, I had been tempted to object, but I got a solid feeling that it meant a lot more to him than it bothered me. Besides, I’d kinda grown to like it.

“I hope you had at least a little fun with me today,” Mahlan murmured as he pulled onto the road.

“I did,” I admitted. Despite myself, I had enjoyed the shenanigans.

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

And I was sure he was. For being my kidnapper, Mahlan had always been completely honest with me.

Leaning my head against the window, my exhaustion hit even harder as Mahlan drove us toward his home. It was rather relaxing, especially considering how sore I was from trying on so many clothes, which was a wild thing to experience. Before I knew it, my eyelids fluttered and I drifted in and out of consciousness.

More than once, I jolted awake after my chin hit my chest, and it wasn’t until we pulled to a complete stop that I could kind of shake myself out of it.

“Come inside, sleepyhead. I think someone needs a nap.”

“That’s meeee,” I answered, drawing out the last word while rubbing my eyes. “I’m gonna be so sore tomorrow.”

“Well, let’s get some protein into you to help those muscles heal.”

I nodded, politely not pointing out the double entendre, and let him lead me inside. We were barely a step in when he gently took my hand.

“Here, come take a nap while I work a little. You’ve more than earned it.”

“But the clothes...” Letting him pay for everything was one thing, but I should at least bring everything in if they were mine.

“Don’t worry about it. Just get some rest.”

Well, I certainly wasn’t going to argue with that. Yawning, I let him guide me to the room and lay down. For a moment, I was worried he’d get in with me, but instead, he just tucked me into his fluffy, warm blankets.

Goodness, when was the last time I’d been tucked in? When I was ten? Maybe eleven? It would have choked me up if I wasn’t so exhausted that I

was already almost off to la-la land.

“Sweet dreams, Lyssa.”

I gave him a little half-wave before succumbing to slumber, sinking into blissful nothingness.



“LYSSA? CAN YOU HEAR ME, LYSSA?”

I groaned, opening my eyes to see Mahlan leaning over me. “Hmm?”

“I’m sorry to wake you, but I need to meet with my pack members. There’s been a dispute.”

Dispute? That sounded like drama, but I was far too sleepy to be interested. How long had I even been out? Probably not more than an hour or so.

“The groceries should be here in an hour or so if you want to bring them in. Feel free to eat whatever you want.”

“Okies dokies, artichokies,” I answered blearily. “Can you set an alarm?”

His expression was weirdly soft as he answered like I was an especially cute puppy or something. “Yeah, I can do that. I’ll be home as quick as I can.”

“Sounds good.”

After that, the world faded out. But it seemed like barely a minute before I was stirred again by a shrill beeping.

“What the hell?”

Sitting up, I saw that I was alone, and the sun was considerably lower in the sky. Geez, I’d had a long day.

With an especially egregious yawn, I reached for the source of the noise, turned off the alarm on the digital clock beside the bed and sat up. After everything that had happened, my muscles demanded a nice, first-thing-in-the-morning stretch, and I complied, hands over my head and everything. It was a good one, relaxing me enough that I almost wanted to crawl under the cover again. But I didn’t want my nap to turn into a full-on sleep, so I tried to get my wits about me only to hear the doorbell ring.

Who could that be?

Wait, I was expecting the groceries. Right.

Shaking my head, I headed to the front door and opened it to find another

ridiculously large order of food. Although it was pretty silly, I also was flattered by it. Mahlan did seem to care about feeding me. And not just cheap, filling things, but nice things that had been out of my scope for years.

I thought about trying to haul as many bags as I could at once, as I used to do when I was a kid, but considering how tired I was, I opted for just two bags at a time. Once the whole order was in, I dutifully started putting things away. Some of it was difficult, considering I wasn't sure where everything's spot was, but some were more straightforward since there were other items of their type lying around.

It took me a good twenty minutes or so to finish, and I was ready to sit down when I noticed a bunch of other bags beside the door that hadn't been there when we entered.

"What's this?" I murmured, snooping in them. I was surprised to see all sorts of hygienic supplies, like shower supplies, feminine products, brushes, combs, hairpins, scrunchies and hair ties. It was like he'd bought out an entire beauty store!

I couldn't help but smile softly as I perused them, feeling that soft and fuzzy warmth spreading through me again. It was nice, feeling cared for... looked after. And even though I knew I shouldn't get used to it, I could feel my walls coming down inch by inch.

Which was stupid. And dangerous. But I was getting tired of fighting it.

Heading to the bathroom, I began to meticulously put my things away. Huh, *my things*. What a crazy idea. I bet if I asked Mahlan to buy me a grand worth of makeup at Sephora, he'd do so without even breaking a sweat. The idea was brain-melting to me, so I shoved it away to think about probably never.

It wasn't until I was done that I realized he might not even want me to stay in his room. It wasn't like I'd toured his place. But at the same time, the whole mate talk implied that we would sleep in the same room.

Oh, well, I could always move it later.

But as I stepped out of the room, I grew curious about what else could possibly be in his spacious residence, so I did some investigating of my own. Nothing was locked, so I easily moved about and discovered another two bedrooms, an office, the dining room he'd mentioned earlier, and even a fully decked-out home gym.

I whistled in appreciation as I looked around the expensive-looking equipment. At least I knew how Mahlan got his chiseled physique. Although

my memory was hazy from when he'd been pressed against me, I remember feeling some washboard abs under his clothing.

Strolling back to the kitchen, I admired how nicely decorated the place was. Had Mahlan done it himself or hired someone? He certainly was wealthy enough to hire an entire team of designers. He really did have everything, didn't he?

Well, maybe not a private jet. As far as I knew, at least. Then again, it wasn't like private jets were kept in people's driveways.

... I should ask him if he had a private jet when he got home.

I yawned yet again, but the sound was interrupted by my stomach grumbling angrily. I guess I was a little hungry. Looking at the clock on the chrome oven, I saw that it was past 7:00 p.m.

"He did tell me I could eat if I got hungry...."

Despite that, I still debated if I should wait for him or start making something to eat. It wasn't like I was a total noob. I took culinary arts at school in the hopes of getting free meals, and while I learned a lot, it wasn't like I'd memorized many recipes.

"Maybe he'll be home soon."

Deciding to wait a bit, I gathered my clothing bags and started to de-tag and organize them into different piles. I figured professional, formal, athleisure, casualwear, and intimates were enough, then busied myself with them.

Once I was finished, I couldn't help but marvel at how big each folded pile was. We had gone hog wild. I would never have allowed him to spend that much if it wasn't a competition, and I couldn't help but wonder if he'd known that and tricked me.

"Cheeky," I muttered to myself, standing and stretching. I wanted to put the clothes away so I could finish the chore, but since I had no idea where Mahlan wanted them, I couldn't. It irritated me more than it probably should have, so I busied myself with going back to the kitchen and searching for a cookbook. Surely, Mr. Rich-Wolffy-Fancy-Pants had some classic tomes full of yummys.

I didn't find any in the kitchen, but thankfully I spotted them on a shelf in the pantry. Looking over the titles, I picked one geared toward simple dinners.

"Easy meals for the modern family? I can do easy," I muttered, taking it to the kitchen. After everything Mahlan had bought for me, I wanted to do

something nice for him. Maybe our situation didn't have to be all bad and aggression. Perhaps we could work something out where I didn't feel backed into a corner with no choice.

And maybe pigs would fly. Who knew?

Determined, I leafed through the book until I found a recipe that seemed doable, then headed to the fridge to gather the ingredients. But before I could so much as grab a stick of butter, the door suddenly flung open.

"Holy shit!" I cried, whirling around and half expecting a burglar or attacker.

Except it wasn't either of those things. Instead, I was greeted by Mahlan, covered from head to toe in blood.

MAHLAN

I panted as I stood in the entryway of my house, dripping blood from a battle I had with another pack member. One of my men had come home from a shifter fighting ring tweaking out on something completely out of control.

I'd been summoned there to help him calm down and maybe figure out what he was high on, but instead, the guy had shifted and gone ballistic. We'd tried to contain him without injuring him, but once he practically chewed through a wall to escape, it became much more dire.

We couldn't afford anyone in public seeing a feral wolf like that. In his half-shifted state, he looked like what laypeople would call a werewolf, and my clan wasn't going to be the one who exposed our kind to humans.

So there had been a fight, and while we'd managed to subdue him, I'd taken some significant hits. I knew my ribs were fractured, making my walk back home slow, but they were healing quickly.

"Oh my God, Mahlan!" Lyssa gasped, and I blearily realized that she was in the kitchen. Rushing towards me, she pulled off her shirt from my sister's boutique. I watched, confused, until she pushed the wad of fabric to the wound on my side, covering the bleeding.

"What happened?"

I knew I should probably answer quickly, but all I could do was lift my hand and stroke her cheek. She *cared* for me. I could see it written all over her face and how she tended to my wound. With the way she'd reacted to my invitation to dinner, I had worried that we were starting at square one all over again. But no, I could see with my own two eyes that it bothered her how hurt

I was.

Huh, it could almost convince a man to get wounded more often.

“Mahlan, can you hear me?”

I knew I should probably answer her, but then my gaze drifted down to my mate in just her bra, and all of my sensible thoughts fell out of my head. Yup, it was just like being in high school again.

Somehow, I got my brain together before Lyssa had to ask a third time, and I tried to give her an easygoing smile. Not sure it worked while I was covered in blood.

“A rogue wolf had to be put down. I wanted to save him, but... he was too far gone.”

It always hurt to lose a pack member. I felt like I had failed even though my entire inner circle and I, minus Ellibie, had tried to save him without it coming to that. But in the end, we couldn't risk him finding a human and ripping them limb from limb.

But Lyssa didn't look comforted by that, her eyes growing even more panicked. Exhausted, I rested my hand over hers and tried to put some humor into the situation. “Sorry I ruined your shirt.”

“*That's* what you're worried about?” Lyssa snapped. “We should be going to a hospital!”

It probably wasn't a normal reaction, but I laughed, feeling much happier than I should have about the entire night's events. “We can't. Shifter, remember? But you can stitch me up if you want.”

“What? I have no idea how to do that! I never so much as put a Band-Aid on another person!”

I didn't mean to panic her. I needed to remember that she wasn't used to the accelerated healing of shifters or the kind of scraps we got into. “Hey, hey, it's okay. I'll walk you through it. But before I sit anywhere, I need a shower.”

“How can you be so casual about all of this?” Lyssa said, still pressing her shirt into my side. Gently, I took over holding my wound, even though I wanted nothing more than to have her touch me forever.

“It's okay, I've got this. Just run and get the water going for me, would you? Nice and hot.”

“O-okay. But I remember hearing once that running water into a wound can cause shock. Does that happen to you?”

I trailed after her slowly, keeping her shirt pressed to me. I could smell

how worried she was drifting through the air, which made me feel so incredibly valued.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not that serious. We’re just tending to this so I don’t bleed all over my furniture.”

“I...” Lyssa looked like she was going to say something else but just shook her head and disappeared into my room. I caught up to her right about when she realized my blood was all over her hands, and she stared at them in shock before hurriedly washing them in the sink.

Guilt welled up in me because I kept just throwing her into the deep end without regard, but I had to admire how well she was handling it. Steam was already filling the room, and I longed to get under the water.

“All right, what’s next?” Lyssa asked, turning back to me with a resolute expression across her lovely features.

“The suture kit is under the kitchen sink; would you grab that and bring it here?”

“Yeah. Be right back.”

She hurried off, and I took the time to strip from my ruined clothes — except for my boxers. I had a feeling that while Lyssa wouldn’t say anything, seeing me in the buff so soon would probably throw her through a loop that she didn’t need to be tossed through.

So instead, I rinsed off in just my underwear, getting my felled packmate’s blood off my skin. The heat of the shower was soothing, coursing down my body in a burning sort of purge.

Once I was sure I wouldn’t leave a lake of crimson on my floor, I shut off the water and grabbed a towel. Carefully making my way into the bedroom, I saw Lyssa sitting on the bed, staring at the suture kit and looking incredibly nervous.

“You’re gonna do fine,” I murmured, sitting beside her. “It’s as easy as sewing up a tear in your pants. You took home ec, right?”

“Yeah, I did,” she answered, chewing her lip. I wanted more than anything to reach over and pull her plump lower lip out of the punishment of her teeth. But I knew better, even in my injured state. “But this is different.”

“How so?”

“Because it’s *you*.”

Well, if that wasn’t just the right thing to say to flood my system with dopamine. “It’ll be all right. I promise. First, you just want to take out the alcohol pads.”

I walked her through it step by step, and although her hands were shaking, she never faltered. I couldn't help but admire her as she concentrated, her brow scrunched from her efforts. My inner wolf was howling in pure glee at the development, feeling triumphant at having defended the pack but also cared for and cherished.

That was the thing some people didn't get about alphas. Sure, we enjoyed our gifts plenty, but we felt certain things so much more acutely than betas, thetas, and even some omegas. There was nothing like a mate taking care of us after a battle, assuring us that we'd done well and were loved how we needed to be. Not feared. *Loved.*

"There, I think we're done," Lyssa breathed, her voice tremulous as she set the bloody needle to the side. We'd made a real mess, and I chuckled at how much we were covered in it. At least it was my blood this time and not a feral wolf's.

"We should probably wash off before my inner circle comes for dinner."

"What? You're having guests over now? You almost bled out in the entryway."

"It was hardly that serious," I assured her, pulling her into the bathroom and then the shower. Sure, her shorts were going to be soaked along with her bra, but I'd just throw them in the wash.

"It sure seemed that way to me," she grumbled, grabbing my body wash and starting to clean me like it was nothing.

Except it wasn't nothing and my brain was acutely aware of several things at once. One, was that for my body wash to be out already, she had to have used it earlier. It did a lot for my ego that she wanted to smell like me, and my inner wolf preened without remorse. Secondly, her hands sliding down my frame was somewhere between heaven and the most tempting sin. If I wasn't still a bit hazy from post-battle fatigue, I might have grabbed her right then and there to kiss her until we both forgot the rest of the world.

But she wasn't ready, so I just stood there, letting her explore me.

And explore she did. Her slick, slippery hands slid over my chest, along my shoulders, and down my waist. She stopped at my hips, although I wanted nothing more than for her to grip my aching length, which was already standing at full attention.

Did she notice? She had to. I wasn't exactly small and could feel it twitching as it stood for her against the fabric of my boxers. It was the world's most perfect torture, her touching me, smelling like me, looking at

me like I was so important to her that she could cry.

Beautiful. She was just *beautiful*.

Eventually, her hand went to my side where my injury was, and my breath caught in my throat. But she was so incredibly gentle as she washed it, trying her best not to cause me a lick of pain.

And that tenderness, the incredibly careful way she tended to it, just about made my heart grow within my chest three sizes and nearly crack in two. Had she had anyone to care for her like that since she was sixteen? How could someone who had been abandoned by everyone they loved be so kind? So caring? My mate was an amazing person, and although I was sure I didn't deserve her, I was going to do my best to get myself to that level.

"There we are," she said, wringing the now bloodied washcloth out. "All clean."

"What about you?" I asked, voice rough. Surely, she had to be as affected as I was, right? Because I was so attracted to her, drawn to her, that I felt like my bones might just up and walk out of my body if we weren't touching again.

"What about me?"

I took a step closer until our bodies were *almost* touching, and it was like electricity crackled between us — which may not have been the best thing to happen in the water, but I was beyond caring.

"Don't you wanna... get clean?"

She looked up at me a moment, her face flushed, her eyes wide, and clad in nothing but her bra and shorts. She was a vision, for sure, and I wanted to do nothing more than worship her.

"Yeah, I should, um, probably get clean too."

If I found a genie at that moment, I would simply wish to hear her say that three times and be perfectly content. Grabbing a different washcloth, I lathered it up and then proceeded to stroke along her body.

"Oh!"

I didn't know if her little gasp was a reward or punishment, but it drove everything up to the next level. I wanted to ravish her right then and there, to pick her up, press her into the wall, and drive into her until we were both sated.

But I didn't do any of that, so I dutifully scrubbed across every part of her that was bare to me.

By the moon, she was gorgeous. The most beautiful woman that I'd ever

seen. I could barely resist her most of the time, but with her standing there, all half-lidded, pink-cheeked, and covered in slippery suds? Impossible. I didn't know if I wanted to devour her or bow in worship.

Could I do both? Maybe once my side healed.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" I growled, dipping my head, so I was closer to her ear.

She gasped again and the sound went straight to my dick, making it ache something fierce. It wasn't fair, any of it, and yet I loved it and didn't want it to stop.

But then, in a move I never could have predicted, she tentatively reached out and gripped my length. The touch was light, barely there, but it was still enough for my soul to ricochet out of my body, take a euphoric trip around the sun, then come crashing back into me.

"I have an idea," she said, voice shaky but a hint of that sass I loved so much.

It took every ounce of will I had in my body not to let my wolf take over. It wanted to feel, bite, and claim until she never thought of another again. But I knew that wasn't an option. Lyssa needed time. After so many years of fighting for everything she had, she needed tenderness. Consideration. And I would sooner throw myself off a cliff than purposefully hurt her again.

"Careful how you play, Lyssa. This wolf can bite."

"Oh, I know," she said, tilting her neck so I could see the fading bruise. "Rather intimately."

That was the last straw. She was teasing me, and she knew it. Leaning forward, I pressed my lips to the bite until she gasped again, and then my tongue came out to gently lave at it.

"Oh my God!"

That exclamation coursed through me like fire, and I put more pressure on the bite, letting my teeth ever so gently graze over it. Lyssa was practically panting in an instant, and her hold on me grew even tighter.

It was amazing. Every cell of my body was drenched in pleasure as I made my way to her lips. Her mouth was already open, making it easy to claim, my hand sliding up to gently massage her mark as I devoured her.

Maybe I had lost the fight, died, and somehow wound up in heaven. Well, if my afterlife consisted of kissing my mate in a heated shower, I wasn't mad about it. Not even in the slightest.

Every touch, breath, or sigh was a jolt to my system, and I could feel the

moment building between us. Once Lyssa started trembling, I moved my thigh forward so she could grind against it. Watching the pleasure drenching her features when I broke our kiss was exquisite. But I couldn't stay away for long, feeling my peak rapidly approaching.

Time slipped away in the ecstasy, and not for the first time was I incredibly grateful for my excellent hot water supply. The temperature never dipped as we kissed and found joy in each other, letting the sensations build higher and higher until Lyssa tipped her head back and let out an ardent keen.

That was all I needed to set myself off, and I lost myself to my orgasm, biting into the other side of her neck. Not enough to break the skin, but she would have a light mark there in an hour or so.

God, she looked so good with my marks on her. The thought made my climax last longer than it normally would, and when I finally came down, I was absolutely breathless.

I'm definitely gonna need to wash these boxers ASAP.

We both stood there a moment, and I got the feeling that we were a bit in shock, but before either of us could say something lucid, a knock sounded at the door.

“Oh my God! I forgot that you were having people over!”

“Don't worry. You finish rinsing off, and I'll text them real fast.”

Stepping out of the shower, I dried my face and hands while trying not to look like the cat that ate the cream — which was pretty hard considering how damn satisfied I felt. Despite the unfortunate circumstances of our meeting, it was clear to me that Lyssa and I were meant to be together. And although she was resistant to the idea, she was slowly beginning to see it too.

Grabbing my phone, I opened the group chat and told them to let themselves in, as I'd be a couple of minutes. None of them questioned it, no doubt thinking that I was still bandaging myself up.

Except I didn't have to bandage myself up anymore. I had Lyssa waiting and willing to help me. I didn't think I would ever grow tired of that fact.

Maybe that was why Alpha Sawyer became so bitter. His wife had passed fifteen years before he did due to complications in birth, and his eldest son had died in a fight with a loose pack of exiles who illegally crossed into our territory and tried to cause trouble. I didn't even want to imagine what it would be like to lose Lyssa. Not since I found her against all odds.

“Here, let me dry you off,” I said, returning my attention to my mate. I didn't hide how I looked over her naked body, appreciating the shape and

power of it as I gently enveloped her with a towel.

I couldn't help but notice that she looked troubled, and my alpha instincts began to rise.

"What's wrong?"

"I left all my new clothes in the living room," she murmured, worry etched into her lovely features. "What should I do?"

"Oh, did you leave them out there for a reason?" Was she planning to run again? Objecting to ever being in my room?

"I didn't know where you wanted me to sleep and I was afraid I'd take a closet or dresser I wasn't supposed to."

I had to resist chuckling, as I was sure she'd take it the wrong way. "You can put them wherever you want in my room. Provided you want to, of course. But for now, I'll go grab some of them for you."

"Thank you," she breathed, clearly relieved. Which naturally filled me with all sorts of satisfied and protective instincts.

"I'll be right back."

I headed to the living room, giving my guests an absent salute before swiping up five or so of Lyssa's bags. My inner wolf liked seeing all the nice things for his mate, although I could feel my instincts urging me to feed her more and maybe even purchase a bigger mattress for her to nest in.

Oh. That was a thought.

It flashed before my mind while I was in mid-step, nearly knocking me off balance. But I could see it clear as day, her belly swollen with pups as she arranged the sheets and pillows on our bed just so, carefully scent marking our entire bedroom so it would become a birthing den.

Except I didn't want to get an erection in front of my friends, so I cut off that fantasy and hurried down the hall. Not that I wouldn't revisit it later at a more... appropriate time.

When I finally returned to my room, Lyssa was pacing slightly, no doubt anxious to get dressed and be less vulnerable. But when I handed her the bags, and she began to paw through them, she didn't look any happier. If anything, she looked even more troubled.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I am," she murmured uncertainly. "It's just..."

"Yeah?"

"I, uh, I..." she took a deep breath. "This is gonna sound dumb, but I don't know what to wear! I've never had options like this before."

Goodness, that was cuter than it had any right to be, but it also made me want to go buy out an entire outlet mall to rain over her head. My inner wolf needed to cool it, or every dresser, closet, and other storage space in my house would be full to bursting.

“Do you have some favorites you picked out?” I pointed to a bag that seemed much fuller and heavier than the others. “What about in there?”

At that, she blushed a vibrant pink, and I didn’t quite understand why. “Uh, that’s not a clothing bag. Not really.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I, um, I made a go bag. You know, in case I needed to run.”

Pain lanced through me, wounding my pride with the idea that she thought she’d need to flee from me after all.

“It’s not specifically because of you, FYI. It’s just if something goes wrong, it’s always better to have all your absolute essentials nearby so you can beat it in a hurry.”

My heart ached for her. What kind of life had she lived where her first thought in a new home was to make sure she had an escape kit? But I wasn’t gonna shame her for it. I recognized that I was coming from a much more advantageous position, and I needed to be understanding.

“You won’t ever need to run from me or from here,” I promised gently. “Go ahead and finish off your bag whenever you like. And maybe we can make one for me. Together.”

“Really? You don’t think I’m stupid? You’re not insulted?”

My beautiful, wonderful Lyssa. So brave, so strong, and yet I could still hear the slightest tremble of insecurity in her voice. It made my chest swell with pride that she cared what I thought. It didn’t take a genius to tell that Lyssa was headstrong, so it meant a lot that I mattered.

Sure, we hadn’t exactly fallen into each other’s arms in a fairy tale romance, but I could feel us rapidly growing closer.

“Not at all. Preparedness is next to godliness, I hear. Or something like that.”

Her sharp laugh bubbled out, and I was about drunk just on the sound. Or maybe it was the blood loss. Hard to tell.

“What, you gonna take me to church now?”

“Sure, I’m sure we’d fit right in on the pews.”

“Wouldn’t you burst into flames or something?”

I chuckled at her quip. “I’m a werewolf, not a vampire.”

At that, her eyes went wide, color draining from her cheeks. “Wait, are *vampires* real?”

I chuckled yet again. Except by chuckled, it was more a booming bark of laughter that startled even myself. It was just that her expression was so priceless!

“What? What’s so funny?”

“If you could only see your face right now,” I said, struggling to compose myself. “You are just too cute, you know that?”

She flushed a truly brilliant red. “What? No, I’m not!”

“You absolutely are, and I’d be happy to debate you until the next full moon. But, for the moment, you should get dressed for our guests.”

“Oh, right.”

“And you can be comfy, but the way. This is just a family dinner.”

“O-oh...”

Her response was interesting, but I didn’t press it. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d put my money on it being her just thinking about her own family. Or lack thereof.

I waited by the door as Lyssa picked out a pair of jeans and a simple, fitted t-shirt. It was a relatively plain outfit, yet it looked plenty good on her.

“Ready?” I asked once she was all done.

“As ready as I’m ever gonna be.”

“All right, let’s head out.”

She followed me to the living room, where Theo, Kaleb, Jacobian, Parker, and my assistant, Taylor, waited. Quickly, I reintroduced Lyssa in case she forgot their names before I realized one other person was present.

She was slightly familiar, but I couldn’t quite place her name. She wasn’t Addison, judging by her lack of cane, and she was plus-sized with long, emerald green hair instead of waifish with a mousey brown bun.

“This is Hannah, one of my interns,” Jacobian said flatly, no doubt noticing my look of curiosity. “She’s been working on a new portfolio for you, focusing on sustainable companies and shares.”

“Ah, nice to meet you,” I said, offering her my hand. “You’re fairly young for a financial genius, though.” I gave her a wink and she let out a soft, polite giggle. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swore Lyssa stiffened beside me.

Interesting.

“Oh, I’m still in my final year of college, but I’m excited to apply once I

pass my finals.”

“Wait, we’ve met before, haven’t we?” I blurted as her face clicked into place.

“Yes, sir. But I did grow my hair out and got new contacts. Thought it would be cool to have green eyes for a bit.”

“Well, you look great,” more stiffness from Lyssa, and this time I was sure I didn’t imagine it. Now that my memory was rolling, I remembered more of the woman. “Hannah here has a strong affinity for numbers,” I told Lyssa, hoping it would ease her. “Maybe someday she’ll work on your portfolio.”

“That would be an honor!” Hannah said, grinning from ear to ear. “And you are?”

“Where are my manners? This is my mate, Lyssa.”

“Lovely to meet you then! I would count myself lucky to work with you in the future.”

“Yeah, sounds great,” Lyssa said, trying to smile, but her gaze kept flicking to me uncertainly. Was she looking to me for assurance? If that were the case, I was more than happy to be whatever support she needed.

“Are we eating here tonight or going out?” Theo asked, clearly bored with the pleasantries. I loved him, but sometimes he was a bit *too* brusque.

“I was cooking before Mahlan stumbled in here like a zombie,” Lyssa said, gently elbowing me in the ribs. I couldn’t help but notice that she purposefully went a little higher to avoid any injured area. She really was a considerate mate — more than I could ever hope for.

“Thank you, Lyssa. But you don’t have to. If you want, you can sit and talk with everyone else. I’ll take care of it.”

What I wanted to say was *I’ll take care of you*, but I knew that would be too much in front of an audience of strangers to her.

“Could... could I help?”

Goodness, it was probably a health concern how much my heart swelled in my chest, but I was too happy to care. Making a meal *together* was so domestic, so cozy. I’d never really thought much about it, but with the option in front of me, I suddenly wanted it very much. Besides, having a simple task would probably help Lyssa with any anxiety she had about being around so many pack members at once.

“Sure, of course you can.”

The soft smile she sent me was priceless, and the two of us walked into

the kitchen while the rest of my inner circle, plus Taylor and Hannah, set themselves up at the edge of the living room or the kitchen island.

They were patient as I walked Lyssa through what I could use help with, not a snicker or divisive comment among them. I was more than grateful, and once Lyssa seemed settled, I turned to them.

“We need to figure out how to get the device we need plugged into the CEO’s computer. Or a computer that has backdoor access to his,” I said as I started pulling more things from the fridge.

“According to Addison, the meeting rooms are on the same floor as the CEO’s office,” Theo supplied. “As long as we keep him and the other two of his men in the meeting busy, *someone* should be able to slip in there.”

“I can get in and out, that’s no problem,” Lyssa said, brow furrowed as she concentrated on cutting the potatoes.

“There’s a lot of room for error,” I gently reminded her. Not because I didn’t believe in her, but because I wanted her to know the gravity of the situation. “Someone could lock a door, or a single assistant could say back.”

“Don’t worry, I think quickly on my feet. I know I can figure it out should the situation arise.”

“What about their security?” Parker asked.

“I can hack into their camera feeds and put it on a loop, thanks to Addison. Somehow, she managed to get a splicer in there without anyone knowing.”

“That’s Addison for you. She may not be a pickpocketing wizard, but she is good at being unnoticed.”

“Great. You’ll have to be careful about who’s still on the floor and what they’re doing.”

“Are you sure she’s ready for this?” Theo asked, staring at me like Lyssa wasn’t there. Now, I didn’t approve of that at all. “Every new person we bring in is an additional risk. And how is she even getting in? Bringing her with us is sure to raise suspicion.”

“Why not have you guys go in early and demand a tour? That way, you can scope things out, get a read on people, then relay that info to me when I come in?”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” Parker added, as enthusiastic as ever. “We go in with our dicks swinging, so they think we’re just there to be posturing alpha and co. Their attention will be so locked on us ‘boneheads’ that they won’t even think we’re there for corporate sabotage.”

“I like it.”

We continued to go over details while Lyssa and I cooked. Even though we’d just met, and she hadn’t even begun to integrate into the pack, it felt so natural to be making a meal together. Just two mates looking out for each other.

A wolf could get used to that sort of thing.

LYSSA

I was thoroughly exhausted by the time everyone left, my head swimming with all the names, places, and everything else that had happened in such a short time.

And that was with me trying to avoid thinking about the hot, steamy shower and how nice the water had looked running down Mahlan's abs. How my body had longed for him and desire had taken such a stranglehold on me that all I could think about was his touch.

I hadn't intended for all... *that* to happen, but it did. And strangely enough, I didn't feel bad about it. I was slightly alarmed, as that wasn't my style, but not bad.

"Damn," Mahlan murmured, standing in the doorway and watching as his pack members left. "I still haven't finished up all that I need to do today."

"Oh?" I asked, interested in what exactly it was he had to do. I was sure he didn't become some fancy-pants business owner just by running around doing wolf stuff.

...Huh, that was undoubtedly a sentence I never thought I'd ponder.

"Yeah," he murmured absently, checking his expensive-looking watch. I'd lifted plenty of those in my time. Enough to know that it would buy me groceries for half a month even if I rushed it through a fencer who charged a forty-percent cut. "You know, it's not that late. I'm gonna go work in the home office on my computer."

"Oh! Could I check my email on your computer?"

"Of course. I'll set up your profile on that until we get you a laptop. Do you know what kind you'd want?"

I blinked at him like I could shift into an owl instead of a wolf — although that part was still debatable. “You wanna buy me a laptop?”

“Isn’t it borderline necessary in today’s world? That and a smartphone.”

I’d gotten by without both for quite a long while, but yeah, it had made my life a lot more complicated. I couldn’t imagine having that technology at my beck and call.

But Mahlan must have misinterpreted my expression because he paused. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“No! It’s not that,” I said quickly. “It’s just a lot. All of this is... yeah, a lot.”

“That’s fine,” Mahlan said gently. “For now, let’s just check your emails.”

I nodded and followed him into his office, where he logged in for me. I didn’t want Mahlan standing behind me as I opened my email, but it wasn’t like I could ask him to go away in his own house when a lot of his sensitive information was accessible to me.

So instead, I focused on the emails, and the first things I noticed were quite a few invitations to interview. Score!

“You can ignore those for now,” Mahlan said, his voice low but not demanding like before. “I’m going to get the paperwork in to officially hire you tomorrow.”

My first instinct was to argue, but we’d already been through it twice. He was hiring me as an independent contractor, and I was a free agent as soon as I did what he needed.

“By the way, we never really talked numbers. Do you have something in mind?”

“Fifteen an hour,” I blurted instantly, remembering how Amanda and Chris had bragged for about a week that they were being paid twelve an hour working for the public library.

“You didn’t even think about it,” Mahlan said, sounding disappointed. Which naturally just made me all the more defensive.

“That’s three dollars more than my friends are getting!”

“All right, how about we make it a weekly salary? How much would you want for a standard workweek?”

I tried to do the math as quickly as possible, although I’d never been very good without a pen and paper. “How much am I contributing for rent?”

His chest puffed up and his mouth opened, which I quickly recognized

was him being affronted at something I said. “And don’t say nothing!” I understood he had more money than me, but that didn’t mean I wanted to be a total mooch.

I was pleased when Mahlan seemed actually to consider what I was saying. “You should pay for your parking spot in the garage.”

“How much is that?”

“About \$750 a month.”

I tried not to let my eyes bulge out at that. Seven hundred fifty a month for a damn parking space? Rich people were insane.

“Is that doable?”

“Sure, yeah, but I don’t have a car.”

“We can rectify that.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing exactly what he meant. “Yeah, I can buy one after I save up.”

“...you know you don’t have to, right?”

“I know that I don’t want to freeload, and I fully expect to pay my way through life.”

“Why won’t you let me provide for you?”

“Why don’t you recognize there’s a difference between being provided for and being completely beholden to someone?”

Maybe that was too sharp of me, but Mahlan seemed to ponder a moment. “All right. I’ll let you pay for whatever bills and lodging you want if you let me take care of your schooling and help you find a career when you’re ready.”

It was a generous offer, I knew that much, but at the same time, it made me feel so suffocated. Everything he was saying was so *permanent*. I was just nineteen! The only permanent thing I should be doing was getting a reckless tattoo.

Yeah, maybe he was handsome, clever, and funny, and... and... and maybe I was viscerally attracted to him, but I’d just met the guy, and yet, we were discussing rent and college. It wasn’t how I imagined I’d eventually find someone. And even if it felt *really* good being around him sometimes, it was just so much *pressure*.

Once more, Mahlan seemed supernaturally aware of how I was feeling. Who knew? Maybe that was a werewolf thing too. After all, if every other girl in high school could claim to be an empath, why couldn’t a lycanthrope be one too? It wouldn’t be the weirdest thing to happen in my week.

“Let’s just take it a day at a time for now. How about we get you working then sort of settle in a bit? Maybe you can take a semester off and see how you feel?”

I let out a sigh at the reprieve. Yeah, that sounded a lot better than trying to make a bunch of decisions in less than a week.

“I’ll talk to Theo and his finance team to see what kind of weekly salary we can work out.”

“Okay.”

I was kind of done talking about money, and suddenly noticing an email from Sarah sealed the deal. Quickly, I opened it, reading a bunch of concerned questions asking where I was, why I ghosted them, and how I could miss graduation.

I felt terrible, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to explain much to her. Sorry, I robbed the wrong guy, ended up kidnapped by wolf-people, and now I’m mated to a rich, handsome type who was trying to shower me with money. Yeah, not exactly believable.

But I couldn’t just leave her with *nothing*. Knowing Sarah, she was worrying herself silly and running around like a chicken with her head cut off. Ghosting was a particularly cruel thing, and I didn’t like to do it if I didn’t have to.

“Hey, so... uh, what exactly can I tell my friends?”

“Do you have to tell them anything?”

I sent him an icy glare. “Imagine you disappeared from your pack without warning and not a soul ever heard from you again.”

“Noted,” he answered wryly. “Well, I suppose you should skip the mating, wolf, and supernatural parts.”

“I’m right there with you on that.”

“Here, lemme think a moment.”

It took a bit, but together we crafted an email that at least didn’t sound totally unhinged. We played it vague, saying I’d gotten an opportunity I couldn’t walk away from and not much else. Although I insisted on saying that I was still in town, just booked, busy, and blessed, as it were. When things calmed down, I would reach out and we could do lunch, my treat.

I did feel better once I hit send. Sarah could be a stickler for manners, but she would be much less mad with a reasonable explanation instead of echoing silence. Besides, she’d looked out for me through much of high school. I was pretty uninclined to leave her high and dry.

“So, this Sarah girl, she’s important to you?”

I nodded, resting my chin in my hand as I explained how she’d been my friend most of my life. How we’d gone from school buddies to best friends to borderline inseparable. Well, as inseparable as one could be with the sort of double life I was living. That part did make it pretty complicated to have a BFF.

“I suppose one of the reasons we got so close was my folks.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, things started pretty normally, as far as I knew. My parents weren’t saints, Mr. Rogers or anything, but they treated me well enough, and I never really wanted for anything.” I chewed my lip, recalling the slow transition of my family unit. “But as the years went on, it was kinda like they went crazier and crazier. Almost like they were scared of me.”

That stopped me short, and I reexamined my memories through a more current lens.

“Huh, I guess that makes sense knowing what I do now.”

“Did you ever go back for them?” Mahlan asked quietly, almost as if he feared he’d hurt me with his question.

“Oh, yeah, tons of times. Especially that first year. I kept hoping they’d be home and have a change of heart, but a different family already occupied the place.”

My memories came in faster, flooding me with melancholy and loss. “I remember I went to a shelter once because I was freezing and so hungry that I thought I might pass out. That’s when I met this other homeless kid who taught me to pickpocket.”

“And what happened to him?”

“Disappeared just like my family. That’s what the people I care about love to do. They trick me into trusting them, relying on them, then-” I made an exploding gesture with my hands. “-*poof!* Back into the ether they go.”

Mahlan looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t, so I decided to finish up the topic. “So yeah, I don’t exactly have a booming inner circle like you. That’s why I value Sarah so much. She’s the only one who’s always been there.”

“I see. I’m glad you have her then.”

“You and me both.”

I returned to my emails, thoroughly wrung out on emotional stuff, only to be interrupted by a truly egregious yawn that damn near cracked my jaw in

half.

“Go to bed,” Mahlan said with a slight chuckle. It was a barely there rumble of noise, but goosebumps spread along my arms. “I’ll be here for quite a while, and your body still needs to heal.”

“My body, what about your body?”

And then he flashed me a crooked smile that could have been registered as a lethal weapon in at least twelve states. Goodness, it was not fair how *hot* he was. “I’m doing fine, don’t worry about me.”

“I’m not *worried*,” I countered sharply like I wasn’t a very worried worrier who was most definitely worrying.

“Sure, you’re not. In any case, I have an early morning tomorrow, so you likely won’t see me.”

“Um, is there anything I should be doing?” Usually, I’d be out hunting for a job or a mark so I could get food. But with Mahlan taking care of all that... what was I supposed to put my energy toward?

“Whatever you wish, really. I’ll be back around lunch, so maybe we could go somewhere?”

“Sure, yeah, if you want to.”

“Sounds good. Why don’t you just sleep in, relax, and make yourself at home? I get the feeling you don’t get a lot of lazy mornings.”

He was right about that. I didn’t know if I even remembered how to do a lazy morning. Whenever I tried to sleep in, I rarely made it past ten, except during the summer when I tended to be out later and do more social events with my friends in the hopes of free food.

“What should I wear?” Thinking of the entire wardrobe I’d just procured made me a bit anxious. Talk about choice paralysis. “We’re doing this whole Ocean’s Eleven thing after lunch, right?”

But Mahlan just let out that gentle laugh of his. “Yeah, we are doing all that tomorrow. As for your outfit, I don’t know. I’ll see if Emmaline can come over tomorrow and give you some outfit suggestions.”

Thank God. Although I wasn’t exactly thrilled about how I’d come across my new wardrobe, that didn’t mean I wasn’t excited about having more clothes. However, with that excitement was an underlying uncertainty that I would roll out looking like a clown.

“Okay then, that’ll be great.”

I got up, made sure to sign out of my email first, and headed towards the bedroom. But at the last moment, Mahlan caught my wrist. I turned to him,

worried that I had forgotten something, but he tenderly pulled me in and placed a feather-soft kiss on my cheek.

“Goodnight,” he said, voice full of so much that I was intimidated all over again.

“Night!” I said quickly before hurrying off. Yikes, I was a mess.

I thought perhaps I wouldn’t be able to fall asleep, but the moment I changed into some nightclothes and slid into bed, I was immediately enveloped in Mahlan’s scent — which didn’t make any sense. Sure, I’d always had a strong sense of smell, but there was a difference between having a good nose and getting drunk off huffing a guy’s scent. But that’s precisely what it felt like. I buried my face in his pillow and breathed deeply, letting it lull me into a deep, relaxing sleep.

No nightmares plagued me, no worries. My belly was full, my spine was supported, and I was wearing clothes that were so soft they were like a sensory blessing. I was vaguely aware when Mahlan climbed into bed, but I couldn’t bring myself close enough to the surface to so much as grunt at him. It was just blissful relief.

Until I felt Mahlan getting out of bed, which seemed entirely too soon — hadn’t he just gotten there? This time I did manage to grunt at him, murmuring something that might have been English if you ran it through google translate twenty times.

“Shhh, it’s 5:00 a.m. Go back to sleep, dear.”

I could feel him kiss my forehead, and if that didn’t just turn me to syrup, sending me sinking deeper into my comfortable sleep.



I AWOKE with crust over my eyes, a dry mouth, with an urgent need to pee. And I couldn’t be happier about it. I couldn’t remember the last time I was so thoroughly rested.

Glancing at the clock on my way to the bathroom, I saw it was only 8:00 a.m. Wow, with how satisfied I felt, I would have thought it was at least noon. But it was nice knowing I hadn’t lost the whole day.

Finishing up with my business, I returned to Mahlan’s room, something restless within me. It wasn’t that I missed the guy. *Pffft*, that would be ridiculous. ...but it would have been nice to wake up with him beside me.

Just cause the bed was so big, naturally. It felt weird to be the only one it. That was the only reason; it wasn't like I was developing feelings or anything.

"I should start putting away my clothes," I muttered to myself, trying to trick my consciousness into being motivated.

The task broke my brain from the loop it was quickly sinking into, which I was grateful for. I didn't need to ruin a lovely morning with anxiety over stupid shit.

Granted, I might have bitten off more than I could chew. There was a *lot* of clothing. And by the time I was halfway through, I couldn't help but wonder if I was making the wrong move. He had, after all, taken pretty much all of my choices away from me. Sure, he was paying for a lot and seemed like a genuinely good person. But that didn't negate his violation of my agency.

Conflicted, I paused my clothes wrangling and headed to the kitchen. Emotional conflict on an empty stomach always made everything worse. But I didn't feel like cooking, especially without Mahlan, so I just grabbed a banana instead.

And that was when I spotted a phone and laptop sitting right in the center of the island.

"No way..." I gasped, eyes wide.

That phone didn't look like the one Mahlan was using. I'd noticed his was comically oversized to fit his broad, strong hands and that it almost looked like a dwarf using it.

I stared at the electronics for a while, certain that those things couldn't be for me. Sure, we'd talked about it the day before, but that was literally the *day before*. He couldn't have gotten them so quickly! And especially not such *nice* ones.

Nearly a solid minute passed before I realized there was a note on the laptop in what I recognized as Mahlan's meticulous writing. Geez, we'd known each other for two days, and I could already tell how he tended to write. That was a lot.

Nevertheless, I picked it up and read it.

These were delivered for you this morning. Enjoy!

I couldn't believe it, but that didn't stop me from starting off with the phone as I ate my banana. I knew it would probably take some time to install all its apps and stuff, but I watched with fascination as it went through the

process.

I had a smartphone! A real, honest-to-werewolf-god, smartphone!

When it finally finished with all its initial hullabaloo, I picked it up and started navigating through it. I found a few contacts already loaded in, mostly him, and a couple of his other friends. Well, that was nice.

Even though I wasn't the most familiar with the interface, I could call him without much trouble, excitement and worry both twisting in my gut, erstwhile companions who loved to give me stomach rot.

"Good morning," he said, sounding so genuinely pleased to hear from me that a wave of euphoria swept over my mind. How did he *do* that?

"Good morning," I echoed, trying to find my words. But I'd never been the most gracious person, so I blurted out the first thing my brain came up with. "You didn't have to get me all this stuff. I would have gotten it after my first week's pay." After all, if he was going to be my boss, it would be pretty entitled of me to think he would also buy everything for me.

"I needed to be in contact with you, and I was worried something could happen if we waited."

"You think I can't take care of myself?"

Sometimes I wished that I didn't have to fight everything, that I didn't have to be so stubborn. But if there was one thing I'd been taught in my short life, it was that I couldn't trust or rely on anyone but myself. And Mahlan, with his dazzling smiles, delicious scent, and seemingly endless wallet, was constantly challenging that. Which kind of pissed me off.

Wait, no. Perhaps a more accurate description would be that he was threatening the entire system of coping mechanisms and strategies I had put together to survive. Without those things, I was afraid I would just drop into the miasmatic void of uncertainty that was always waiting to swallow me whole.

"I know you can, Lyssa. You've more than proven that. It's just that you don't *have* to."

You don't have to.

You don't have to.

I wanted to believe him, I did, but everything in my mind was screaming that he was lying to me. He would eventually get tired of me and leave whenever he desired.

But his words took all the wind out of my sails, and I could feel myself physically deflate.

“Mahlan, I know you mean well, but you can’t keep pushing me like this, okay?” My voice was soft as I spoke, my cheeks coloring at the fact that I had to show so much weakness. “I need you to be patient. I’m trying to navigate all this, but you move much faster than I’m ready for.”

I expected a fight. I expected him to tell me I was being stupid or overdramatic. But he didn’t do any of that. Instead, he let out a very quiet sigh. “I’m sorry, Lyssa. I’m not trying to do that, but I will work to be more conscious of it. I know it’s not an excuse, but my mating instincts feel like they’re always yelling at me. I’m still learning how to control them.”

Oh. I’d never thought of how it must have been from his side. Sure, he was the one who bit me, and I was still plenty pissed at him, but he hadn’t left his home that day thinking he was about to be mated for life. That had to be a lot for him too.

“Whenever you need space, I will do my best to give it to you.”

I couldn’t believe it. Man, I wished I had met him through other circumstances. Everything would be less complicated if he hadn’t put a claim on me like I was a particularly good steak at the grocery store.

“I’ll try to be more understanding too. It helps to know that you get where I’m coming from. This is all just so much.”

“I’m trying, I really am, Lyssa. And as long as you can tell that, I’m happy.”

“Well, glad we worked that out then. I’m... I’m gonna go now, okay?”

“Of course. Emmaline will be there around eleven, and you can let her in. If you want to text her, the number is in your phone under Emma.”

“Thanks. You know, for all this. And that too.”

“No problem. See you tonight.”

At that, he hung up and I was left to play on my new toys, conflict only slightly abated in my belly.

But it turned out that time passed quickly when one had nearly unlimited access to the internet. While I tried to stay on task and research stuff, it was so easy to get distracted by every interesting article or funny meme. Plus, the idea that I wouldn’t have to schlepp all the way to the library and carefully budget the twenty minutes I had online before I was kicked off for the next patron to use it.

Before I knew it, my phone was buzzing and the doorbell rang at the same time, notifying me that Emmaline had arrived.

“Hey there,” I said, opening the door for her and letting her in.

“Hullo! Ready for some fun styling?”

“If you mean ready to dig through a clothing pile equivalent to Mount Everest, sure.”

“Hah! I know; my brother went all in, didn’t he? But he’s always been the type. All alpha, ya know?”

Emmaline breezed past me and made her way toward her brother’s bedroom. Once we were inside, she let out a low whistle. “Oh, man, I didn’t know he went *this* all out.”

“See now why I’m a bit overwhelmed? And this is only about half of it. I spent a good hour or so this morning just hanging the rest up.”

“Oh, totally. I get it now.” She cracked her knuckles and walked over to the bag pile. “But it’s nothing I can’t handle. Let’s dig in!”

And dig in we did, methodically going through it all. Emmaline was plenty helpful, picking out different ‘statement pieces’ as they were and showing me how to mix and match for different occasions. It was all pretty interesting, almost scientific, and I found myself more enthused than I thought I would be.

But at the same time, I started to feel self-conscious. She had to think I was using her brother for his money or that I was a spoiled brat. “I didn’t want him to buy me all of this,” I said hurriedly as she hung up a particularly strappy lingerie set. I didn’t even know that lingerie was the kind of thing that was *supposed* to be hung up. Or maybe she was just doing it because I didn’t have a dresser? Kind of hard to use an underwear drawer without any drawers available.

I was getting sidetracked. Shaking my head, I focused. “I want to pay my way for things.”

“Well, if that’s the case, you can always come work for my place. I’m guessing you’d be pretty good at spotting shoplifting techniques.”

I blushed, but Emmaline’s wry smile let me know she was mostly teasing. “I’m on contract with your brother right now.”

“Oh, for how long?”

“Not sure. A couple of weeks. Maybe a month?”

“Okay, then after that. Mahlan was right; I need more help in the shop, and you’ve certainly got talents that I don’t.”

Excitement bubbled in my middle, but I was also wary of it. “I’d really like that. Maybe I could start training during some of my free time?” Considering that my life had turned inside out, I’d have at least a little of that.

“Sure! Once this week is over, I’ll talk to Mahlan about setting up a schedule.” To my great surprise, Emmaline clapped her hands and then threw her arms around my shoulders in a hug. “Man, I am *hella* excited! You have no idea. Buuuuut, in the meantime...” she lifted some lipstick and mascara that she pulled from who knew where. “How about a little makeover?”

I broke into laughter because how could I not at her enthusiasm? She was older than me, but she didn’t seem to look down on me like some older people.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

Her energy was palpable as she went about painting my face and picking me out a professional outfit. It wasn’t like I needed to dress up for standing in the middle of Mahlan’s bedroom, and I felt pretty stupid for a long while.

But when she finished and finally let me go to the bathroom to look in the mirror, I was blown away by who I saw standing there.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. The woman in the mirror looked so polished. So poised. Was that really me?

“You clean up great, girlie. But we both knew you would.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Shaking my head, I leaned closer, taking it all in. With myself so done up, it was easy to imagine a life where I hadn’t been a street urchin, fighting tooth and nail for everything I had. It was easy to imagine an untraumatized Lyssa who was put together and had a loving, not vanished family.

“You know, if you like all this, maybe we could do a girls’ day after your first paycheck? Like the whole shebang, hair, nails, and spa.”

“I’ve always dreamed of doing that,” I breathed, still looking in the mirror. How many romcoms or sitcoms had I watched where women did just that and desperately wished I could experience it at least once?

“Then it’s a plan! It’ll be a great first purchase!”

“Yeah, I know it will.”

MAHLAN

Emmaline texted me that she was heading out about halfway through my drive home. Not that I texted while I drove, not when my car's Bluetooth system took care of that for me. Judging by the number of smiling emoticons the speaker listed, she and my mate had quite a good time.

Which pleased me, naturally. After our talk in the morning, I worried that I was making Lyssa's life so much worse rather than better. I didn't mean to be overbearing, but it would be much easier if Lyssa would let someone take care of her. I admired her strength and her determination, but I didn't want her to have to scrap and fight for every little thing. She didn't deserve that.

But as we said, it was something both of us needed to work on. I was certain that we were meant to be mates down to a molecular level.

Traffic allowed me to zip the rest of the way home fairly quickly, and I strode in to see Lyssa sitting at the island, dressed smartly in a pair of business slacks and a fitted, teal shirt with a pinstriped vest.

She looked *amazing*, but after our talk, I reined my reaction. "You look great," I said while my inner wolf howled that it would defeat an entire pack of rabid ferals for her.

"Thanks, your sister did a good job."

"It's been a while since she's had a gal pal to hang out with. She seemed to have a blast." I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't for Lyssa to let out a loud snort. "What?"

"You know gal pal is code for being a lesbian couple, right?"

"What? No. Since when?"

"Since ever, man. It's a joke because historians always call lesbians best

friends, gal pals, or roommates.” She shot me a skeptical look. “You’ve really never seen a meme about ‘just gals being pals?’”

“I don’t spend much time online looking through memes.”

“Ugh, that’s right, you’re *old*.”

“I’m twenty-six!”

“Yeah, basically ancient.” She stuck out her tongue, and I gave her a good-natured eye roll.

“I see how it is.” But the truth was that I loved it. Clearly, her confidence had gotten a boost between when I talked to her on the phone and when I came home, letting me see more of that personality that I loved.

“I’m sure you do.” But her snarky expression faded, replaced with a sweeter smile. “But seriously, I did enjoy hanging out with her.”

“That’s awesome. I hope you both find the time to do that more often. Emmaline can get so wrapped up in her work.”

“Yeah, she takes her business pretty seriously.”

“She sure does. You ready to head out?”

“Sure! I kinda forgot to eat lunch with all the makeover stuff.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever done the same,” I shot back, opening the door for her.

“Well, not all of us are blessed with thick lashes that go on for days and bone structure that could chisel itself out of the side of a mountain.”

If I’d been drinking water then, I would have spit it out. “Where do you come up with this stuff?”

“My brain, naturally,” Lyssa said, strutting by me. And boy, did I appreciate the show. “Unlike some people, I prefer to talk out of my head instead of my ass.”

“Are you referring to me, dear?”

She just batted her eyelashes at me. “Whyever would you say that?”

“Yeah, yeah, Miss Smarty-Pants, let’s go to the car.”

“You’re the one who bought me the pants, so whose fault is that?”

“Noted.”

We continued to banter all the way to the car and even the restaurant itself; conversation flowed without our usual bickering. It was refreshing, that was certain, especially since it felt like both of us were trying.

Even when we recapped the plan over our meal, there wasn’t any arguing. Maybe because she felt an equal part and less like she was being forced into something? That would make sense considering all that she was struggling

with.

“Do you have any other questions?” I asked as our food was brought to our table. It was cute how Lyssa’s eyes grew wide, her mouth borderline drooling over the roasted salmon in front of her. Oh, I would have so much fun feeding her all the nicest things.

But first, our little heist.

“No, I think I’m pretty good. You and Parker are gonna wolf-Karen it up in there. You threaten to leave Hannah to be a consultant while I get into the building and where I need to be to insert the jump drive, take it out after three minutes, then beat it.”

“You say it so casually,” I murmured, resting my chin in my hand.

“Because I’m pretty confident that I can do all of this. It’s not even the trickiest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

“Well, I trust you.”

Those seemed to be the magic words because Lyssa’s face flushed, and she cut herself off to shovel food in her mouth. But then she seemed distracted by the sheer flavor of the dish and started genuinely eating it.

It was nice to have our little meal together, and I wished it could last much longer. But after an hour and a half, we both realized we needed to get going.

We would have the rest of our lives to leisurely dine at our favorite places. For the moment, our pack recovering our moonstone was pretty damn important.

If we lived in a perfect world, I would have held her hand as we walked to our rendezvous point hand in hand. But I recognized that we weren’t quite there yet and just contented myself to stroll along beside her.

Sure enough, everyone arrived on time, and we headed toward our target building. Once we were close, Lyssa stopped us. “All right, give me whatever paperwork I need. And Hannah, can I have your purse?”

“Uh, what? Why?”

“Just trust me on this.”

Our intern looked at me uncertainly, but I just nodded. Whatever Lyssa was planning had to be based on what she knew of the building, and what Addison had told her from the unnoticeable woman’s visit.

“All right then....”

With that handled, we headed in.

Clearly, the receptionist was not prepared for the alpha of a rival pack to

come striding in with an entourage, her eyes growing wide as we approached her.

“Mr. Reese! You’re here early!”

“Yes, my constituents and I had an earlier commitment fall through. We thought perhaps your CEO, Rex Bronson, would be willing to give us a bit of a tour as an act of goodwill.”

I did my best to sound imperious, which wasn’t exactly my strong suit. I had no problem standing up for my pack when they needed it or being a leader, but I liked to think I did it without a condescending attitude.

“U-u-uh...” I felt bad for the receptionist. She was just trying to do her job. But it was all a part of the plan.

“Surely it’s not too much of a request considering the future our companies want to build together. If a tour is out of line, I hate to think of how more important things will be handled.”

“How will we work with people who aren’t even considerate of our time?” Parker added, voice much lower and flatter than I was used to. Huh, he seemed to have a talent for acting.

“Let me see if his assistant is available to touch base with. One moment.”

I was grateful that I didn’t have to bluster any more than that. I didn’t want to have to be abusive with a woman who was just doing her job.

She stepped away from the desk just far enough, so I had to strain to hear the other side of the call, and a few moments later, she returned to us.

“His assistant will be down in just a few minutes to take you on that tour. Thank you for your patience.” It didn’t take werewolf super senses to tell that she was relieved we’d be out of her hair.

Sure enough, maybe three minutes later, the CEO’s assistant arrived through a pair of overly polished elevators. He was a slighter man, with a sort of weaselly look that I didn’t really like. Naturally, I didn’t say that, but I did my best to continue posturing like a knothed while our tour began.

We kept him on his toes; I could say that much. Parker, Hannah, and I peppered him with questions like how many people worked in certain departments, their average profit percentage or productivity rates, just anything that seemed slightly plausible but also pretty obscure. The assistant wasn’t as nervous as the receptionist but wasn’t at ease either.

When all this was said and done, I would need to do something nice for some office workers, just to even out my cosmic karma.

It was exhausting being a jerk, but I kept it up as best I could until we

walked into the CEO's office. Perfect timing because he was just saying goodbye on his phone as we entered.

"Ah, Mr. Reese and crew. I hope you liked your tour of our humble facilities."

"It was adequate," I said, offering my hand. Despite our poor behavior, he continued to shake everyone else's hands as well. Even Hannah's. But when it came to Lyssa, she stumbled a bit as she tried to juggle all the paperwork she was holding, sending it scattering everywhere.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry! I-I-I-" she cut herself off and dropped to her knees, hurriedly trying to pick it up.

"It's hard to find good help, isn't it?" I remarked, making eye contact with the man and mentally urging him to pay attention to me. I was certain that Lyssa was up to something important, and I figured she could use a little distraction.

"I know what you mean," the CEO agreed, and yeah, if I hadn't already known it, I was sure I didn't like the guy right then and there. He was so smarmy, enough so that I felt like I was going to need to take a shower later just to get his scuzz off me.

"You don't have to worry about all that, sweetie," he continued, not even looking to Lyssa. "Arron, would you take some of this paperwork off this young woman's hands?"

"Of course, sir."

"There we go. We'll leave them to that while the rest of us head to my preferred meeting room. This way."

Lyssa knew what she was doing. Sure, I was nervous about leaving her alone with the CEO's assistant, but she had herself handled.

So instead, I concentrated on my side of the plan, giving the CEO the same treatment we'd given his employee. But this time, I had a focus, questioning the financials as we settled in the meeting room.

"Do you have a spreadsheet on the breakdown of how you factor employee wages into company productivity?"

"I'm sure our financial team has something along those lines, but I'm not sure why you'd need it."

"We find that's a key metric to see which employees are worth retaining. From what your assistant told us, you have several bloated teams. It would be interesting to see why, especially if we work together on some of our proposals."

“Do you have an example of this kind of spreadsheet? I’m afraid this meeting doesn’t exactly come at the most opportune moment. Our CFO and lead of the financial team are both out. We thought after so much postponement, even a meeting with just me would be better than nothing.”

“I’m sure we do. Once my junior assistant returns-”

In another example of perfect timing, a harried-looking Lyssa came in, the CEO’s assistant wearing an annoyed expression. Man, if I could have seen what was happening inside that office while we were gone.

“Ah, there she is. The spreadsheets, please.”

Lyssa set down the paperwork and began to rustle through it, her eyes wide. After a truly awkward amount of time with all of us watching her, she looked up in horror.

“I... must have forgotten to print them out.”

“You what?” Parker asked, perfectly selling a nasty upper employee.

“I’m sorry! But I have them here, on my drive. If there’s a printer around here, I could get them for you ASAP.”

“Did you just ask if we have a printer?” the CEO asked, his tone entirely snide. “Of course we do. My assistant can do it as his desk.”

“Thank you so much!”

Lyssa reached for her pants pocket, only for all the color to drain from her face. “I am so, so sorry for my unprofessionalism, but I think it’s in my purse, which I left on the floor when I was picking up papers. I’ll just run real fast and grab it!”

She hurried out, making sure to close the door behind her, and I found myself holding my breath, sure that the CEO would figure out what we were up to. But instead, he just huffed a laugh.

“Either she’s someone’s daughter, or one of you is shagging her.”

My hackles rose almost instantly, and it took an iron grip on my anger to stop myself from snapping at him. *No one* talked about my mate that way.

Thankfully, I had Parker, who piped in quickly to keep the arrogant man going. “Hah! You called it in one. But I’ll let you guess which one.”

“Hah, judging by that ass, I can put two and two together.”

My incisors grew within my mouth, and I had to focus on drinking from the water bottle beside me to keep control. My inner wolf did *not* like that, and it was all too easy for him to imagine ripping the CEO’s throat out.

“To resume our previous conversation,” I said with plenty of bite in my voice. “We are concerned that you’re currently hemorrhaging far too much

money in bloated and redundant departments, so we're leaving Hannah here to do a little work and help you identify the best ways to cut costs and maximize your output. That way, there's progress even if your CFO and whole finance team are suddenly AWOL."

Mr. Bronson let out a flat chuckle, letting me know he wasn't amused with my input — which was probably a lot more satisfying than it should have been to me.

The conversation continued from there, and I felt like we'd done well to be convincing. It did take Lyssa a bit to return with the assistant, but when she did, she was appropriately breathless. "Here's the report! Turns out it was under the desk the whole time!"

And that was when her entire plan clicked in my head, from the purse to the paperwork. My mate was clever, that was for sure.

Now we just had to sit through the rest of the meeting, knowing that we'd essentially committed corporate espionage and perhaps even a felony. Not our first as a pack, especially considering I'd just had to put a feral member down, but still pretty heart-pounding.

And yet, somehow, we got the CEO to agree to our terms, even Hannah starting the following week. Having her as a known entity on the inside and Addison as an unknown entity on the inside would give us the perfect advantage to strategize once we could see what Lyssa had managed to get.

"Have Miss Hannah stop by on Friday to get badged access for the appropriate areas of the building. And if you don't have any other questions, I'm afraid I have a teleconference in just fifteen minutes."

"No, we're satisfied with the current state of affairs," I said, standing and offering my hand again. There was another round of handshakes, except for Lyssa, and then we were headed out.

It was hard not to act like giddy schoolboys as we exited into a van that was waiting for us, windows tinted so that it was impossible to see inside. Naturally, John was driving, with Theo in the passenger's seat beside him.

No one said anything as we pulled away. In fact, it was nearly an entire block before I turned in my seat to gaze at Lyssa.

"What?"

"Did you get it?"

"You bet your bottom dollar, I did. Maybe next time give me a challenge, why don't you?"

I laughed, loud and long and full of pride. That was my mate, all right. I

was incredibly lucky to have her.

“All right, I’ll make sure to do that.” Pulling out my phone, I dialed up Jacobian, who was back at our pack’s home base.

“Progress?” I asked simply once he picked up.

“We’ve made our way into their internal network. Pretty much everything is accessible through here, but I gotta tell you...”

My stomach dropped at his tone. “What?”

“Their file encryption is, uh... interesting.”

“Can you not break it?”

“No, I can. Kinda.”

“Kinda? What does ‘kinda’ mean?” I was quickly growing annoyed with the vague talk.

“Okay, so I got past most of it, but there’s this sort of weird bug where the folder names were corrupted and now just read as ‘error.’ The files are all intact, but nothing’s organized.”

“That sounds inconvenient.”

“That is the best word for it, alpha. I can access everything, but I’ll have to sift through manually and organize everything myself.”

“And they won’t be able to tell their system has had this error?”

“No, because I’m pretty sure it’s only on our end. Most likely from trying to access their stuff from an offsite IP.”

“Noted. Do your best.”

“Yes, sir.”

At that, I hung up the call, still feeling pretty jazzed. In fact, I was excited enough to do something I usually never did.

“Hey, this Friday, let’s have a celebration. After Hannah gets badged.”

“What’s the occasion?” Parker asked excitedly. Because of course he was.

“Victory,” I answered succinctly.

“Aye, that’s a good reason if I ever heard one. We can have a nice dinner at this restaurant I just bought.”

There was a jovial round of agreements in the van as we headed back to where I’d left my car from my lunch date with Lyssa. When the van stopped, I looked at Hannah and Parker.

“Either of you hungry?” Sure, Lyssa and I had already eaten, but that didn’t mean I was going to leave my other packmates high and dry.

“Oh, no, I’m good for today,” Hannah said, looking truly weary. “That

whole meeting was kind of a lot, so I think I'd prefer to go home."

"We can drive you to your car," Parker offered helpfully. "I don't mind, and I'm sure John and Theo don't."

"You guys do that," I said, already half out of the car and offering my hand to Lyssa. "We have our own plans."

With a few more polite goodbyes, Lyssa and I stepped away from the van and let it drive off. Somehow, even after all we'd done, it was still the early afternoon.

All the better to spend my time with my mate.

LYSSA

I headed into Mahlan's place feeling pretty proud of myself. My adrenaline had been pumping during our little espionage stint, making me feel like I was running a marathon.

But it was also thrilling. I loved a good challenge, especially when it felt like I was acing it. And I most certainly aced it.

Who knew? Maybe I had a career in corporate espionage ahead of me. My future was wide open in a way it hadn't been in a long time.

I didn't get very far into the apartment before I felt Mahlan's hand on my shoulder, spinning me around. The next thing I knew, he was kissing me deeply, making my breath catch.

God, locking lips with Mahlan should come with a warning. My entire body flushed, and I wanted nothing more than to press myself to his front and ravage his mouth right back.

But then it ended almost as soon as it began, Mahlan looking at me almost lovingly. "I'm really proud of you, I hope you know," he said like that wasn't the most intense thing he could say to me. If the kiss was a lot, that was so much more, and I could feel my heart slamming against my ribcage.

"You handled yourself exceptionally well. Better than anyone could have expected you to."

"T-thanks," I sputtered. "You did well too."

"Yeah, I'm a bit disappointed at how well I pulled off being a complete jerkwad."

That startled a laugh out of me. "Pfft, just think of it as you being a talented actor."

“Sure, I like your interpretation of it.” He let me go, and I couldn’t deny that I missed the touch of his warm hands. “How about I make something special for dinner tonight, then we can do whatever you want.”

The thought of Mahlan’s cooking made my mouth water. “Sure, I’m game for that.”

“Perfect. I’m going to change into something loungy and check my emails. The shower’s free if you want it.”

“I think I’m good on that, but I am gonna wash my face and get out of this business outfit.”

Mahlan gave me an absent nod, already heading to his office. I went to his bedroom, quickly doing what I said. By the time I was in joggers and a tank top that was *ridiculously* soft, Mahlan was entering the room himself.

I stood there for a moment, not quite sure what to do. Part of me wanted me to stay there and watch Mahlan strip. My thoughts went to the shower we shared and how much I was drawn to and turned on by his body.

“You all right?” he asked, shooting me a blithe grin like he could hear my lusty thoughts. Geez, what was wrong with me?

“Yeah, just thirsty.” In more ways than one. “I’m gonna get myself something to drink.”

“All right, I’ll catch up with you.”

I hurried to the kitchen, drinking that deliciously cold, filtered water from his fridge’s dispenser. I once thought that having a double-door fridge with ice and water dispensers was the pinnacle of wealthiness and chuckled at myself. There was a whole world of richy-richness that I was beginning to get a taste of.

And I was still there, sipping at my delicious hydration, when Mahlan returned, looking like a snack in his low-slung sweats and a dark t-shirt. It wasn’t fair that he looked soul-destroying good in whatever he wore. Not fair at all.

With a wink that nearly took out my knees, he started cooking as I parked myself at the kitchen island, watching him while he worked.

“So now that we’ve done the sting, what now?”

“I’m sure there will be some follow-up later, but for the most part, yeah. The job went a lot smoother than any of us expected.”

“Y’all are a bunch of pessimists then.”

“Hah, perhaps.”

Well, if I wasn’t going to be that needed... “You know, your sister

offered me a job.”

“Did she?” I froze, waiting for his reaction with bated breath. “That’s a neat little solution. I’ve been after her to hire help for a couple of years now.”

Whew! So, he was okay with it. I didn’t want to fight about it, but I would have if it were necessary.

“Right now, do you mind holding off until Jacobian and Hannah finish their fact-finding? We don’t know what our endgame is because we need that info.”

“But if we’re just gonna be sitting, twiddling our thumbs in the meantime, why not have me start training with her and working part-time?”

I could tell that Mahlan wanted to argue, his jaw clenching as he ‘deglazed’ a pan. I didn’t even know that was a thing one could *do* to pans, but apparently, I had a lot to learn.

“All right then. As long as my sister understands that for a small window, you’re on call for me.”

“I’m sure she’ll be more than okay with it. You know, being pack business and all.”

“I’ll just speak with her-”

“Hey, I’m a big girl. I’ll talk to her myself. She’s going to be my boss, after all.”

Mahlan’s expression grew even more tense, and I kept waiting for him to boil over and yank everything away from me. But he didn’t. Instead, he kept deglazing that pan before adding the meat to it.

“Hey, you wouldn’t happen to know a bus route to her place, do you? I’ll need to figure out the best schedule that would work for both of us.”

“Public transit doesn’t always mix with shifters. You can always ride in with me, and she can bring you back until you get a car.”

“Uh, isn’t that a lot to put on both of you?”

“Actually, Emmaline passes right by here on her way home. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if she offered all on her own.”

“I still think it would be easier to take public transport.”

“Lyssa, I’m asking you, please don’t argue with me on this one.”

His tone wasn’t exasperated or even angry, but there was an underlying exhaustion to it that made me feel a bit guilty. “But...”

“You know what? Let’s call her right now and see what she says.”

The next thing I knew, he dialed her up, putting her on speakerphone as soon as she answered.

“Hey, Emma. Lyssa and I were brainstorming different ways for her to get to and from work if she takes you up on her offer.”

“Well, I always pass by your house whenever I go home, so if you drive her in, then I don’t mind bringing her back home.”

I had to give him credit; he did indeed know his sister.

“What about public transport?” I asked cautiously.

“Absolutely not. Honestly, I just assumed I would give you rides or add an Uber stipend into your pay.”

I could feel anger brewing in me, irritated that they both were so adamant against my independence. But I tried to tell myself they were both looking out for me. There had to be a good reason they were so against it.

So I swallowed down my urge to argue and rolled right along. “So, I’d need to be on call for certain stuff, but Mahlan said I could pretty much start now.”

“Oh, really? That’s perfect! Why don’t you come in tomorrow, and we can get all the onboarding going?”

“Okay.”

The conversation lasted only a bit longer, hashing out timing and whatnot, then she was saying goodbye, leaving me with Mahlan as he cooked.

“Fine, no bus,” I muttered. It was impossible not to miss how his shoulders relaxed as he nodded.

“I appreciate that, Lyssa. Thank you.”

I gave him a nod, and the mood settled between us as he finished cooking. It didn’t take long to finish, and it smelled heavenly and sinful while Mahlan dished it up for me.

Goodness, despite all my objections, it was nice to be served delicious meals in such a way. My stomach was getting spoiled very quickly.

“Oh my God, Mahlan, this is so good!”

He preened at that, which I usually would find kind of egotistical, but it just looked so sweet on him. So instead, I just kept happily eating. And if I made a few extra groans of appreciation, well, that was just the icing on top of the metaphorical cake.

“Hey, do you want me to show you how you can connect your phone to your computer?”

“Wait, it can do that?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty easy once you know what you’re doing.”

I opened my laptop, pleased when Mahlan turned away as I typed my password into it. From there, we ate and he showed me around both items, taking a selfie with his phone and then sending it to my computer.

“Technology is wild.”

While I may not have been the most current on gizmos, I did know how to set a background, which I did with the photo he sent me. He looked good on my computer screen.

Besides, it wasn't like I would see it that often considering I'd always have something else on the screen.

He continued showing me fun little tricks while we finished eating and loaded the dishwasher together. I'd never owned something like that before, so while it wasn't *as* fascinating as my smartphone and laptop, it was still pretty cool.

After the intense rush of the past few days, I felt pretty exhausted. So once that was done, we settled down to watch a little bit of TV. It was nice, real domestic, and it was easy to imagine a future like that.

But that was also terrifying. Was I really so ready to dedicate my life to the man who kidnapped me?

Ugh. I was just going to upset myself if I kept chasing that thought in circles, so instead, I let it go, just enjoying my time.

Later, we went to bed, and for a moment, I was worried about something happening. Mahlan hadn't gotten into bed with me any other time I'd gone to sleep. This was the first time that we were both tucking in at the same time. But the only thing Mahlan did was kiss me on the cheek and curl up against my back as we drifted off.



I WOKE up in a phenomenal mood, even with Mahlan having to drive me to my new job. But Emmaline and I got along well together, and my onboarding shift finished way faster than it should have.

The days began to pass quickly, full to the brim in a much more satisfying way than sitting around Mahlan's place like a kidnapped trophy wife. I learned a lot from Emmaline, such as how to work a POS system, stocking, and even receiving orders.

At the same time, Mahlan and I were growing more and more

comfortable around each other. There were no more steamy showers together, but my attraction towards him felt less dangerous and more... thrilling.

Which, like everything else, was crazy. But I was slowly, ever so slowly, coming to terms with the strange reality of my new life. Not that it was smooth sailing. Oh, no, there were plenty of bumps along the road, but I no longer spent most of my days blistering with resentment and anger.

Just some days.

“Whew, that was the busiest day we’ve had in a while,” Emmaline said as she dropped me off.

“Yeah, it was crazy.”

“Sorority runs like that are always pretty profitable. Especially now that I’ve got you to watch out for shoplifters.”

I grinned at that. I liked being appreciated and treated like I was a valuable asset, and Emmaline had no problem telling me how helpful I was to her.

“Glad to be of service.”

“Well, this is your stop.”

I chuckled as I got out, giving her a little wave. “See you next shift.”

“See you.”

I headed into Mahlan’s, ready to tell him about the entitled rich college girls I’d dealt with, but the moment I opened the door, I could tell that his place was empty.

“Hello?” I called uncertainly, stepping in. But a long beat of silence confirmed that he wasn’t home.

Huh.

He’d always made it a point to be home to greet me. Even if he had to leave shortly after, he was a permanent fixture in my schedule.

I didn’t know what to think of his absence, but I *did* know that I wasn’t a fan of it. So, I whipped out my new phone and called him up.

“Hey, where are you?” I asked as soon as the line picked up.

“Oh, Lyssa. I’m afraid I lost track of time. Are you home now?”

“Yeah, I am. But you weren’t here, so I got worried.”

“Aww, were you worried about little ol’ me?”

If he were in front of me, I would have leveled him with a truly epic glare. “I think we both know there’s not much little about you.”

“Touché.” Even over the phone, his laugh was amazing, a rumbling sort of brook filled with all kinds of pleasant tones. “How was your day?”

“Pretty wild, actually. We had an entire sorority come in, and they had some real witches among them.”

“Did my sister have to lay down the law? She gets pretty scary sometimes.”

“Nah, I handled myself.”

“That’s something certainly worth celebrating once I’m home.”

“I mean, sure, but don’t we kinda celebrate a lot?”

“I suppose. But since you came into my life, it seems like I’ve got a lot to celebrate.”

My jaw dropped open; my heart skipped beats like it was trying out for a jump rope team. I would always assume that someone saying that was being sarcastic, but Mahlan seemed to mean it sincerely.

And if I didn’t know what to think about most of our situation, I *definitely* didn’t know what to think about that, so instead, I just swallowed hard.

“Um, I’m gonna go shower.”

“That’s fine. I’ll leave now and should be back soon.”

“Okay. See you.”

“See you.”

I hung up, my heart still fluttering in my chest, and headed into the bathroom. But even as I stepped under the spray, I couldn’t help but smile.

Maybe being celebrated wasn’t such a bad thing.

I let that thought ruminate until he got home, and once he entered, I paused to kiss him on his cheek. It was the first time I’d ever initiated such a thing, and he seemed pretty surprised.

“I’m happy you’re here,” I said, and I meant it.

“I’m happy to be here,” he answered, and I knew he meant it too.

From there, we went into our usual routine, having dinner together, doing any leftover office work on Mahlan’s part, then watching some TV together before going to bed. We also planned to ‘celebrate’ on the coming Friday, which I was excited about. It was lovely, and I felt my walls drop ever so slightly.

The days began to pass quickly again, and before I knew it, it was Friday. I headed into work as usual, ready for what was typically our busiest day of the week.

“Hey, Emmaline!” I called, heading towards her office, where I always hung up my bookbag. I knew the more usual thing was to wear a purse, but I liked having my old trusty backpack around.

“Oh, hey there, Lyssa,” Emmaline said, coming out of the back with her arms full of something. “Would you be a dear and try this on for me?”

“For what?”

“For the celebration tonight.”

“You don’t think I’ll be overdressed?”

Emmaline leveled me with one of her intense looks. “Please, don’t even try me. Anyway, I was thinking of texting my brother to see if you and I could get ready together.”

“That would be amazing,” I said, heaving a relieved sigh. “I’m still a bit too intimidated by those hot tools.”

“I totally get it. They are very specific tools that need to be used with respect and care.”

“Yeah, not helping me on the intimidation front.”

“Eh, you don’t need to worry. Your inner wolf will heal you up right quick.” She paused at that, seeming to realize what she said. “How is that going, by the way?”

I just shrugged. “I dunno. I feel the same as I always have. No unexplained powers or abilities suddenly showing themselves or anything.”

“Huh, curiouser and curiouser.”

“But for the moment, let’s get to work, shall we?”

“You’re such a motivated employee — I love it! All right, let’s tackle the day.”

Like every other day, the hours began to fly by. I knew that retail was technically supposed to be a nightmare, but Emmaline made it the opposite. By the time the end of the day rolled around, she was practically vibrating in her skin, and she may or may not have sped much more than usual back to her brother’s place.

He wasn’t there again, but that was purposeful, I was sure, considering that Emmaline and I were getting ready together.

“You know,” I remarked as I patted my face dry. “We should have invited Hannah. Maybe even Taylor.”

“Oh, I didn’t even think of that,” Emmaline said, her eyes going wide. “Honestly, I need to hang out with different pack members more. Not just my brother and his inner circle.”

“That would require you not being married to your work.”

“What can I say? My wife is a demanding one.”

“Funny that you’d call her a wife and not a husband.”

“Please, do you ever think a straight man would have the fabulous closet my wifey does?”

I laughed at that, thoroughly amused. “Technically, that’s a storage room, not a closet.”

“Potato, potahto.”

Goodness, I really liked hanging out with Emmaline, but there was also an undercurrent of melancholy to it. I missed Sarah, and I wanted to update her on stuff, but everything was still going a mile a minute.

Plus, I wasn’t exactly sure how to explain my situation. I was living with a strange man, and I had a new scar on my neck that was very clearly his teeth. That would shake things up no matter what I said.

“Hey, I know this is coming out of nowhere, but I wanted to tell you I’m proud of how you’ve been standing up for yourself and sticking to your boundaries.”

“Hmmm?” was all I said in reply, surprised by the sudden segue.

“It’s not easy to do with a mating bite. So, like, I just wanted to congratulate you.”

“Thanks,” I murmured. “Sometimes it’s hard not to feel like Mahlan is pushing them too hard.”

“I get that. He can be a very exacting guy. But he does his best to listen; if he doesn’t, lemme know. I’ll beat him up.”

“Hah! All right, I’ll keep that in mind.”

The conversation drifted to lighter topics as we finished getting ready, and I was quickly growing excited to meet up with Mahlan at the restaurant. I wanted him to see me all dolled up again, and this time not just for a corporate heist.

I was more grateful than ever for her suggestion that we get ready together. It almost made me feel like an ordinary woman just doing normal woman things. I needed those shreds of normalcy, as they were the only thing to keep me from waking up in a cold sweat every night.

Because, as strangely easy as it was to forget, the truth was that shifters surrounded me, and I was permanently mated to their leader. Their young leader at that. I wasn’t an expert on shifter politics by any means, but I was pretty sure it was a tenuous position.

“Ready?” Emmaline asked me after I checked my reflection for probably the dozenth time.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Let’s roll out then.”

That excitement continued to build in my middle as Emmaline drove us to the restaurant. And when we arrived, Mahlan was waiting out front with Theo, Parker, and Hannah.

His head immediately snapped to me, a broad grin spreading over his features. “You look *amazing*,” he said, eyeing me over with plenty of appreciation. Usually, I would find a look like that creepy, but from him, it made me feel much more alive.

“You don’t look half bad yourself,” I replied, giving him his own up-and-down with the elevator eyes. He wore a dark blue suit with a black button-up and a silver tie. He *had* to have gotten that suit tailored because it fit him like a glove.

“Ah, there you are!” Parker said, grinning brightly. I wasn’t close with the guy by any means, but I liked his levity. He seemed like he was a glass-half-full kind of guy. “Everyone else will probably trickle in over the next fifteen minutes, but how about I show you ‘round the place?”

I nodded, taking Mahlan’s hand. If he thought anything of the contact, my mate didn’t say anything about it. But he did squeeze my palm twice, which I appreciated. It made me feel seen in an entirely different way than his enjoyment of my outfit.

Because even if we’d met under possibly the most unfortunate circumstances possible, the truth was that Mahlan very clearly liked multiple parts of me, not just my looks. He said so himself how much he admired my tenacity, and he’d hired me for an important mission for his pack. He saw me as a whole person, flaws and all, yet still very much cared about me. Which pretty much went against everything I knew about the laws of the universe.

Maybe... maybe some of those laws could be broken then? Perhaps he was the exception that proved the rule.

And maybe I was developing a severe case of Stockholm syndrome.

Eh, whatever it was, at least I was in for another amazing meal.

Stepping into the restaurant, I was shocked by how fancy the interior was. It was clear to me almost immediately that the demure nature of the outside was just to keep people’s guards down because the inside was lavish in a completely unfamiliar way.

It wasn’t gaudy, not by a mile. There was no garish spectacle or gross display of wasted wealth. But it was clear that every bit of the place was meticulously curated — from the marble tabletops, the plush chairs and walls

to the occasional pergola that was covered in beautiful vining flowers and other plants.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, taking in the amber light of the crystal sconces situated in strategic spots. “This place is really yours?”

Parker nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, an old family friend wanted to retire and sell this place, so I couldn’t walk away when he gave me an amazing deal. Honestly, I didn’t even update it much when I bought it. Just changed out the lighting and a few of the flowers that were less, uh... *animal friendly*.”

I caught his drift, and an amusing picture formed in my head of Mahlan and his pack out to eat but struggling with allergies and sneezing up a storm. Granted, I was pretty sure wolfsbane and other anti-shifter plants would have much more visceral reactions, but the image in my head was certainly amusing.

We walked around for a few minutes and at some point, I was able to retract my jaw back into my head. Just like Parker said, more people started to arrive until there were nearly twenty people around, most of whom I did not recognize.

But even if I didn’t know who a majority of them were, everyone greeted me with a smile, shaking my hand like I was one of them. Although it was a bit overwhelming, it was also reassuring too. Was this what a family reunion was supposed to be like? I remembered all sorts of zany sitcom episodes with similar meet-ups, and I’d always been vaguely jealous of them, even if they did seem a wee bit stressful.

Not too much later, we all sat in a back room that seemed like it was for special events, and delicious food started coming out in droves. It was like something out of a movie, and I started drooling from the start.

If anyone noticed my overworking salivary glands, no one said anything. Instead, there was drinking, eating, and all sorts of other merriment.

The only dreary part was when I overheard Jacobian tell Mahlan that he hadn’t found any record of the man that led them to the company anywhere in their system. I didn’t know what that meant but judging by Mahlan’s face, that wasn’t a good thing.

“I got another tour today, but I was told to avoid this one particular office. Apparently, the guy does local transports and is old-fashioned.”

“That’s certainly interesting. Jacobian, tell Addison to try to get around that area.”

“Yes, alpha.”

“How are your interns doing, by the way?” Emmaline asked, leaning across the table towards the stone-faced man. Although she was addressing him, her eyes were on someone else entirely. Kaleb, was it? Innnteresting.

“Acceptable,” he answered flatly. “Why?”

“Oh, you know, just trying to make conversation.”

“Hm.”

Wow, clearly the guy was the life of the party, and even more so, my boss was still eyeing probably-Kaleb. That I could get, kind of, he was handsome and filled out his sharp clothing just right. But he seemed a bit shy, not talking much except to Parker, who was just about the complete opposite.

Still, maybe I could tease her about it on Monday. Just a little good-natured ribbing and perhaps encouragement to find someone who could hold an actual conversation.

But the conversation quickly shifted away from business, and soon I heard terrible -and by that, I meant excellent- werewolf and shifter jokes. I didn't get all of them, but I didn't need to in order to laugh. And I was ready to tell my own after enough peals of mirth and a glass of wine that I shouldn't have been handed at the ripe ol' age of nineteen.

“Hey, hey, I got one!”

Several eyes turned to me, and I almost lost my nerve, but Emmaline's response kept me going.

“What is it?”

“What do werewolves eat after they get their teeth cleaned?”

Thankfully, no one corrected me that they were wolf shifters, not werewolves. Tomato, tomahto, as Emmaline liked to say.

“What do we eat?” Mahlan asked me, his eyes practically smoldering from across the table. I swallowed hard, and after a beat, I was able to remember the answer.

“The dentist!”

There was a beat of silence, and I was worried that I'd just said something offensive, but then all the shifters around me burst into laughter, the sound joyously booming.

“Haaaa! The dentist! I wish I could eat him!” Kaleb said, his smile growing even more toothy. Wait, was that something shifters could do? Why did no one tell me that was something shifters could do?

“Wait, since when have you been going to the dentist?” Emmaline asked.

“If your wolf’s not healing right?”

“Not all of us went through puberty without developing cavities, Miss Emmaline. Check your enamel privilege.”

“I can’t help that I have superior genetics,” she responded airily, making me almost inhale my wine. “Sorry your diet of Mountain Dew and Red Bull did a number on you.”

“Shhh, none of that logic tonight! This is a celebration!”

It was just so *fun* watching everyone banter around me, and after a bit longer, I realized that I was having a blast. I felt welcomed. I felt like I had a *family*. Something I never thought was possible.

And yet it was and waiting for me to accept it.

The walls within me cracked a little further, sinking into the ether. Maybe I had found where I belonged.

Only time would tell on that, I supposed. But for the moment, I just sat back and enjoyed the best dinner party I’d ever been to. I was feeling an all-time high, and I owed it to Mahlan.

Funny how that worked out.

MAHLAN

Lyssa and I headed into my place in great spirits, both of us rejuvenated by the great dinner we'd had with our pack.

I had been nervous about how my mate would feel surrounded by so many pack members, but she'd gotten on like the outback on fire. Seeing her banter back and forth with my sister was so lovely, and then she'd unloaded that terrible joke that was absolutely wonderful.

"That was amazing," Lyssa said, going straight to the fridge and grabbing one of the water bottles I'd put in there earlier. I'd noticed that she always liked to walk around with cool water in her hand, so I'd secretly been putting more and more in there to chill for her.

"I'm glad you had fun." And I really was. Although Lyssa and I were getting more comfortable around each other, there was always this underlying edge of hostility and anxiety that rested just below the surface.

And I got it, I did. I'd bitten her without consent, shoved her into a world she knew nothing about, and presented her with the idea that her parents hadn't left her because she was a bad kid but because something greater, something *magical*, was at stake.

That was a lot for anyone to swallow, let alone a nineteen-year-old woman.

And there was the age gap to consider as well. Lyssa was very independent and had fought hard to survive, making her wise beyond her years. But the truth was that she was just out of high school and not even twenty while I was twenty-six. I had experienced things like college and running my own successful business. Could I blame her for wanting to go

through those kinds of things too?

It was a mess, and for the millionth time, I wished it could have been different. But at the same time, I wouldn't give it up for anything. Lyssa was meant to be in my life. I knew that as much as I needed oxygen to breathe and the moon to give thanks to.

"I did! But like, seriously, thank you. I know I'm still getting my bearings with everything, but that dinner was, like... well, it was what I needed. It let me know there's a space I can carve out in this weird wolf world of yours."

Although I tried not to touch her without direct permission, it was like a rope yanked me toward her. I slid my arm around her waist, looking deep into those lovely eyes of hers.

"You have no idea how happy that makes me."

"Oh, but I think I do. And just know, I'm not ungrateful or taking it lightly. I can tell you really care about me, even if it terrifies me out of my mind."

"I do," I murmured, my face drawing closer to hers. God, she smelled good. So good. The perfect blend of jasmine flower, chamomile, and something else made me want to bury my nose against her skin and smell her heaven. "I care about you more than I ever thought possible."

I could hear her heartbeat kick up a notch, an excited flush creeping up her neck and staining her cheeks. God, she looked so beautiful. Did she have any idea what a masterpiece she was? How perfectly sculpted her features were only to be brought to life by the sparking energy in her gaze.

"Mahlan..."

That was my undoing. All it took was her breathless whisper of my name, and I was crashing my lips to hers.

It was as devouring as it was worshipful, and I hoped she could feel how much she moved every part of me — mind, heart, inner wolf, and my very soul. I wanted to learn her, to feel every part of her like the goddess she was. I wanted to drown her in pleasure and likewise succumb myself until we were so wrapped up in each other that we were one.

Her arms wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me closer, and I went willingly. I could feel myself getting carried away, but I didn't care. My body craved her in ways I'd denied for far too long. Not that I wouldn't keep denying them. I would cut off my hand before I took away Lyssa's choice again. But with her in my arms, pressing her form to me, I couldn't help but think that perhaps, just perhaps, she was willing to complete our mating

bond.

The thought made my heart leap, and my body responded instinctively. I could feel myself hardening and I knew she could too. She had to with how it was straining for her, craving her as viscerally as my wolf craved the moon.

I broke away from her lips practically gasping, but when I looked down at her face and saw how they were kiss-swollen, red, and slick, it made me dive in again. My hands slid down her body, almost questioning until she ground her rear into my palms.

That was an invitation if I ever felt one, and I gripped both globes of her ass, hauling her up. She went with the movement, her legs wrapping around my waist. She was still too thin for her frame, I could tell her body wanted to put on more weight, but she'd already come a long way with the steady meals I'd been cooking. Her body edges were smoothing out, her muscles were getting the support they needed, and most importantly, she had more energy. Which just drew me to her even more.

My inner wolf was thrilled to see its mate happy, healthy and flourishing, even if it didn't understand why the mating wasn't completed and why we weren't trying to put pups in her belly.

Oh, that was certainly a mental image.

"I want you," I growled into her mouth, feeling my canines starting to pronounce themselves. She was quite literally driving me wild, and I didn't want it to stop.

"You have me," she whispered, voice ragged. And *oh*, if that wasn't a phrase I'd been waiting my whole life to hear.

I didn't even think, didn't plan; my body just propelled us down the hall as I made tiny little love bites in a line down her neck, stopping only when I reached her claiming bite.

It had healed prettily, the bruise fading from a violet purple to greens and blues until it finally reached a subtle yellow, but the raised scar was still there. My whole body yearned for her to bite me in kind, to seal the deal consensually and with joy.

Kicking the door open, I laid her out on my bed, blood rushing so hard I was surprised I didn't combust right then and there. Lyssa landed gracefully, her hair splaying across my dark sheets as her arms raised to me.

I wanted to ravish her. I wanted to snap her up and show her the unchecked wildness my inner wolf longed to unleash. But at the same time, I knew that I couldn't.

Because if we kept going, it wasn't about me. It couldn't be. Sealing our mating bond would be all about Lyssa. Every need of hers, every desire, I would fulfill or die trying.

"You're in control here," I murmured, looking over her beautiful form. She was art. Living, breathing art, and she was in *my* bed. "We don't go any further than you want. You say stop, we stop immediately — no questions asked."

A look of surprise crossed her blissed-out features, and she sat up slightly. "R-really?"

Something in her voice made me pause, and the raging libido faded ever so slightly. Concerned, I knelt on the floor in front of the bed so we were face to face.

"I'm completely serious, Lyssa. I know I took away your choice in getting into all this, but I swore I'd never do that again."

"What if I never want to have sex?"

Ugh, that was an awful idea, but it was a reality I'd always been aware of. "It would... complicate things, but that would be your choice, and I would respect it. No matter how much my inner wolf is screaming, I'd never take you without your permission."

Apparently, that was the right thing to say because the next thing I knew, she was the one kissing me.

But it was different than the previous one. It wasn't biting, demanding, or full of fire. No, it was something else entirely. Sweet. Soft. And more than a bit tenuous. It was full of both questions and trust. My entire life could pass without another kiss, and I would still die happy.

When we broke apart, her cheeks were practically crimson, and she muttered something even I couldn't hear with my advanced wolf senses.

"What was that?" I murmured, brushing her hair out of her face and encouraging her to lift her chin to look at me.

"I've never done this before."

"Sealing a mating bond?" I offered her a slight chuckle that I hoped was comforting. "Well, that's understandable."

"No, I, uh, I mean..." she trailed off, somehow turning even redder and that's when it clicked.

A million different thoughts flew through me at once. Incredulousness. Desire. Shock. Doubt. Intrigue. They all combined in a volatile rush, and I had to fight to keep my voice steady.

“Lyssa, are you trying to say you’re a virgin?”

She nodded, her face practically a beacon, and looked like she wanted to disappear into the floor. For a moment, I didn’t know what to say. Suddenly, I was worried that I was taking advantage. But also, my wolf was very keen on the idea that we would be the only ones to ever have her. Our darling mate would know no other touch but ours — would experience pleasure at no other hands.

“We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready. I’m serious.”

“But... but I wanna,” she whispered, looking up at me through her thick lashes. “I’ll tell you if I get scared or want to stop, but right now, something in me is literally cursing me out for distracting you.”

I smiled a slow, wicked grin. That sounded like her inner wolf for sure. As if puberty wasn’t enough, the first year or so as a shifter was always rough. Our inner beasts loved freedom, lust, and the hunt, demanding at least one of the three daily.

“Let’s quiet that voice then.”

I gave her a soft, quick kiss on the lips once before trailing down her neck, making sure to lave attention on her mating bite as I went past. Lyssa sighed dreamily, her body relaxing against mine. Once more, her arms encircled my neck, her fingers gently playing with the hair at the base of my neck.

Fuck, if that didn’t send goosebumps spreading across my skin in a hedonistic wave. My blood picked up its pace, racing through my veins, but I forced myself to go slow. We only had a first time once, and I would cherish every single second of it. Not a breath, not a single sigh, would go unaccounted for and untreasured. I could live to be centuries old, like the ancient shifters, and I wanted to make sure I could still recall this night with perfect clarity.

I kissed along the line of Lyssa’s shoulder, moving aside the strap so my teeth could graze against her soft, perfect skin. Her scent was even thicker this close to her, coaxing me in like a siren. Except I made no effort to ignore the call; I was a sailor more intent to crash upon the rocks of her isle and let her devour me whole.

“I can smell you are getting wet,” I growled against her skin, voice so low I was surprised she could even hear it. But she most certainly did, judging by how her heart skipped a beat and her nails bit into the back of my neck.

Oh! So close to a mating bite but not quite, and that just made the heat

within me burn hotter.

“Lyssa.” Somehow, I managed to get her name out, the word delicious and scalding along my tongue.

“Yes?” she whispered. Her voice tore my attention away from her neck, and I looked at her gorgeous face only to have my breath taken away entirely.

She was a vision — there was no other word for it. Her cheeks were vibrant red with desire, those eyes of hers were half-lidded, her lips still bruised from our kissing. She looked so thoroughly debauched that I just wanted to ruin her *more*.

“Has anyone ever tasted you?”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, her eyes going wide, before shaking her head. “Um, no. Some making out, heavy petting outside of my underwear, some clothed grinding, but that’s it.”

I admired her ability to be so articulate when I felt like I was one ounce of lust away from going completely nonverbal.

“I really, *really* would enjoy that right now,” I whispered, trying to keep my tone more human than beast. “Would you let me?”

“Are you s-s-sure?”

I straightened until our faces were barely a breath away, my lips almost tracing hers. “I would love nothing more to have your thighs clamp around my head until the neighbors complain about how many times they had to hear you scream your orgasm.”

“O-oh!”

Yeah, that had definitely gotten my intention across.

“Okay, y-yeah. You can t-try.”

I watched her face to ensure she didn’t agree out of fear, pulling myself back from the feral edge so I could scent any ketones around her. But no, although she seemed plenty nervous, her eyes were still bright with desire, and I could sharply smell just how wet she was for me.

“Let’s get these out of the way then, shall we?” I patted at her dress. It had looked lovely on her, complementing her skin and the strength of her body, but it would look much better on my floor. Lyssa nodded, biting her lip, and I had no idea how I didn’t tear the dress in two right then and there. But with a lot of control, I managed to wiggle it down her body, then throw it to the side.

Only to be greeted by teal, silken panties that I had *not* been expecting. They weren’t the most dolled-up thing on the face of the earth, with no bows

and no real frills. But some cutouts were filled with black lace and attached garters that went down to her thigh-highs.

Well, I'd suddenly found a new fetish.

I'd been sure she was just wearing stockings when she'd first arrived at the restaurant, but now I saw the wonderful visual present she'd given me. Had she planned all of this? Or was it just some bleed-over from Emmaline's style?

Ew. I was *not* going to think about my sister in the bedroom. Gross.

Banishing that thought, I returned to Lyssa at the center of my attention. And she deserved all of my attention, that was for certain.

I slid my hands up those legs of hers, enjoying the feel of her soft skin. My lips followed soon after, kissing a trail up one thigh and then the other. She was trembling as I placed a kiss right below her belly button, then slowly trailed down to the very top of her entrance.

"Ready?" I murmured, looking over her body at her. God, I wanted to burn that sight into my memories. Speechless, she nodded, and I finally pressed my lips down to her.

A soft gasp escaped her, urging me onwards. I started tenderly, so tenderly, with gentle pecks, before adding my tongue. That time another gasp escaped her, louder, and her fingers wound themselves through my hair.

"That's it," I purred, a furor building within me. "Hold on for the ride."

I parted her legs farther before hooking one of her knees over my shoulder, giving me better access. She was just as beautiful there as she was everywhere else, a pretty pink that was shiny with her slick. The smell was outright intoxicating, and it was all I could do not to go completely feral.

But I kept myself in check. It was her first time, so I wanted to make it something memorable. So instead of losing myself to my animal, I kissed, licked, and nibbled, working her up further and further until she was practically dripping for me.

"I'm going to touch you now, baby girl. Remember, you say when this stops."

She let out the most adorable, kitten-like mewl and I was lost to her. I sealed my lips around that sensitive bundle of nerves at her core, my tongue playing with it while my fingers gently slid between her folds.

"*Mahlan!*"

I paused for a moment, worried I'd gone too far, but one look at her blissed-out expression told me that she wasn't objecting. No, quite the

opposite. Well, that was all the encouragement I needed to keep on going.

I listened as she moaned, writhing against my touch, dripping into my hand. She was delectable, perfect in every way. I put my everything into coaxing ounce after ounce of pleasure from her. I loved every breath, every whimper, all of it. And when I noticed the tremble of her thigh pressed against the side of my head, I lifted her other leg to join its partner over my shoulder.

I pressed further, practically bending her in half as I worked her over. Curling my fingers just so, Lyssa bucked hard into my mouth while also yanking at my hair. I groaned at the sensation, that must have been precisely what Lyssa needed, orgasming around my fingers.

By the moon, the first wolf, everything else holy, that was possibly the most erotic moment in my entire life. My pulse was pounding in my ears, my body crying out for her.

“Oh my God, Mahlan,” Lyssa breathed.

“I’m just getting started, darling.”

Standing, I undid my belt, my eyes never leaving her form. That pretty flush on her face had spread down to her perfect breasts, which were heaving from her climax. If it were any other time, I might have taken a picture. But it wasn’t the right time or place.

“I want you,” Lyssa breathed, reaching out to me. I was already motivated to hurry, but that was the final straw. I ripped the rest of my clothing off, kneeling on the edge of the mattress.

“You have me in every way you could possibly think of.”

I kissed her, our tongues sliding against each other as I arranged the rest of her body. She felt so *right* pressed against me. Her body was so soft, a welcoming bed I wanted to sink into.

My hands roved her body, memorizing her form. I wanted to touch every single bit of her, to map her out until I knew her better than I knew myself. My callused fingers traipsed an indulgent path along her limbs, drunk on the feel of it.

“I’m scared,” Lyssa whispered, her voice the faintest of sounds.

“Then we don’t have to go any farther than this.”

“Really? You’d be okay with that?”

I could only imagine what ridiculous stories she’d heard about blue balls and other immature things in high school. “Yes. We don’t take this a single step further than you want to. If you want to stop here, we stop here. Not a

single complaint from me.”

Lyssa stared at me for a long moment, and despite my raging libido, I waited for her to speak. “I want you to kiss me again.”

“I can do that.”

And so I did, lips crashing to hers, claiming her in all the ways I hoped she longed to be claimed. My senses were consumed by her, the sound of her, the smell, the taste of her. All of it. I kissed her longer than I’d ever kissed anyone else.

It was magic, pure and simple. I was loath to break away, but all kisses — even the sweetest ones — had to end.

“How was that?” I murmured, nosing against her jaw.

“*Perfect*,” she breathed, making my heart sing. That was exactly what I wanted to hear. “I...”

“Yes?”

“I want to seal the mating pact. I want you to take me.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. I am. One hundred percent.”

Her permission was the last thing I needed, my inner wolf seizing the reins and mouthing at her bite. Lyssa let out a sharp gasp, arching against me, and I used that moment to settle both of us into a better position.

Gripping myself, I lined up with her dripping entrance, watching her face. Gods, she was gorgeous. Beautiful. Everything I could ever want and more.

“Deep breath,” I warned, gently stroking her hip, my thumbs dragging in jagged little circles.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I pushed forward. Although I wanted to thrust into her with all my wild might, I held back. She deserved tenderness and consideration. No more pain for my beautiful mate. Not unless she wanted it, that was.

But even with her orgasm and all that natural slickness, she was still sinfully tight. I couldn’t hurry, couldn’t even slip for a moment — which was hard to do considering the hot, velvet squeeze of her.

“God, Lyssa,” I breathed, my other free hand going to that bundle of nerves, coaxing that in circles. My mate bucked again into me, taking in several inches in the process.

“Holy crap, Mahlan!”

But her cry wasn’t a shriek of pain or even indignation. No, it was drenched in pleasure, practically begging me for more.

And I had more to give her.

Gripping her tighter, I slid further in. Then further, until finally, I was entirely inside her, the fluttering of her walls enveloped my cock. I stilled, allowing her to adjust to me.

“How’s that, baby girl?” I practically snarled, forcing my hips not to flex into her. This was no small feat when my body was screaming out to rut into her.

But she was worth every ounce of restraint and then some, so I managed to wait until she began to wiggle against me.

“What’s the matter?” I teased, dipping my head down so I could graze my teeth over her bite mark.

“Want more,” she begged, her arms wrapping around me. “I’m ready.”

The magic words. They unleashed something in me, and my first full surge into her was nothing like anything I’d ever felt. It was paradise in motion, the burning, devouring flames of sin. It was cloud nine to the tenth power.

And it was all mine.

“Oh my God,” Lyssa breathed, clinging even more tightly to me, her nails making ten little exhilarating pinpricks along my back. I still kept control of my thrusts, but I established a steady, demanding rhythm. One that barely satiated my near rabid inner wolf.

But finally, *finally*, after so much time, we were joined together as mates should be. It was like a nagging, festering wound had been miraculously healed, leaving only desire, joy, and even *love*.

It was too soon, and I knew it was too soon, yet I could feel myself falling in love with her. I adored Lyssa, from the way her body reacted to mine, to her witty sense of humor, to her driven personality. She was my mate, through and through.

“Are you going to howl for me? Going to make the neighbors complain?”

“I don’t know if I can so soon....”

That was a challenge if I ever heard one.

“We’ll see about that.”

One of my hands slid between us, returning to her folds. There I teased her, feeling what kind of pressure and speed she liked as I thrust into her.

Slow, even, and deep strokes, I was lost in her. In *us*. Every cell of my body was lit up by the pleasure we shared, but I wanted *more*. I wanted her to let go again and again until she forgot what it was like to be stressed.

But for tonight, we would settle for two.

I was determined, so when I shifted my hips and she let out another keening mewl, I chased that sweet spot within her. Her body reacted quickly, and I could feel the change within her as she massaged my length.

“That’s it, baby girl. Chase that high. You can do it.”

“I... I... I-”

Lyssa cut herself off, her mouth going to my neck, where I felt her teeth bite into me.

Holy.

Shit.

Endorphins flooded me so hard that I was surprised I wasn’t propelled into space. It rushed through me in a deluge of ecstasy, so all I could do was hold on and ride it out.

Thankfully, my body didn’t stop while my brain quickly ascended to a new plane of reality. I kept rocking within Lyssa while she orgasmed, trying to take in every expression, breath, and hitch in her voice.

If it weren’t for the need to eat and drink, I would have kept Lyssa in bed forever just to see that over and over again. But since that wasn’t physically possible, I just let myself experience the moment.

But then Lyssa’s teeth left my neck, and the way she drug them across the wound had my pleasure spiking. The next thing I knew, my climax hit me with full force, adding to the rush from Lyssa’s bite. It was all so much, but I loved it, and I knew the moment would stay with me for the rest of my life.

“Mahlan...” Lyssa murmured, sounding like she didn’t know whether she wanted to laugh or cry. So naturally, I kissed her as softly and sweetly as possible. Sleep was quickly overtaking me, but I knew better than to drift off without making sure my beloved mate was all right.

“You are incredible,” I murmured, pressing more kisses over her face — those cute cheeks, the tip of her nose, her forehead. I peppered her with them until she finally giggled.

“You’re just saying that because you came.”

“I’m saying that because it’s true.” I gave one last peck on her lips. “Do you need anything? Water? A snack?”

She giggled again, rolling onto her side, patting the mattress behind her. “I just want you to hold me for a while.”

“I can most certainly do that.” Cuddling up to her back, I draped one arm over her and pulled her flush with me. Contentment filled my brain, and I

drifted into a blissful sleep while holding my mate.



I WOKE UP FEELING INCREDIBLE; I couldn't remember why for a moment. But the previous night came flooding back, and a very satisfied smile bloomed across my features.

Happiness bubbled through me, I reached out to cuddle with my mate only to find her side of the bed empty. Alarm cut through the thick, syrupy contentment I was feeling, but then my brain pointed out that the shower was running.

Right. Of course, Lyssa would want to clean herself after our surprise coupling.

...Wait, my mate was naked in a steaming shower! What was I doing still in bed?

That was plenty of motivation to get up and head in there, but right as I opened the door, the shower turned off. Drat.

“Oh, did you need something?” Lyssa said, peeking out from the shower looking all freshly scrubbed and red-faced. While I appreciated her adorable expression, my inner wolf was upset that she'd washed off our scent. It argued succinctly — with mental images to boot — that I should pick her up, carry her to the bed, and make her smell claimed all over again. I resisted, of course.

Somehow.

“Just wanted to check in,” I said casually like I hadn't busted a beeline to the bathroom to catch a peek, or a handful, of her back end. Instead, I went to where I kept my toothbrush and started up my normal morning hygiene routine. “How are you?”

Lyssa stepped out of the shower and pressed a soft kiss to my arm. Yet again, I was struck by the sheer domesticity of it, the type of comfortableness that felt so damn assuring.

“I have to go to work,” she said, sending me a wry smile.

“About that,” I started, a memory floating back to the forefront of my mind. “Emmaline texted me late last night that she was closing the shop today.”

“What? Really?”

I nodded. “Seemed like she might have had a hot date.”

“Oh, did Kaleb finally come out of his shell and take a bite of what she was offering?”

I stopped in the middle of brushing, head whipping towards her. “Did who do *what* now?”

“Kaleb, ya know, the one she was clearly mooning over.”

I stared at her for at least three hours and twenty-seven minutes. Or maybe just thirty seconds, it was hard to say. “My sister does *not* have a crush on Kaleb.” The whole idea was shocking to me. Kaleb was the second youngest of our crew and, as far as I knew, had about as much interest in romance as he did in the life cycles of Argentinian cockroaches. That is to say... about none at all.

And Emmaline was an insanely occupied woman. She was so driven by running her own business and all the charities she volunteered for that she never really had time to waste on men. I also wasn't entirely sure she liked *only* men, which wouldn't be a problem for me, but I would understand if she was nervous about our somewhat conservative parents finding out.

So yeah, the idea of the two being together in any sort of capacity sounded about as plausible as there being werewolf-alien hybrids on the moon.

“Sure, whatever you say,” Lyssa said in a way that clearly meant the opposite.

“Right, let's table that for a moment. Instead, how about we discuss what I want to show you.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“You'll just have to see.”

“You sure do love your mysteries, don't you?”

“What can I say? I'm a fan of suspense.”

“All right, do I get to know what I should wear?”

“Something casual, or sportswear. Stuff you can move around in.”

Lyssa bit her lip and goodness, that was enough to make me want to pick her up right then and there to go to the mattress. Funny how that was the second time that urge had come on since I had woken up. It was like being a horny teenager all over again.

“I dunno. I think I moved around just fine last night in nothing at all.”

She was teasing me and I *loved* it. Much as my inner wolf loved the thrill of the hunt, I loved the thrill of a brat. “You're welcome to wear exactly as

little as you wore last night, but I don't guarantee I won't be... inspired by your getup."

"Noted," she said, standing on tiptoes to press a kiss to my cheek. "Athleisure it is."

I watched her go before realizing I was still holding my toothbrush like a doof. Right, I should probably get on with that.

Regaining my sanity, I finished up my morning routine and got dressed. My stomach wasn't ready for a full meal, but as a wolf, I knew my metabolism would punish me if I tried to go for any sort of hike with an empty stomach. So instead, I made Lyssa and myself breakfast shakes with protein powder, fresh bananas, strawberries, and pineapples, then some of the supplemental powder for pregnant women that also worked surprisingly well for shifters on the go.

"Uh..." I turned, the container in hand, to find Lyssa staring at me critically as she spoke. "Is there something you wanna tell me?"

There was a beat where I didn't get it, but then realization hit. "No, no, this isn't a hint or anything. It's just that it's really easy for shifters to get malnourished, especially this close to the full moon, and this is full of stuff that helps. And, ya know, keeps our coats healthy."

"What, are you kidding me?"

I shook my head, finishing scooping out the stuff. It didn't smell bad as I used it, but it didn't quite smell good either, so I usually tried to hurry through the middle process. "Folic acid, vitamin D, calcium, vitamin C, a bunch of other stuff. But most importantly is riboflavin."

"Riboflavin?"

"Yeah, it's a chemical from meat and one that our type of shifter needs a lot of. And considering how expensive meat is in the supermarket, and how hard it is to hunt around here in wolf form, we need all the extra help we can get."

I finally hit the button on the blender, studying Lyssa as she studied the shake. I could see that she was thinking hard, but I couldn't determine what about.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I said as I finished and started pouring it into our chilled thermoses.

"Just amused, I guess, by all the science behind this."

I raised an eyebrow, eager to know more about how that clever mind of hers worked. "Can you elaborate?"

“Well, you turn into a wolf, and I’ve literally met a witch who did actual magic right in front of me. All of that is enchanted otherworldly stuff. But like, using prenatal vitamins because our current environment doesn’t properly provide for you guys’ diets... well, that’s all science. It’s practical.”

“You know, I’ve always said that magic is just science we don’t entirely understand yet.”

Lyssa grinned, reaching out to take the baby blue thermos over the deep purple one. Was that her favorite color? Suddenly that fact seemed very important to my brain, and it squirreled the clue away for the next time I wanted to buy her a present. “I like that.”

“I’m glad.” Grabbing my thermos, I crossed to the door to put on my shoes. “You ready to head out?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

We headed out to my car, Lyssa happily slurping away at the shake I made her. Her evident pleasure with the drink pleased me, making my inner wolf puff out its chest every time he felt he’d provided appropriately for his mate.

Our mate. I reminded it firmly.

That was the complicated part of being a shifter. I was just as much my wolf as he was me, but we were also different. My humanity ruled me while he was ruled by his bestiality. Neither of us was better or wrong, but obviously, I was more suited to integrate into society, which put me at an unfair advantage compared to my inner wolf. Part of being a responsible alpha was dealing with that complexity and knowing how to balance both properly. If I became off-kilter, I could bring my entire pack with me.

I would have to explain that to Lyssa eventually, but it wasn’t time yet. Not when she hadn’t even approached her first shift. Although I was hoping that our shared bites would help break whatever magic was locking her up inside.

The thought of the bite had me glancing in my rearview mirror, spotting the light red mark on the side of my neck.

Gorgeous.

It wasn’t something I often thought about myself, but there was no denying that the faint mark was exactly that. It wasn’t nearly as bruised or intense as mine had been on Lyssa’s neck, but that made sense considering I was an alpha and experienced shifter while her wolf was trapped somewhere in the void. Her incisors couldn’t grow like mine, nor could her canines, and

she didn't have the exaggerated strength that so many shifters had.

But it didn't matter if it was lighter on me, and my accelerated healing was already working to erase most of the harm. What mattered was that she had done it of her own free will. I didn't even have to ask or suggest it, which meant somewhere in her was the raw instinct that told her that was something she should do.

And that was promising. *Real* promising in a way that made me even more sure we would be able to help my mate become whole.

It wasn't a long trip to where we were going, although Lyssa did seem surprised when we completely left town.

"Are we going on a road trip?"

"No, we're almost there."

I was pleased when she nodded and settled back in her seat, looking out the window and excitedly pointing out every cow herd and horse we passed.

It was then that I realized she probably had never left the city. As a pickpocket who traveled by foot or bus, there wasn't exactly a plethora of targets in the suburbs or countryside. Maybe I should arrange a little road trip for us. Once things calmed down, of course.

A few moments later, I saw the usual hunting trail where plenty of pickup trucks would go off-road and drive down it. I was well aware that my car was not the usual vehicle that took the dirt road, but it handled it fine.

"Uh, are we reenacting a horror movie or something?" Lyssa asked as I parked between two willow trees, whose branches did a good job of obscuring my car.

"No, I just wanted to show one of our pack's favorite running areas."

"Wait, you guys actually run around here?"

"Well, not here specifically. Too many hunters. But this is the path we take to get to the area."

"Huh, okay. That makes sense, I guess. I suppose with everything going on, I haven't exactly thought much about the practicalities of you guys' situation."

"It can be confusing, I know. Honestly, the more advanced the world becomes, the harder and harder it is to stay a secret. I wouldn't be surprised if multiple covens are casting all sorts of hexes, spells, and blessings to keep us under wraps."

"But why be under wraps?" Lyssa asked, following along beside me. "You're stronger than humans, and you have incredible powers. And it's not

like we're doing a good job taking care of the planet."

I shrugged. "I think you underestimate just how powerful and foolish humans can be. They would probably nuke the whole planet rather than let a different species live in peace. Just look at what they've done to each other for being different religions or races."

"Okay, I see your logic there." Lyssa sighed, looking around at the trees that were quickly surrounding us, cutting us off from the hubbub and light pollution of the modern world. "I... I guess it would be nice if more places were like this."

"Wouldn't it?" I agreed, taking in a deep breath. I'd mostly become desensitized to the acrid smells of the city, but leaving it always reminded me of the stink of it all. The vile odor of scalding blacktop, the pungent heaviness of gasoline. Exhaust from cars. Human waste. And that was without me getting started on the brewery or tire factory. I wished I could live further out from all of that, but as an alpha, I needed to stay closer to the heart of our territory in the city. Vacating would put it at too much risk of being snatched up by another pack.

"Why are you showing me this?" Lyssa asked after a while.

"I want you to know everything there is to know about our pack. How can I expect you to want to be a part of our family if you don't understand it?"

"I... I really appreciate that, Mahlan."

"Of course. I know things didn't start out the best between us, but despite that, I really do want what's best *for* you."

"I'm starting to believe that. Even though I know I probably shouldn't, I do."

I reached out for her hand and was delighted when she intertwined her fingers with mine. "I'm sorry about the bite, really. But I will never be sorry about you coming into my life."

She nodded, giving me a small, sweet smile, and on we walked.

For a while, we just listened to the sounds of nature. The running water from hidden brooks, the birds calling out in their twittering languages. Wind rustling through leaves and squirrels having very heated conversations about whatever nuts they got excited about.

It was so peaceful, so serene. I really should go on the trail more than once a month, but it was challenging to find the time.

"I think I heard someone mention an alma at dinner," Lyssa said. "What's that?"

I was pleased she was curious and attentive enough to ask a question, not just have me lecture her. “An alma is sort of a matron or healing figure. She helps raise a lot of the pack, helps with healing, and ensures our culture is properly passed down between generations.”

“So, like Ellibie?”

I chuckled slightly. “I can see how you’d make that connection, but no. Ellibie is the gay auntie who everyone loves but never had any kids herself.”

“Oh, she’s gay?”

I shrugged. “Not that I know of, but she could be. I think she’s just not romantically inclined.”

“Like asexual?”

“Maybe? Human sexuality doesn’t always compare to wolf sexuality.”

“How so?”

“Well, as far as I understand, almost every human has the capacity to want to reproduce. There are exceptions, like asexuals, demisexuals, or people with trauma, but the instinct is there in the majority.”

“But not with wolves?”

I shook my head. “Alphas, some betas, and most omegas have very strong drives to reproduce, but other designations tend not to. It’s part of what makes a pack structure healthier. If all of us were trying to procreate, it would produce too many pups and incapacitate too many members at once. I mean, the phrase ‘it takes a village’ is popular for a reason. So while I have the urge to have pups, Ellibie doesn’t. She *physically* can, which is a failsafe to ensure pack survival if the worst happens, but the drive just isn’t there. She’d much rather work as a nanny and back up alma while being one of the best mechanics around.”

“Wow, that’s so fascinating,” Lyssa said. “So it’s just alphas, some betas, and omegas that have sex?”

I turned to her with wide eyes. “What? No! We’re all *people*, Lyssa. Plenty of us like to have sex. And a lot of it.” After all, our inner wolves tended to lean towards the uncomplicated, hedonistic side of food, fighting, and fucking. “It’s just that the obsession with reproduction isn’t a drive most wolves have.”

“Oh, okay. I mixed up what you meant, but I get it now.” She let out a soft chuckle. “I’ve known some dude-bros who were all obsessed with alphas and betas, but this doesn’t sound like any of that.”

I let out a snort that was less than gracious. “Those boys are idiots. That

theory has been disproved a million times, and even its originator hates it. He realized he'd been observing captive wolves whose forced pack structures differed completely from naturally formed ones."

"Wait, really? Why is that theory still so believed then?"

"Some men just need any excuse to treat other people like shit."

"Ain't that the truth."

We shared a laugh; no doubt we had our own stories. But I didn't feel the need to tell her any then, not wanting to disrupt the lovely peace around us with all the turmoil from being a functioning member of society.

Our conversation dipped in and out from that point, but none of it was awkward. The silences were contented and natural, and it was smooth and comfortable when we did talk. Lyssa asked whatever she wanted about wolves and the history of our pack, while I did my best to answer and update her on anything important I thought she should know.

Time slipped by quickly, and our breakfast shakes were long since devoured by the time we reached the drop-off to our true destination.

"Is this safe?" Lyssa asked nervously, looking down the muddy incline.

"With me, yes. Hunters don't go past this point, and they travel west instead to more even ground. Down at the bottom of this ravine and through a hill is where most of us prefer to shift."

Lyssa's eyes went as wide as saucers. "Are you going to shift?"

I could hear the trepidation in her voice, but I nodded anyway. "I thought it would be good for you to experience me as a wolf. Outside of the heated battle we met in."

"Met is a pretty strong word for what happened. I saw an animal explode out of you and ran for dear life."

I winced at that. She wasn't wrong, but it wasn't the usual start of a great romance.

"Yeah, so I'd prefer that not be your only impression of my wolf side."

"Okay, I get that, but I won't promise I won't be nervous."

"That's totally understandable. I just ask that you give me a chance." That she *trusts* me.

"...All right."

It wasn't the most enthusiastic 'yes' I'd ever gotten, but it was enough. Offering my hand again, I helped her down the incline, being careful to make sure every foothold was a solid one. When we were down on the ground, I led her through the cave my pack and I had traveled through so many times,

then out into a thicket of pines and spruce trees.

“Oh my God,” Lyssa murmured when we emerged. “It smells amazing here! Even better than where we started.”

“It’s the needles and sap,” I answered, unable to stop myself from smiling crookedly at her pleased expression.

“Wow, it’s incredible!”

“I think so.”

We walked to the middle of it before I let her hand go, taking a few more steps away.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah, yeah, I am.”

“It won’t be quite like that first time. I had to shift quickly because it was an extreme situation, but that’s pretty painful, so I try to avoid it.”

I could hear her heart jump even from where I was standing. “You were hurt?”

“No, not literally. It’s just shifting that violently can be painful and leaves us a bit sore, that’s all.”

Lyssa crossed her arms, almost like she was outright pouting. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You’d gone through a lot that day. It didn’t exactly seem relevant.”

“Well, it is to me!”

I smiled toothily, giving her a wink that made her cheeks color brightly in the way that I loved. “Good to know.”

Before she could continue, I concentrated, calling out my inner wolf. He was more than happy to slide into control, and I felt my body begin to warp.

Shifting wasn’t painful when done properly and not rushed, like in some movies. At least not literally, but there was a sort of... discomfort to it. I’d long since grown used to it, but I remembered my first few had been rough. There was the skin stretching as our bones changed, then the itch of fur spreading across my body in thick waves.

Then there was the sharpening of the senses. As shifters, we all had heightened senses, but it was dialed up to eleven once we were in our complete animal forms. And it wasn’t a smooth transition either, but more like abruptly being launched into the sun. Except the sun also smelled just as much as it was bright.

But then, once the transformation was over, there was peace — a sort of rightness that I didn’t have in my human form. I stood there a moment once

my shift was done, letting everything wash over me until I was reminded of Lyssa's presence by her rapidly beating heart.

I couldn't speak to her, not with her inner wolf barred by whatever spell she was under, so I settled down on my haunches.

"Mahlan?" she murmured. I hated that she did indeed sound nervous, but her scent wasn't completely inundated with fear, so that would have to be enough.

I snorted, nodding as best I could, considering my current anatomy. Slowly, painfully slowly, Lyssa came closer. And closer. And closer still until she was within reaching distance.

But I stayed still, very aware that I was nearly as tall as her when I was on four legs. And I weighed at least twice as much as she did, equipped with razor claws and teeth that were plenty sharp.

"I'm gonna... I'm going to pet you."

Well, that certainly wasn't a phrase that I often heard, but I allowed it, tilting my head downward. Sure, I'd been licked or groomed plenty of times during pack runs and other bonding times, but it was another thing entirely being petted by a human hand.

Her touch was tentative at first, barely even a breath. But as the seconds passed, she pressed more firmly, her palm sinking into my coat.

"Oh my gosh, your coat is so *thick!*"

I outright preened at that, figuring she wasn't familiar enough with wolf physical communication to call me on my cockiness. Who was laughing at those prenatal supplements now?

"I thought it would be rougher," she murmured, her fingers moving away from the center of my head to behind one of my ears. If she could hear my wolf communication, I might have chided her that I wasn't a dog. But that turned out to be a good thing because the moment she started petting that sensitive area, I was suddenly inundated with all sorts of pleasant sensations.

"Oh! Your tail is wagging!"

It most certainly was *not!* I was a proud alpha! A warrior and guardian to my people. I'd won battles, slain foes, and, oh, *oh*, if she'd just go a little to the right....

We spent a good fifteen minutes like that, her petting me all over and me turning into a gooey puddle. Eventually, however, I managed to get to my feet with a huff.

"You're just a big puppy, aren't you?"

That wouldn't do at all. I huffed again before leaping into the air over her head, rebounding off a tree and vaulting over her yet again. Then I ran, and ran, then turned on a dime and raced back to Lyssa. I slid to a controlled stop and gave her a look that I was sure translated even in wolf form.

"Okay, okay, you don't have to show off. I get that you're a big, strong wolfie-wolf. Color me impressed."

She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around my neck in a hug. I froze, as that was about the last thing I expected. But the moment was saccharine between us, so I didn't budge her.

"Can we go for a walk? With you like this?"

I chuffed happily, switching from foot to foot. Lyssa seemed to get that was a positive answer and laughed.

"All right, lead the way Mr. Wolfman."

And so, we walked together, me as a wolf and Lyssa as a human. It was surprisingly lovely, and I felt incredibly accepted by her. It also gave me plenty of hope that I was bang on the money with her being a wolf shifter. It might as well have been tattooed on her forehead.

The minutes slipped by surprisingly quickly, and before I knew it, my inner wolf was pretty concerned by how hungry it was growing. But it wasn't until I heard Lyssa's stomach rumble that I realized it was time to go.

I gave her a little nudge with my snout before moving ahead. Lyssa paused, shooting me a quizzical look, but let me be.

The act of going from wolf to human was not much different from its opposite, but also nothing like it at all. Instead of the itch of gaining hair, it was the sudden chill of losing hair. Bones still shifted, but skin shrank instead of stretched. Organs rearranged themselves, teeth receded, and my senses dulled.

"Oh..." Lyssa murmured once I stood.

"Was that too much?" I asked, concern lancing through me.

"No, not at all. It's just, uh," she blushed, and I couldn't help but be incredibly curious. "I didn't expect you to be wearing clothing."

It wasn't the strangest thing to assume, but something about her expression and how she said it had me bursting into unchecked laughter.

"What? I'm just saying... you literally transformed into a wolf. You should be nude!"

Her indignancy was golden, and I let myself ride out the mirth, thoroughly enjoying her mock-tiff. Once I was able to speak again, I looped

my arm over her shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze.

“How about we go get some dinner?”

That calmed her down, and she gave me a beaming smile. “I thought you’d never ask.”



“So, I was wondering, since you’ve had more time to understand us, and what being in a pack is like, are you more interested in finding out what’s suppressing your inner wolf?”

Perhaps that wasn’t the best thing to ask while sharing a family-style chicken and broccoli Alfredo at an Italian restaurant, but I was curious. Between the previous night and our earlier hike, it felt like something had shifted between Lyssa and me, pun thoroughly unintended.

“...Yeah. I don’t think I’m a wolf. I certainly don’t feel like anything other than a human. But if I *am* like you and someone’s taken away my choice by locking that up —” Ooof, and that was what it came down to, wasn’t it? Time and time again, Lyssa had her choices stolen from her without much concern about her consent or dreams. I hated that I was a part of that, but if I could help fix the original sin that started it all, maybe it would help ease what I’d done. “Well, I don’t want to leave the power in their hands. *I* make the choices for myself from now on. Nobody else.”

I nodded, proud of the fire and determination in her voice. Lyssa was an amazing mate for an alpha, a born leader.

“I’ll reach out to the alma and some of her witch contacts. Maybe after next week’s pack run, we can start trying. In the meantime, I’ll see if Jacobian can dig up anything about your history.”

Lyssa chuckled lightly before slurping up a noodle. “You know how hilarious it is that you have a hacker shifter, right? Like, that’s not exactly what people usually think of furry men who howl at the moon.”

“Yeah, well, we’re more than our coats and rippling physiques.”

“Pfft, whatever you say, Mr. Twelve-Pack.”

“I don’t think that’s physically possible.”

“A giant wolf literally erupts from your body whenever you want. I think the realm of physical possibility could allow for some extra abs without batting an eye.”

God, I loved her sense of humor.

“You may or may not have a point, but I’m going to eat this delicious Alfredo instead.”

“Coward,” she teased before pressing a roll against my mouth. Naturally, I bit into it, chewing while smirking, which was a fairly impressive skill when I thought about it.

But once I swallowed, I got back on track. “I’ll need you to write down everything you remember about the schools you’ve been to, the places you’ve lived, and everything else. That’ll help.”

“Sure. I’ll trust your word if you think Jacobian can do it.”

She still didn’t seem to get how much that meant to me, but that was all right. Smiling, I ordered another glass of dark wine and enjoyed my dinner with the love of my life.

LYSSA

Never in a million years did I think I would go on a hike in the woods with a giant, sentient wolf that could transform into my ‘mate,’ and yet, that was exactly what had happened. And the craziest thing was that I had a brilliant time. I learned so much, asked questions I’d never thought to ask before, and had tons of fun.

And I felt so *close* to Mahlan. He let me see a side of him that so few people got to see. He even let me *pet* him, which had felt surprisingly intimate.

“What’s got you all cheery over there?” Emmaline asked as I smiled dopily down at a thick sweater. Hey, it wasn’t my fault that the rich brown of it reminded me of Mahlan’s chocolate eyes.

“Your brother took me on a wolf day,” I answered honestly. Because why hide why I was so happy? Honestly, it was a lovely change from all the stress and turmoil that had followed me getting bitten.

“A wolf day?”

“Yeah, he taught me a lot about your culture and even shifted in front of me. It was... nice.”

“That’s so wonderful. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you, thank you. And it wouldn’t have been possible if you hadn’t closed the shop.” I gave her a salacious look, complete with an eyebrow waggle. “How about you and Mr. Kaleb, huh?”

Emmaline turned a vibrant red, which was certainly interesting on her complexion.

“Nothing happened or will ever happen on that front,” she said with a

long sigh. “I’ve had a crush on him since basically forever, but I’ve never done anything about it because he’s so much younger and part of my brother’s inner circle. Seems like crossing a boundary, ya know?”

“No, not at all,” I answered honestly. What could I say? I didn’t like needlessly sugarcoating things. “Sounds more like an excuse to me.”

“Maybe it is. But he’s never really noticed me anyway. It’s just a silly crush.”

“Emmaline, you’re one of the least silly people I know. If you like him, why not pursue it?”

“I... I dunno.”

“Would you think about it for me? The relative stranger who shoehorned her way into your life by robbing you nearly blind?”

“Fake-robbed me,” Emmaline laughed. “But yeah, okay. I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

“But what about my brother?”

“What about him?”

“You don’t think he’d be upset about me pursuing one of the few members of his closest friends? We have a large pack; I have plenty of people I could court.”

“I knew... most of those words and what they meant, but no, I don’t think Mahlan would mind. I think he’d want you both to be happy.” The sappy, fond tone of my voice gave me pause. Since when was I so cheesy? I didn’t know, but I continued anyway. “Don’t you?”

“I guess so.”

Before I could press it, the door chimed, and we both went into professional mode. From there, it didn’t seem like we got a break for several hours, and it didn’t feel like the right time to bring it up by the time she dropped me off at home.

So instead, I wished her goodbye and headed in for another amazing meal by Mahlan. It was hard to be around him without thinking back to that first night we spent together. I’d been nervous, *really* nervous, but he’d put me at such ease. He’d put the power in my hands and made sure I knew that it didn’t go a step beyond what I wanted it to.

He didn’t mock me for my lack of experience or chide me for not knowing where to put my legs or how to hold myself. He was loving, supportive, and *really* good at making me orgasm.

The thought had me clamping my legs tightly, sensations rolling through me like the loveliest echoes. I'd never had someone's mouth between my legs, but wow, Mahlan clearly knew what he was doing. And the way he'd looked at me... *goodness*. It was enough to give a girl an ego.

"You okay?" Mahlan asked, turning to me with a full plate. "Your face is flushed."

"I'm fine," I answered quickly, taking the plate. "Just excited for the food."

He looked suspicious, but I quickly shoveled a forkful into my mouth, which resulted in a happy groan. Damn, my mate was good at cooking.

"All right then, keep your secrets."

"Did you just meme at me?" I objected once I smiled. "You can't just meme at me when my mouth is full."

"Looks like I just did."

I gasped indignantly, but my open mouth allowed him to stab some delicious roasted asparagus with my fork and then feed it to me.

"You win this round," I admitted before happily returning to my meal.

The night ended how ours usually did, with watching TV together and then going to sleep. From there, the days started to pick up again, passing by without so much as a wave. Work was good, home was good, heck, my *life* was good — which wasn't something I was used to.

And while Mahlan and I didn't sleep together again, we spent several hours making out, and he went down on me about every other day. I was mildly worried about being a pillow princess, but whenever I tried to raise the concern, Mahlan would make me climax so hard that my eyes would cross.

I was easing into the domesticity of it happily, getting used to it pretty quickly. So naturally, I was surprised when I arrived home on Wednesday to find his place empty again.

Concerned, I pulled out my phone, ready to call him just like I had the first time. But to my surprise, he'd already texted me.

"Huh, I must have had my phone on Do Not Disturb."

I usually put my phone into that mode during work, but I was pretty consistent at switching it off on my breaks and as soon as I clocked out.

Sorry, I'll be home late. I had to look into something. Be safe and please snack.

I read the text three times, trying to discern his tone psychically. His text was both vague and not vague, which made my stomach twist.

“Get your head together, Lyssa, and make some food.”

I’d grown more confident with cooking since moving in. I still wasn’t a whiz like Mahlan, but I was comfortable with three or four dishes that I knew wouldn’t be nauseating. Getting the ingredients out, I allowed the process to distract me. The last time Mahlan was late, he’d shown up at the door covered in blood. If he did that again, I would have to insist on a curfew.

I didn’t speed through my process and I tried to be patient, but by the time the tuna melts were done, the worry was growing sour in my belly.

Grabbing my phone yet again, I sent him a quick text.

Hey, you got an ETA?

My phone buzzed less than a moment later.

In the elevator now.

I heaved a sigh of relief and went to the door. Opening it for him, I was even happier to see that he wasn’t covered in crimson or other viscera. If that could never happen again, that’d be great.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“One second, I have to take a call.”

And with that, he walked right past me and into his office. I could vaguely hear him talking on the phone, but I couldn’t make anything out. My patience was being severely tested, and I ended up pacing the hall, the conversation fading in and out.

“...you sure?”

“Have Hannah get access... ..number in the manifest... ..reach?”

“Maybe... ..someone into the shipping...”

I couldn’t wait any longer. I went into his office only to find him pacing, his cellphone pressed to his ear. It was clear that he was pretty worked up, and suddenly my relief about him not being covered in blood began to ebb.

Mahlan kept listening to whoever was on the other end, giving out a chorus of “uh-huhs” and “yeahs.” It took him a solid minute to notice me, and when he did, he stopped short.

“Listen, we’ll talk about it tomorrow. Sleep on it.”

With that, he hung up, looking plenty disgruntled.

“Did something happen?”

He didn’t answer right away, but I hated how upset he looked, so I held my arms open for him. His alleviation was evident as he slumped into my arms, letting me tightly embrace him. I clung to him, squeezing as supportively as I could, one hand gently rubbing circles into his back.

“It’s not good news,” he murmured, resting his head on top of mine.

“I figured, but tell me anyway.”

“Two alphas disappeared today. They were supposed to meet to discuss a potential marriage between two of their pack members, but they never returned home.”

“Oh,” I murmured. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“That makes eight wolves missing in the last two months. It’s blatantly targeted at this point. Something is happening.” Mahlan’s voice wavered ever so slightly. “One of them was a ten-year-old kid.”

I couldn’t help the gasp that punched its way out of my throat. “They’re targeting kids?”

“They’re targeting everyone, it seems. Women, males, old, young, alphas, betas, and other designations. I’m worried about my pack.”

“It would be weird if you weren’t,” I assured. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“This is a lot,” Mahlan said, and I could feel his posture relaxing.

“I understand. And I’m happy to do it. I cooked dinner if you’re hungry.”

Mahlan pulled back, his expression shocked enough that I was trying to figure out if I was offended or not. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Don’t be so surprised about it.”

“Right, of course. Silly me. And thank you for the hug, that is.”

“You can thank me for my dinner too when you’re done. It’s not poisonous or anything.”

“If you say so.”

Sticking my tongue out, I led him to the kitchen and sat him down at the island. “So, you wanna tell me what you were talking about on the phone?”

“That company we infiltrated. Well, we found a secret staff list that Hannah, Jacobian, and Addison can’t get into. We’re aware it exists, but we can’t crack it for anything.”

“And that’s really bad?”

“We’re guessing. It’s not on the CEO’s server. And we still haven’t been able to source the guy that left the breadcrumbs to the company.”

“Can you get someone into their shipping department? Often that’s the least guarded, and they’re the ones who see everything coming in or out.”

“How do you know that?”

“Stuff I learned from watching people and figuring out the best way to get in and out of places unnoticed.”

“You continue to be full of surprises. But I’m worried about endangering any more of my wolves. Having two of our women in there is risky enough. As much as I hate to admit it, we men are relatively expendable, whereas women bring the next generation of pups into the world.”

“Well, I don’t know about *expendable*, but I get what you mean.” I pondered a moment as I loaded the sandwiches on two plates and sat next to Mahlan at the kitchen island. He had a whole dining room, but there was something more intimate about the smaller counter and stools. “Is there anyone who’s trained that could go in? Like a contracted magical shifter type?”

“A witch, potentially. The wolves there wouldn’t be able to sense her unless they had very specific training.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah. Shifters can usually tell other shifters, but it doesn’t work across species. We usually can’t tell a magic user just by their scent unless they’re quite powerful, or we’ve got a lot of experience with that subset of fey.”

“This is so complicated,” I said, rubbing my temple. “And I can’t even pick out other wolves.”

“Whatever’s locking in your wolf is probably affecting that as well. But once we take care of that, you’ll be more yourself than you’ve ever been.”

I tried not to shudder at that. It was a whole lot of pressure, that was for sure. What if I really wasn’t a wolf? Would Mahlan just kick me to the curb? It wouldn’t be the first time I was completely abandoned by people I trusted.

“Let’s change the subject, shall we?” Mahlan murmured, breaking me out of my spiral.

“Sure, what do you want to talk about?”

“You still need to set up a bank account, right? Or did you already do that?”

“No, I still need to do it. I can shoot for tomorrow during my lunch?”

“As long as that works for you. I do need someplace to deposit the first payment of your salary.”

“You mean the *only* payment for my salary, considering we finished the contract in a single day.”

“Not true. The contract isn’t done, and you’re technically on call, which means I’m paying you.”

I huffed, but technically he was right, so I didn’t argue. I was quickly learning to pick my battles. I finally believed that Mahlan wasn’t trying to

outright control me and that he was just as eager to find a peaceable compromise as I was.

Instead, we just spent our night like it was normal — eating dinner, putting dishes in the dishwasher, watching TV then getting ready for bed. As usual, I was bone exhausted by the time I lay across the mattress, and I went under in just a few breaths.

Similarly, I woke up incredibly refreshed. It turned out that sleeping on an expensive mattress was much easier on my body than a hand-me-down, outdated air mattress a friend had given me. Who knew?

Kissing Mahlan on the cheek, I went about my morning routine. As usual, by the time I came out of the shower, Mahlan was also up and had breakfast ready once I walked into the kitchen fully dressed and with my hair pulled back.

It was simple fare, blueberry pancakes and some sausages, but I wolfed them down with gusto before Mahlan drove me to work. Then it was his turn to kiss *my* cheek before I got out of the car, and I waved goodbye as he drove off.

The morning did drag a little, as they usually did. I wasn't quite sure why Emmaline didn't have her boutique open from noon to six, but she liked having more traditional work hours, I guessed.

By lunch, I was anxious to take care of my banking business, so I told her where I was going and then headed out. It was just a few blocks down, and I figured it would be more convenient to have a bank close to where I worked rather than close to Mahlan's place.

It was a nice walk, the wind flowing gently and the sun shining. But after a block or so, I got the feeling that I was being followed. It could have been nothing, but I had long since learned to follow my instincts. If I thought someone was following me, it was best to act as if they were.

Picking up my pace, I briskly walked through a crowd of people milling about the downtown area. Taking a couple of random turns, I managed to get to the bank by taking a completely different route, ducking inside and tucking myself into a corner so that I could watch from the windows.

But as much as I watched, I couldn't see anyone suspicious or anyone who looked like they were hunting someone. Stomach twisting, I waited nearly fifteen minutes before I realized that I needed to get a move on.

Still nervous, I got in line and waited for a teller. While standing there, it was hard not to see all the easy targets walking around, just begging to be

lifted from. But now that I had a steady job and a contracted job, I didn't need to pickpocket for a living. Still, it was awfully tempting.

The teller was surprisingly efficient in helping me open an account, and once I presented all my proper IDs, I had my very first bank account. Thanking him, I headed out, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was still being watched.

I just needed to tuck my head down and get back to work. There I would be safe.

MAHLAN

I hadn't gotten a text from Lyssa.

Not that she was the most communicative person during her work shift, but she usually shot me one or two during her lunch. I hadn't noticed at first because I'd been on the phone with Jacobian, discussing what he'd found about her parents.

But now, I had most certainly noticed. I instantly dialed her, forgetting how upset Jacobian had been about his efforts. Worse come to worst, I was just being overly paranoid. Or at least that was what I told myself until it went straight to voicemail.

I left a message, but alarm bells were ringing in my head. Quickly I dialed up Emmaline instead, trying not to pace.

"Hey, bro, what's up?"

"Hey, is Lyssa there?"

"No, she left for the bank at the start of her lunch break, why?"

"She's not answering her phone. But maybe she's just busy setting up her account?"

I could hear that Emmaline was just as worried as I was. "I guess, maybe. But do you have GPS on her phone? Can you check that?"

"I don't, actually. She's a bit sensitive about being surveilled, and I wanted her to know I trusted her." However, I was beginning to regret it.

"I'm going to leave work and head to that bank. Maybe they're hassling her."

"Do you want me to leave? It's just four blocks down from here."

"Is it a straight shot?"

“No, you have to go around this big, ugly building. You know, one of those modern chic ones.”

“No, stay put in case she comes back. I’m heading out now.”

My inner wolf’s head was perking up from its slumber, heeding my anxiety. I called Lyssa twice as I rushed to my car, vaguely announcing to my team that I was leaving. My sister’s boutique was a few miles away, hardly a long drive.

Part of me was tempted to shift so I wouldn’t be confined to the roads, but having a giant wolf running around downtown would cause all the packs in the area more problems than they needed.

I called Lyssa three more times while I drove, sick to my stomach. A thousand and one worries were pouring through my head, one right after the other. So yeah, I might have sped, maybe I didn’t. Except I most certainly did, arriving at the bank in minutes.

Heading inside, I cut in line and went straight to the closest teller, asking for the manager. Either my face or my outfit spoke for me because less than a handful of seconds later, a smartly dressed woman came walking out.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Yes, my fiancé was just opening an account here on her lunch break.”

“Sir, we cannot give information about our customers without their permission.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s fine. I don’t need to know about her account info. I’m worried because she never contacted us at the end of her lunch break and she’s not answering your phone. I want to make sure she’s safe. Did you see which direction she went in?”

“Oh,” the woman’s tone changed from managerial calm to genuinely worried. “Give me just one moment.”

She disappeared behind the counter, talking to a couple of tellers. A few moments later, one of them handed her something then she hustled over to me.

“Jamie here says your fiancé was in here just fifteen minutes ago, but she left this behind. Hopefully, she is fine, just unable to message you without this.”

She handed me Lyssa’s phone, and I swore my heart stopped in my chest. My mind could only come up with two solutions, one being that she had run away and the other being that she was taken away. Neither were good options.

But I tried to work my expression into something not panicked for the manager. “Ah, of course. She must have just been in a hurry to get back to work. I’ll go run this to her.”

They handed the phone over and I headed out. But the moment I stepped onto the sidewalk, I was already typing into the group chat for my inner circle.

I told them that Lyssa was missing, and she’d left her phone behind at the bank. I also warned them that I might need them to start searching downtown, but first for Jacobian to hack into the bank’s security feed and see if he could find anything.

There was a chorus of affirmative comments, and I tucked my phone back in my pocket, deciding to go on foot to try and track Lyssa’s scent. Easier said than done with all the scents in the city.

I hoped she was just so occupied with the bank that she had accidentally left her phone behind. But my instincts were screaming at me that wasn’t the case and something dangerous was afoot.

Which meant I had failed. My entire job was to protect Lyssa, to provide for her. And yet, I’d let her fall right into danger. I’d take whatever punishment fate put on me if it meant that she was safe.

Hurriedly, I walked to Emmaline’s boutique, praying I would just happen across Lyssa. I looked right and left, trying to scan everything as I strode along. I was nearly to Emma’s and thoroughly defeated until, impossibly, I spotted Lyssa sitting alone at a sandwich stop.

The entire world stopped spinning as a dozen or so feelings hit me all at once. I rushed to her, ignoring the employees who tried to greet me.

Lyssa smiled at me, sweet as ever, but it didn’t abate the surge of too much within me.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, obviously unaware of the chaos she’d caused.

“What am I doing here?” I echoed, trying not to sound harsh and failing entirely. “Lyssa, you left your phone behind in the bank in the middle of a rash of shifter kidnappings! I thought you were gone!”

I was yelling and aware that people were looking, but I didn’t care. I needed Lyssa to know how much she meant to me. I needed her to know how scared I was. I also needed her to be *careful!* There was someone out there snatching up shifters right and left. And we weren’t exactly easy prey. But Lyssa was. She was essentially declawed, defanged, and half-deaf.

“No,” she said simply, gathering up her sandwich and standing.

“What do you mean, no?”

But she ignored me and waved to the employees behind the counter.

“Thank you so much for the sandwich. It was delicious.”

Packing the rest of it in her backpack, she headed out the door. Naturally, I followed her, still plenty pissed but also baffled by her reaction. I attempted to ask her several times what was up, but she would just cut me off with a very firm ‘uh-uh.’

I was lucky that Emmaline’s wasn’t far, and as soon as we arrived, my sister was rushing forward to hug Lyssa.

“Thank the moon, you’re safe!”

“Why are people worried about that? You two realize I lived on the streets for three years, right?”

“That was before people started kidnapping pack members,” Emmaline chastised, and that seemed to cow Lyssa at least a little.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that. I was just trying to enjoy a sandwich without being harassed. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to borrow your office to talk to your brother.”

Her tone brooked no argument, and Emmaline nodded. “Uh, sure. Whatever you need.”

Nodding, she marched forward, and I followed, pretty sure that things were not about to go my way.

Sure enough, as soon as she shut the door, she laid into me, her voice steely and cold.

“I realize you are stressed and worried, but you will not come up to me in public and make a scene! There was no need to yell at me or try to embarrass me like that in front of people.”

Okay... when she said it like that, I could... kind of see her side.

“I was scared you were hurt. I even called in the calvary.”

“I... I appreciate that. I guess I’m just not used to having people to watch my back. But even if you’re terrified, that’s no excuse to start screaming at me in public.”

“You’re right,” I admitted, feeling contrite. “I’m sorry. I won’t freak out like that whenever you’re off on your own.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a but coming?”

“Not really a but, but more of a... small request.”

“All right, out with it.” She crossed her arms, giving me a disbelieving

look.

“Would you have any interest in self-defense classes? I know you have street smarts, but it would ease my mind.”

To my surprise, she grinned broadly. “Actually, I’d love to. I’ve always wanted to but haven’t for obvious reasons.”

At least I had one good idea that day.

“So, we have an agreement?”

“We do,” she said, her mood seeming to clear. “And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry for scaring you. That wasn’t my intention.”

“I know. And I promise I’m not normally like this.”

“Yeah, I’m guessing that normally multiple shifters aren’t going missing within weeks of each other.”

“It’s pretty novel, yeah. And not in a good way.”

“Okay then, we’ll talk more later, but right now I should get back into work. Maybe you should message that calvary of yours and tell them it was a false alarm.”

“Probably would be good.” With a nod, I headed out. I wanted to kiss Lyssa goodbye —because when *didn’t* I want to kiss Lyssa? — but I could tell it wasn’t the right time. It seemed I was indeed in the doghouse, even if she understood where I was coming from and mostly forgave me.

Giving Emmaline a wave goodbye, I headed out and updated the group chat.

Theo: Is your brain even functional?

Parker: Whoa, harsh much?

Theo: I just mean that your completed mating bond should mean that you would have been able to feel if Lyssa was in danger or not.

I rolled my eyes and reminded him that Lyssa was not able to access her inner wolf, and that pretty much stopped a lot of what we were supposed to be able to share in our bond. I was grateful it wasn’t total radio silence, but I knew we were missing out on a majority of information that was supposed to be exchanged.

But now, more than ever, I knew that we needed to break whatever curse she was under. Impatient, I exited the group chat and reached out to one of the few witches I knew and asked him to meet with me in an hour at a bar owned by a local friendly wolf pack. He was a young witch, but he was the best shot I had at the moment until our alma got back to me.

Heading back to my car, I hopped in and headed to the Moon Cycles’

Bar.



“YOU OKAY, MAHLAN? YOU LOOK STRESSED.”

“Probably because I am,” I answered honestly, sitting beside Samson, the witch I’d called. He was a young guy, barely twenty and still growing his beard. His skin was deeper than umber, and his eyes were a sort of hazel that I was sure captivated plenty of people.

“You wanna tell me what’s up?”

“Not really. What I want you to do is seal the sound around us.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

Samson raised his hand, his brow furrowing. Although I couldn’t always tell a magic user when I met them, I could feel his enchantment wash over me. Then the sounds of the bar dulled, and I knew he’d done what I asked.

“I need you to try to break a curse for me.”

“Ew, undoing someone else’s work? I’m a bit young for that, you know.” Samson’s attitude was disinterested, but that was how witches always were. Their mantra was to stay hidden and out of the way, always serving their own purposes rather than anyone else’s. Granted, I couldn’t exactly blame them, considering how many of them had been hunted down by humans; nasty stuff, those witch trials.

“Right, I’m sure. But listen, my pack’s lost their moonstone, and there’s a lot of stuff coming down all at once. If you’re not willing to break a curse, I need you to do some spying for me.”

“Spying? You sure you don’t just mean scrying?”

“If scrying will help, do that too.” I quickly gave him the rundown about the company and how we needed our moonstone back. While witches didn’t have moonstones, they had their crystals, relics, and altars. They knew how important it was when a clan relic was taken away.

“Complicated, complicated,” Samson mused. “Sounds risky.”

“Because it is. I won’t lie to you.”

“Okay, you know I liked your past alpha, so I’ll help you out.”

“Thank you.”

“But, for a price.”

“Right, of course.” Yeah, he was definitely a witch through and through.

“How much?”

Instead of just telling me, he grabbed a napkin and started to write across it with his finger, the digits appearing in brilliant shades of purple and green. Witches. Always so dramatic. When he turned it to me, I scoffed at the amount.

“You realize that’s more than most people make in a year.”

“That’s because most people can’t infiltrate a wolf business and do what you need to be done without being detected.”

He was fleecing me. I knew it and he knew it. But once again, I couldn’t really blame him. Magic users all tended to live short lives. Between spells backfiring, infighting, and ne’er-do-wells poaching them for their body parts, getting old wasn’t a usual option for his kind and others like him.

“All right then. I’ll pay.”

“You have a deal.” He offered his hand, and I could feel the magic crackling around his palm. I knew if I took that shake, I would magically seal our agreement down to our souls. But I was a man of my word, so I took his hand firmly.

“Of course, you guys are gonna have to work your own wolfy magic and get me hired.”

“Don’t worry on that front. We already have two people on the inside, one known and one unknown.”

“Smooth, I like it.”

“Now... about that curse...”

“It’s the second time you’ve mentioned it, so spill the deets. I’m curious. What, did a witch turn your pecker into a turtle? Give your wolf form baldness?” He let out a mock-horrified gasp. “You didn’t sleep with a succubus, did you?”

“I don’t think there’s a single succubus in a three-state radius,” I rebuffed. “Too cold for them.”

“Ah, right. But is it the warmer temperatures they like or all the people running around in tiny swimwear?”

“I’m not here to discuss the habits of succubae, incubi, or any other fey,” I snapped, my patience growing thinner and thinner with every snarky comment. He wasn’t like Lyssa, not at all. She could banter and brat with me for hours, and I’d never get tired. But I was quickly hitting that level of exhaustion with Samson.

“Touchy, touchy. All right, fine. What’s going on?”

“Someone’s locked away my mate’s inner wolf. Cut off all connections to it. Could you help with that?”

Simon clicked his tongue. “It’s never simple with you wolves, is it?”

“Can you do it or not?”

“I... I don’t know, to be honest. We need to arrange a time, so I can get a look at her and whatever enchantment is beleaguering your beloved.”

“Okay, we can do that. Text me your schedule and I’ll find a time.”

“And you know that’s gonna add more to my price, right?”

“I would imagine nothing less.”

Samson winked, chuckling to himself, and I understood why not many people were friends with witches outside of witches. They really were the antithesis of the pack and community culture I was raised with.

“And what about tracing lineage?”

“Geez, did you bring a whole grocery list?”

“If that grocery list gets you more money, why are you complaining?”

“A witch only has so much time, you know? But to answer your question, I need to see what’s going on with her before I can do much else.”

I nodded, relieved to have some answers, even if they were vague. “We’ll be in touch.”

With that handled, I decided to skip the rest of the workday and just go home. I didn’t check my phone until I was done driving, which was somewhat of a feat considering texts from Jacobian kept going off.

As soon as I could, I checked his messages and saw that he’d finally managed to hack the company’s HR and was trying to find those hidden employees that Hannah couldn’t find anything on. Pleased at the fortunate timing, I sent Samson’s info and told him to put it into the system that the guy was hired for the shipping department and to send a welcome packet to his email.

I was lucky to have Jacobian on our side.

Jacobian texted a thumbs-up back and nothing else, which meant he was about elbows deep in whatever he was doing and likely wouldn’t come back up for several hours. With one last thing to do, I texted Samson to keep an eye on his email before going into my apartment to think about everything that had happened. It sure was hectic for a Thursday.

LYSSA

I came home with an improved mood. Sure, I still wasn't thrilled about the way Mahlan had talked to me, but he seemed appropriately chastised. Besides, how mad could I be when it was because he was worried I got kidnapped? Usually, I would say that was a pretty farfetched option, but considering eight other wolves had disappeared in just as many weeks... well, that was bound to work anyone up, let alone such a protective person like Mahlan.

Speaking of which, my mood got all soft and sappy when I saw he was already cooking in the kitchen. I knew it was usually the woman who was supposed to make the meals, not the muscle-bound provider, but Mahlan seemed to genuinely enjoy creating dishes for me to try.

And all that delicious food was certainly doing a number on me but in a good way. I felt stronger and had more energy. My body was filling out in a way that it was always meant to be instead of just a bit wider than actual emaciation. Even my hair was thicker and shinier, although that could have been the prenatal supplements Mahlan kept putting into the shakes he gave me twice a week.

If it were any other situation, I would have thought he was trying to be slick about something. But I literally petted his wolf form and *goodness...* his coat was thick and soft. Ridiculously soft. I wanted to lie on him like a rug, but thankfully I'd had some restraint at the time.

Maybe next time, however, I would give in. I was willing to put my newly earned money down that he was very comfortable.

"Whatcha making?" I asked, coming over and pressing a kiss to his

cheek. The way Mahlan perked up at that was pretty gratifying. He was so cute for being a muscled shapeshifter who could rip someone's throat out with his bare teeth.

"Chicken noodle soup," he answered, giving him my cheek kiss.

"Oh my gosh, that's one of my favorites."

"I know, that's why I made it."

"You are too observant for your own good."

"I dunno, giving you food you love seems pretty good for me."

"Sap," I accused, gently elbowing his side.

"I'm just trying to make up for being an ass earlier."

"Well, you're on the right track."

I went to the island and sat in my usual spot, observing Mahlan as he happily pattered around. "Hey, I have a weird question." I blurted.

"Oh?"

"Why haven't I met your parents yet? That's a thing that mates do, right?" Mahlan turned to me, his face split by a broad grin. "What? What's with that expression?"

"You said mate."

Goodness, now he was being the sappy one, wasn't he? "I guess I did."

"You'll get to meet them at the pack run. It'll be the first time the entire pack will be together since I became alpha."

"Oh, that sounds like a huge deal then."

"It kind of is."

I tapped my fingers on the counter, thinking. Now that I knew I would be meeting his parents at the event, I was much more interested. "When is this pack run?"

"This Saturday, actually."

"Wait, I'm going to meet your parents in two days, and you didn't think to tell me about it?"

"I didn't want you to feel pressured."

"Well, it's too late for that!"

Panic rose in me, but I fought it down. Considering that I was bitten against my will, kidnapped, and everything else, meeting Mahlan's parents wasn't really a big deal. I got the impression there wasn't anything they could do about it considering I'd already been bitten.

"Okay, so like, in the future, I require at least a week's notice before I'm supposed to meet significant familial figures."

“Fair.”

Matter abated, he served dinner and explained the pack run to me. It seemed like a family reunion, just like the dinner, except *more*. Well, the dinner had been so fun, I was certain the run would be great.

Okay, maybe certain was a bit too strong. I was pretty sure.

Mostly sure.

... I hoped I was right.

“By the by, I’m going to ask the younger and untrained pack members to take a few safety and self-defense classes together. That way, you won’t be all on your lonesome.”

“That’ll be fun.” I paused briefly, drinking down a delicious spoonful of chicken noodle soup. “Although I kinda figured you would be the person training me.”

“As flattered as I am, I want you to have the best training possible. Your teachers will be experienced and certified more than I ever could be.”

I liked that about Mahlan. He was incredibly powerful, but he was also realistic. He didn’t think he could defeat anything just because he was strong.

“But maybe you could work with me sometimes? Maybe to practice?”

He sent me a knee-melting grin, and I was pretty lucky I was sitting down. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

The conversation went from there, flowing naturally as a talk between two comfortable partners would. But it wasn’t until we were curled together, binging an entire magical series on the couch, that I realized I was falling for my mate.

Huh. I never saw that coming.



THE DAYS PASSED in a blur and the next thing I knew, it was Saturday.

“Hey, Mahlan, what should I even wear to this thing?”

“Whatever you want, it doesn’t really matter.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter?” I called down the hall.

“Lyssa, my dear, think about it. This event is for people who shed their skin and run around in wolf form.”

“... right.”

I paced the closet for a few minutes before pulling some nicer clothes. By

then, Mahlan had returned from the kitchen, handing me another smoothie that was no doubt going to be delicious.

“You can wear jeans if you want. You don’t have to be fancy.”

“You’re introducing me to the entirety of your pack and your *parents*. If I’m not going to dress up for that, then when?”

“Fair enough. But I’m no Emmaline, so I probably shouldn’t be handing out style advice.”

“I dunno, you had a pretty keen eye when we were lifting stuff. You sure you don’t have any recommendations?”

He looked over the somewhat sizable pile I’d thrown on the bed. I half expected him to be dismissive, but to my surprise, he seemed to give the idea genuine consideration.

“What about those shorts with the ties? They’re dressy but a little casual. And that top with the, uh... loopy sleeves?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his description. “You mean the shallop-sleeve top? Like that green one?”

“Yeah, that’s definitely what I said.”

“Sure, it was.”

I quickly got dressed then we both headed to the kitchen, where Mahlan was loading up an absurd amount of snacks into a duffle bag.

“What’s going on here?” I asked, thoroughly amused.

“Turns out running around as a wolf tends to make a shifter a bit peckish.”

“That checks out.”

Even if it did, it was plenty amusing to watch a grown man shove as much high-calorie junk food as he could into a very finite space. Then we headed out and made our way back to the countryside.

Sure enough, there were a *lot* of people there. People who I’d never seen hide nor hair of before. Mahlan led me around the group of nearly a hundred different souls, their ages ranging from teenagers to literal senior citizens. I was shocked, gobsmacked, and maybe add a pinch of bamboozled.

I’d thought Mahlan was responsible for maybe twenty to twenty-five people with how he talked about his pack. I had no idea it was so *huge*.

It was almost like a small town had gathered in the village square for a BBQ, and I was the odd one out.

Except they certainly didn’t make me feel like the odd one out. Everyone greeted me like I was a long-lost friend, their smiles backdropped by the

gorgeous mountains spread out behind them.

It turned out we weren't in the exact same spot that Mahlan had shown me, as that couldn't accommodate a hundred people at once. We were on private property about an hour further into the countryside. Whose private property, I had no idea. But the pack run spread so far that sometimes a few of them would end up where Mahlan had taken me towards the end of the night.

As Mahlan took me on the introduction tour, I noted many tables set out and even a couple of grills. It wasn't what I imagined, not at all, but it was lovely. The family reunion I'd always longed for.

I was legitimately enjoying myself, troubles forgotten, until he guided me to a woman who looked like an older version of Emmaline.

"Mother, this is my mate, Lyssa." An older man approached, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that it was Mahlan's father. "Ah, and this is my dad."

"Nice to meet you," I said, offering my hand to them. "I've heard so much about you."

That actually wasn't true, but what was I supposed to say?

"Oh, Lyssa! Likewise! We've been so excited to meet you, but we understood when Mahlan said you needed some time to acclimate."

And now I got where Emmaline's bubblier personality came from.

"Can I hug you? Is that okay?"

"Of course."

She did indeed hug me and goodness... it was a good hug. I was pretty sure I already liked the woman, which was amazing considering I'd spent the last two days somewhat terrified of her disapproval.

After all, I was a maybe/maybe-not shifter who was homeless, packless, and utterly uneducated in their culture. Technically, I was still a teenager for a few more months, and I had nothing to my name.

But they didn't seem to care, not one drop. Even the more reserved father greeted me warmly, taking my much smaller hand in both of his as he firmly shook it.

Maybe this whole pack thing wasn't that bad after all.

Mrs. Reese launched into a half-monologue, half-happy tirade about all the plans and things she'd like us to do together, from going to the spa to meeting her dog Fergus to passing down some of the family's traditional dresses. I tried hard not to laugh about a shifter owning a canine, but

something about it reminded me of the weirdness of Mickey Mouse owning Pluto.

“Mom, I warned you that you couldn’t hog her,” Mahlan said, grinning wryly at his parents.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Your mother is just excited, dear. I’ll let you go, but you truly are a beautiful, lovely young lady, Lyssa.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, knowing my cheeks were bright pink and unable to do anything about it. “We’ll talk more later.”

“You bet your last moonstone we will! Hugs again!”

We did indeed hug again, and Mahlan continued introducing me to folks. It didn’t take long for the names and faces to kind of blend into each other, and I couldn’t help but marvel at how *normal* everyone was.

I dunno, when I found out I was going to a gathering of people who had wolves explode out of them, I’d expected some real characters. Like maybe a field full of Ellibies. Which I realized didn’t make sense considering that everyone else I met was pretty normalish by human standards. But in my head, they’d all been curious characters and somewhat backwater. Not lawyers, nurses, teachers, kids, and grandparents.

Weird. It was all weird.

But I liked it.

Thankfully, the introductions didn’t last forever, the act fizzling out when someone called that food was ready, and people began to serve themselves from one of the long tables laden with all sorts of dishes. I spotted Mahlan’s open duffle bag in the middle of it, nestled between deviled eggs and fruit salad.

It was delicious, naturally. I wondered briefly if shifters’ extra senses made them better cooks but didn’t spend too much time spinning my thoughts around it. The food was just too good to be distracted like that.

I was thoroughly enjoying myself, chitchatting with a couple of people around me. Maria, a single mom and nurse with had three teenagers who were at their own table. Angelo, a deaf man who apparently couldn’t hear a thing in his human form but could hear fine as a wolf. I couldn’t imagine the whiplash of that. Then there was Gertrude and Amos, a couple in their seventies who kept having to lean forward to hear anyone speak and were utterly adorable.

I loved it. I could see myself getting to know everyone over the years, a life of companionship and happiness stretching out before me in my mind's

eye. I'd always assumed my future would be one of struggle, one of barely making it by. But what if it didn't have to be?

That thought warmed me just as much as the scrumptious food in my belly, and I tried not to tear up. Mixed success on that front, but I was able to get myself together before Mahlan stood, clearing his throat like he was going to make a speech.

Oh, that was interesting. Beyond his few words at that one ritual, I'd never heard him do any public speaking before. I imagined he had to do a fair amount of it as alpha. Unless they entirely communicated in howls?

"Packmates, we have not had an easy time this past year. Violence and sudden change have rocked our very pack structure. But I believe that the coming years will be our strongest!" There was a cheer from many of the attendees and I watched, a bit enamored with my mate. He looked so passionate, it was really inspiring.

"We haven't recovered our moonstone yet, but we are making great strides! Soon we will reclaim our rightful artifact and be able to move forward into the future together.

"However, as I'm sure you've all heard, there are an unprecedented number of disappearances plaguing all parts of our community. Shifters, witches, you name it. Eight of our kind have suddenly been taken, which is about eight too many."

There was a worried murmur amongst the crowd, and I could practically feel their concern prickling up my spine.

"Many of those targeted have been women, the young, and the solitary. So I would like everyone under the age of twenty and all of our able-bodied women to take self-defense classes. I am aware that several of you are just as accomplished fighters as me, and I hope you will help your sisters learn. I have no doubt there are techniques that you've learned over the years that are far more relevant than anything I could teach."

I looked around at some of the female pack members, trying to judge their expressions, but they all seemed varied, just like any other group.

"Classes will begin in two weeks. No one is expected to attend every class, but it will only strengthen our pack if we all do what we can. Note, all men are invited to attend as well. However, if classes are full, preference will be given to our more vulnerable members, as they're the ones being specifically targeted.

"These are scary times, with our territory disappearing faster than ever,

but I have faith in every one of you! I swear my life, my teeth, and all my loyalty to every soul here!”

And there was another chorus of cheers and even — perhaps ironically — some wolf whistles.

“Now, let’s get down to the ridge! In five minutes, we run as one!”

More hooting and hollering, with everyone around me starting to get up and take off. I sat there, watching their enthusiasm and feeling plenty of compersion for them. It was nice to see people so happy and having a good time.

Speech brilliantly delivered, Mahlan returned to me, offering his hand. I took it, and he walked me to another table under a sun canopy. It was only then that I noticed a woman around Emmaline’s age sitting there, gently cooling herself with one of those fancy, lace hand fans.

“Lyssa, this is our alma. We talked about her before, remember?”

“I do,” I said with a nod. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Oh, none of that,” the woman said, surprisingly normal. Maybe it was silly, but I’d imagined something mystical, almost haunting, like her magic would leak out of her words themselves. Because almas were magic... right? I wasn’t quite clear on that. “I am just alma. Or Alma Savannah if you have a thing for lots of syllables. And if I decide I like you, you can just call me Savvy.”

“Yes, ma’a- I mean, alma.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“The two of you will have some time together while the rest of us run. Alma, this is my mate, the one who can’t shift. I called you about her, if you recall.”

“Ah, yes, the one who’s had her magic meddled with. Come, sit with me, dear. We have plenty to talk about.”

I had no idea what to expect, but I found myself quickly charmed by her. Sitting at her side, I gave Mahlan what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

I wished I could run with them, I realized. I’d never thought much about changing my body into a wolf, but now that I was presented with so many close people about to bond and have fun together, I could see the appeal.

“Be safe,” I said, wishing I could kiss Mahlan but not quite feeling brave enough to stand up and do that with what was essentially his pack’s super doctor sitting next to me.

“Always am,” he said with a wink before running off to be with the rest

of his pack.

“So,” Alma Savannah said, turning her dreamy gaze to me. “Tell me about yourself, my dear.”

MAHLAN

As their sworn-in alpha, I stood before my entire pack for the first time. It was an important moment that I didn't take lightly. I could feel all of their eyes on me, their thoughts, and the responsibility of it all bound itself to my very soul.

There was no more need for speeches or words of encouragement. We were a people united together by our bond under the moon.

“Let's run!”

I called upon my inner wolf and let myself fall forward, fur bursting along my stretching form in a ripple. By the time I hit the ground, I was a full wolf, and I raced forward.

I was acutely aware of the sound of my packmates shifting behind me, dropping to all fours and bolting in a loose formation. We were all one spirit, one blood, united by our magic.

The earth flew beneath my feet and fresh air filled my lungs. My inner wolf did notice the absence of its mate, but that concern was fleeting as I leapt over a rocky outcrop and a dozen other wolves followed after me.

A couple of sniffs told me that my sister was to my right, with my mother and father slightly farther back. I could smell Ellibie, too, although she lagged behind at her more casual pace. That was pure Ellibie, never one for hurrying unless she had to.

We ran for goodness knew how long until we reached a small river that cut the property in two. I jumped in, rolling, bucking, and inviting my friends to play.

Perhaps it would be strange for non-shifters to look forward to literally

playing with their adult friends, but our wolves needed it. It was a huge part of how we bonded, released stress, and socialized. I wouldn't give it up for anything.

I couldn't say how long we were out, but the day turned into afternoon, and then the afternoon turned into the setting sun. It wasn't uncommon for us to stay out until sunup, napping in furry piles all around the property. Still, eventually Lyssa's absence grew too uncomfortable for me.

So, with a huff to my parents, Parker, and Emmaline, I trotted back to our cookout area, hoping Lyssa didn't feel too left out.

Surprisingly, I found her right where I left her, sitting beside Alma and talking animatedly. I stopped to watch for a moment, happy that Lyssa was getting along with the closest thing we had to a matriarch.

Ever since we'd been able to move past how she was bitten, Lyssa had integrated seamlessly into our pack, and I couldn't be more grateful. If I had to end up randomly mated to a woman I knew nothing about other than she smelled like heaven, I was glad it was her. There was no one else like Lyssa, of that I was sure.

I took a couple of steps forward enough for Lyssa to notice me. Even though we'd had such a good connection the last time I was a wolf, I stilled myself in case she was alarmed.

But she wasn't at all. She approached me as if I were human, arms spread wide to give me a hug. I'd never had much human-on-wolf contact in my shifted form, and I had to admit that an embrace from her felt mighty nice through my coat.

"I thought you'd be out longer," she murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. I knew some shifters would be offended at her treating me a little bit like a particularly treasured pooch, but I was happy for the affection.

But I wanted to talk to Lyssa directly, and given that she couldn't communicate through her wolf, I shifted back into my human form.

"Hey there, handsome," she said, looping her arms around my neck and pressing a quick peck to my lips. But even though it was swift, my body still reacted viscerally to it, my senses still coming down from my wolf form.

"What was that for?" I murmured, gently brushing an errant strand of hair from her face. God, that face. I could look at it forever and never need to visit an art museum again.

"Because I wanted to," she answered softly, looking up at me through her lashes. And *goodness*, that wasn't fair at all. If it weren't for Alma, I might

have picked her up right then and there to carry her off into the woods and have my way with her. “Did you come back for a reason?”

“Yes, I just wanted to check in.”

“I’m doing just fine. Alma and I are talkin’ up a storm and eating all the tasty food you guys left. Never had so many ribs in my life.”

I chuckled. “I’m glad she’s treating you well, although I never doubted she wouldn’t.”

“Well, you gonna go back to the run then?”

“I suppose I should,” I said, cupping her cheek so I could be in contact with her. “But now that I’m here with you, I’m reluctant to go.”

Her eyes fluttered closed like they did whenever she felt our bond, and I couldn’t help but lean down and kiss her right back. Mine wasn’t as chaste or quick as hers, but I kept in mind that Alma was just a few paces away.

“Wanna go on a walk together then?” she asked, smiling at me like I was the whole world. And honestly, when she looked at me like that, I felt like I was.

“I’d love nothing more.”

Hand in hand, we strolled off into the trees. I knew that Lyssa couldn’t see nearly as well as I could in the dark, so she trusted me to guide her safely, and I didn’t take that for granted.

“So, what do you think of us wild bunch of mongrels?” I asked as we strolled along, the sun just beginning to sink, setting the sky ablaze with tangerines and corals blended into the gentle kiss of lavender twilight. It would have been a sight that would normally have taken my breath away, but with Lyssa by my side, she was all I cared to look at.

“There’s a lot more of you than I thought. And you said there are multiple packs in the city?”

“Well, no, not just in the city. We span a far greater area, but the city is where most of our territories converge. That’s why almost every alpha has a headquarters nearby, and there’s been so much fighting.”

“Huh, shifter politics are complicated.”

“Absolutely. I’ve been trained in it since it became evident that I would become an alpha. You know, growing up, everyone thought Theo would be the alpha.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“The man has a head for strategy and is unwaveringly loyal. Also, he hit his human growth spurt first, so he was bigger than all of us for years.

Sometimes I wonder if he hadn't been a late-shifter if he would have been the alpha instead of me."

"Okay, that's what I'm not understanding. Is this alpha business genetic, elected, or like... magical?"

"Maybe all three?" I answered honestly. "You can't choose to be an alpha. You find it out after your first shift. Some people take a few moons after that, but it's pretty apparent. But it's not just genetic because if all alphas and potential alphas in a pack are wiped out, one will manifest spontaneously. Usually, it's the killed alpha's beta, but it can be anybody."

"So you mean you can grow up your entire life as one thing and then suddenly switch?"

"It's pretty rare, but yes, it's possible."

"Wow... I can't imagine."

"Can't you?" I asked wryly. "You didn't find out you were probably a shifter for nineteen years, and you might not have access to your wolf until you're twenty."

"Honestly, I have a hard time wrapping my head around it. It's strange to think I could have this power inside of me that I've been completely cut off from."

"Yeah, I can't imagine not having my wolf with me. Even before shifting, I could still feel him growing inside me."

Lyssa nodded. "Well, I guess we'll face that when and if it happens."

"That's been working for us so far."

"More or less."

We walked a bit longer, chatting idly. But when Lyssa started to yawn, I knew it was time to go.

Typically, if we didn't stay out the whole night, the guys and I would go to a bar and make up for all the calories we burned as wolves. But my life had changed since I had a mate and absolutely no inclination to return to my bachelordom.

Who would have thought that all it took to tame my heart was a pickpocket with an attitude the size of a building and a heart full of compassion?

"I'm gonna head back to the pack for a moment and say goodbye, then we'll head home, okay?"

"You don't have to leave because of me."

"It's not that I have to — I want to." I bent down, pressing a kiss to her

cheek. “If I can go my whole life without spending a night apart, I’d be a happy man.”

Lyssa flushed in that adorable way of hers. “Sap.”

“For you? Absolutely.”

With one of the winks I knew made her heart skip a beat, I returned her to Alma’s side before shifting. Racing off into the forest, I quickly tracked my sister by scent. I trotted up to her, bumping my larger head against hers.

Going to take Lyssa home. She’s tired.

Give her my love, I’m gonna race Talia and Maria.

You know Maria was an actual cross-country athlete in high school and college, right? I asked, my ears flicking forward.

So?

All right, have fun then.

You too.

If she were a human, she would have been winking at me. But I was pretty glad she wasn’t because I didn’t need my little sister giving me a wink-wink-nudge-nudge about my sex life.

I’m going to go find our parents and say goodbye.

I think they’re napping by the river. At the bend with those three pines.

Ah, perfect.

With a bap of my paw against her leg, I headed off. My parents were right where she said, half asleep and curled together along with some of the older couples.

I’m going to head out. Just wanted to let you know.

Oh? Taking that lovely mate of yours home?

Yup.

It will be nice once the poor girl can shift. It’s not right of a wolf to be deprived of pack.

It certainly isn’t, I agreed.

I hope whatever’s happening is dealt with ASAP! There’s only so long you can expect me to wait for grandpups.

Mother, I warned sharply. We’re a long way from that. You need to be realistic.

What I need is to spoil my grandbabies.

I could hear the hint of playfulness in her wolf-speak, but I could only roll my eyes.

Goodbye, Mom.

Goodbye, son.

Before you go, my father added. We should do dinner later this week.

Okay, we can do that. Wednesday is busy for us though, so it'll probably be Thursday or Friday.

It's a plan, then. We'll work out the details later.

I'm sure Lyssa will love that. Be safe, both of you.

With that taken care of, I ran back to where I left Lyssa. Back to where my heart was and always would be.



EVERYTHING SEEMED to get better after the run. There were no feral wolves, no kidnapping, and before I knew it, Wednesday had rolled around. I'd invited all of my inner circle to dinner at my place, planning on cooking with Lyssa again. We hadn't made a meal together since the last time, and I found myself wanting that simple domesticity again.

"Wait, so what am I supposed to do with these veggies again?"

"We're blanching them," I answered calmly. Lyssa asked a lot of questions, but usually only once. Her mind had an amazing capacity to remember everything I said, which was pretty hard not to be flattered by. "Which is scalding them in boiling water or steam for a very short time."

"Okay, and why do this instead of boiling, baking, or frying them?"

"It's a texture thing. Some veggies feel better in the mouth this way, and they lose fewer nutrients from cooking."

"Ah, there's the nutrient thing again. Shifters have to really think a lot about their diet, don't they?"

"In the modern world, yeah."

She nodded dutifully, dipping the metal colander into the big boiling pot, then counting carefully. She was so cute when she was concentrating.

Actually, she was cute all the time except when she was being painfully sexy.

But I didn't get much time to linger on exactly how much I enjoyed whenever Lyssa decided to be a minx because the doorbell rang. It was Parker and Kaleb, the two attached at the hip as usual. While we'd all been friends since childhood, the two youngest had always been somewhat inseparable despite their opposite personalities.

“Hey, y’all! We brought the deviled eggs!”

“I said you didn’t have to bring anything if you were busy.”

Kaleb just shrugged. “We weren’t.”

Right.

I let them in, but I’d hardly returned to Lyssa before more arrived. Then more. In less than half an hour, my apartment was full of friends and family. My parents weren’t there as our dinner with them was the next night, but Emmaline arrived with two bottles of wine and some rice pilaf.

And this time, I couldn’t help but notice her eyes instantly went to Kaleb, flicking to him multiple times like she was trying to hide it. Huh, apparently Lyssa knew what she was talking about.

Then again, when didn’t she?

Speaking of Lyssa, I hurried back to her side yet again to make sure that she wasn’t overwhelmed from the cooking, only to find her chatting animatedly with Parker while carefully adding the sliced tomatoes to the browned butter. I couldn’t help but be impressed with her, my heart swelling in my chest at just how happy and comfortable she looked.

The mood was cozy and lighthearted, indeed a change for us, and I practically floated for the rest of meal prep and serving our friends. But the levity could only last for so long, and eventually, the conversation shifted to what Addison, Hannah, and Jacobian had found out.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much to update on that front. At least not in the way that I would like. Our pack needed our moonstone, which was a given, but it was turning into quite the challenge.

“Speaking of business,” Hannah said, sounding more confident than usual. “How’s working with Emmaline going?”

Everyone looked to Lyssa, but instead of my mate wilting, she just smiled blithely.

“Well, my boss is a total jerk, but other than that, it’s fine.”

Emmaline threw a roll at Lyssa, who just stuck out her tongue. “You’re lucky you’re the best employee I’ve ever hired, otherwise, you’d be out on your ass.”

“I’m the only employee you’ve ever had.”

Kaleb laughed, and Emmaline’s head snapped towards him so quickly I was surprised it didn’t pop off. Why didn’t she pursue him if she was interested in Kaleb? I certainly had nothing against it. He was brilliant, strong, and an amazing fighter. I trusted him with my life and then some.

“Does that make my statement false?” Emmaline retorted, recovering pretty smoothly.

“I guess not.” Lyssa started eating the roll that was thrown at her, looking to be deep in thought. “You know, something Alma Savannah said stuck with me.”

“What’s that?” I asked, more than a bit curious. When I’d come upon them, they had indeed looked like they were swapping secrets.

“She mentioned she doesn’t get to see most of you since she moved to a home farther away from the city. Why don’t you invite her to dinner?”

We all paused. Why... why hadn’t we thought of that? Sure, most of us didn’t rely on Alma like we once had, as our previous one had passed just two years earlier. Savvy had ascended to her spot without much fanfare, and although a reasonable amount of time had passed, the pack had been in so much chaos that she’d had quite the wild journey. With life going so fast, it was easy to go a month or more without seeing her.

That was bad on our part and guilt nibbled at me.

“That sounds great,” Parker said with all of his usual joie de vivre. “Almost like a family dinner!”

Lyssa nodded. “Yeah, exactly that.”

There was an affirmative from everyone, and I immediately started planning menus in my head. When I was a bachelor, I cooked for myself most nights, but they were simple meals. I always figured making food for just me wasn’t worth all the dishes and cleanup. But ever since Lyssa had joined my life, I’d gotten to spread my culinary wings. With pseudo-family meals in the future... well, there was a whole host of recipes that I wanted to try.

The rest of the dinner passed in a pleasant haze, conversation and drinks flowing while plates were cleared. Just like with most gatherings, I didn’t have a lick of leftovers once the meal was done. But that was all right with me. Knowing that I had fed and provided for my pack was plenty gratifying.

Bellies full, Lyssa and I said our goodbyes to everyone as we saw them out, cleaned up, then tucked ourselves into bed. I cuddled around her, content to blissfully dream the night away, only for my phone to wrest me from my sleep in the middle of the night.

I roused instantly. Once I went to bed, I put my phone in Do Not Disturb mode, which meant only people on my emergency contact list could call and get through. Heart thundering, I answered.

“Is it bad?” I asked, knowing it was Theo on the other side.

“Yes,” he answered plainly. That was Theo, never one to pull punches.

“I’ll get dressed. Text me the location.”

“Will do.”

I thought about waking Lyssa so she wouldn’t panic if she roused while I was gone, but she looked so peaceful that I let her slumber. If I got lucky, I would be there and back before she so much as rolled over.

Putting the location that Theo texted me into my GPS, I headed out into the night. My heart fell when I pulled up and three other cars were there. I’d long since learned that the number of vehicles indicated how severe the situation was.

“What’s going on?” I asked as Theo approached me.

“A body was found by another pack.”

“One of ours or theirs?”

“Neither actually. An unidentified wolf, as far as we can tell.”

“Were they attacked while they were human?” Weirdly enough, I hoped that was the case. The thought of someone being powerful enough to take down multiple shifted wolves was terrifying. We weren’t the biggest, baddest creatures in all of the magical underbelly, but we were pretty fearsome.

“It seems they were shifted.”

“Fuck.”

It was all getting to be too much. We needed eyes on it beyond our senses. Pulling out my phone, I dialed up Samson.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” he grouched, picking up on the final ring.

“Yes, I can read a clock.”

“Ew, how ancient are you? We all use our phones now.”

“Samson, this is serious.”

“I know, it’s always serious with wolves.” He yawned. “What’s up?”

“I need you to meet me at the location I’m texting you.”

“You do realize this is how witches get kidnapped, right?”

“I’m not kidnapping you, Samson. One, I wouldn’t want you. Two, it’s a warehouse close to where a body was found.”

“Wait, *body!* What *body?*”

Oh, had I not mentioned that? Yeah, that was probably on me.

“Another wolf’s been murdered. While shifted at that.”

The line was silent for a long moment, and I almost thought the call had

dropped before Samson spoke. “Yeah, yeah. Fine, I’ll be there. But I’m charging you extra for an after-hours call.”

“Whatever happened to witching hours?”

“Those are for those of us who aren’t trapped in a capitalistic hellscape that insists on us having nine-to-fives. Be there in thirty minutes.” With that, he hung up.

I still couldn’t tell if I liked the guy’s spunk or if he annoyed the absolute shit out of me. A problem for later when I didn’t have to worry about someone hunting down wolves.

“Hey, Theo, you think Brenton is still up?”

“I think he’s been on night patrol the past three months, yeah. You want me to call him while you walk the scene?”

I nodded, letting Theo do his thing while I approached the body. It was a gruesome sight, and I hated it, but I made myself look. Part of being an alpha was dealing with all the awful, tragic, and violent things that came with being a shifter. I didn’t enjoy it, but I was determined to do my duty.

Brenton, a police officer in our pack, arrived before Samson, which wasn’t a surprise, and I helped him rope off the crime scene before heading towards the other two alphas that had gathered. While none of us knew who the mysterious wolf was with, we were undoubtedly thinking the same thing: what *if* the body was one of ours?

We discussed a couple of things before heading to the warehouse. I told them I had a witch coming, but Samson ended up being fifteen minutes later than he said, building up plenty of tension in them. And it certainly didn’t help that he showed up with a large coffee in his hand. Where did he even get that at two forty-five in the morning?

“All right, what do you need of me?”

To my surprise, his tone was pretty serious. Apparently, Samson loved to banter, but he drew the line at actual murder.

“We were hoping that you would be able to pick up on any energy left behind or spot things our senses aren’t attuned to.”

“Or senses that have been purposefully obfuscated,” Brenton added.

“Oooh, *obfuscated*, that’s a five-dollar word if I ever heard one.”

“Concentrate, Samson.”

“Right, right. Sorry. Look, I’m not the best at waking up. Show me the victim while I chug this down and we’ll see what I can do.”

We went around to the back of the warehouse, where the body was found,

and Samson froze the moment he saw it, all the color draining from his dark skin, leaving him ashen and drawn.

“You okay?” I asked. I was used to witches being somewhat blasé about life and death, but Samson seemed pretty affected.

“Yeah, sorry. Just never seen a dead body before.”

“Really?” Maybe I shouldn’t have been shocked, but that seemed rare for a magic user.

“I’m a green witch. I handle community gardens and deal in exotic houseplants. The only death I usually have to deal with is because people under- or overwatered.”

“So you can’t help us?”

“I never said that.”

Samson slowly approached the body, his brow furrowed and his hazel eyes intense. He didn’t say anything, possibly the quietest I’d ever heard him be.

The minutes passed with me and the alphas waiting tensely. I could feel the vaguest simmer of magic, but it was so faint on the edge of my consciousness that it was hard to pin down in any way, shape, or form.

“This is pointless,” one of them growled after nearly ten minutes. “We don’t need to bring witches into our business.”

“With all due respect,” Brenton said. “All of us shifters on the force have been trying to look into this behind the scenes, and we’re coming up empty. I think someone’s using magic to block the normal things we would be able to pick up.”

That was my suspicion as well. It was nearly impossible to have nine murders/disappearances and not be able to pick up any scent or trail.

When Samson finally spoke, it was like a jolt through our little group. “I... This wolf, was alone. No pack aura or blood ties lingering here.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Samson nodded, his eyes shuttering closed. “For the most part. He could have biological family roaming around, but no one he considered close enough to bond with. There’s a difference, ya know. Found family and all that.”

It was incredibly odd for any wolf not to have a pack brand after the age of sixteen, and I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, he was tied to Lyssa somehow.

But that thought also made the hackles on my inner wolf rise. If she was

in danger...

“Can you sense out any biological connections?”

“Nah, a human DNA test would do you better on that.”

“Can you tell us anything else?”

Samson shook his head. “No, not right now. But, uh, if it’s not too much for you, I’d like to take a lock of his hair.”

I could feel all of the alphas bristle behind me. “Why do you need that?”

“Gonna try some different green magic through it, see what I can do. Sometimes you have to plant things to get fruit, you know?”

“No,” Brenton answered flatly.

“Ugh, werewolves. So literal.”

“You can take a lock of hair,” I said, cutting off any mounting tension. “But be respectful.”

“I wouldn’t dream otherwise.”

Usually that phrase would *have* to be sarcastic, but he seemed genuine. I watched as he knelt beside the victim, pulling a pocketknife from his jeans.

“Life unfairly taken will be revenge fairly wrought. Rest with your ancestors, walk this world no more, and know that we will justice seek.”

“What was that?” another alpha asked as Samson carefully cut off a bit of the shifter’s fur coat.

“Some would say a prayer, and some would say a blessing. But I wanted to make sure if any soul-snatching magic was afoot, he’d have a way out of it.”

“Wait, witches can do that?”

“Not just witches. Most magic users have at least some subset that can work despicable things like that. You have witches who practice black magic and necromancers who steal life instead of sticking to manipulating corpses. Goetic priests who pact with demons. I could go on.”

I swallowed hard. I thought I was pretty knowledgeable about our magical world, but I hadn’t known there were so many.

“Thank you,” I said finally.

“It’s whatever. Now, if y’all don’t mind, I’m going to go home, plant this, then get back to bed.”

“You sure you can sleep after this?”

“With enough melatonin and chamomile, anything is possible.”

Nodding, I watched as he walked off before returning my attention to the other alphas. After some discussion, Brenton was the one who managed to

take care of the body, as we usually needed someone on the police force to do. Granted, usually that was because they were shifters in their *human* form, but still, it helped to have someone on the inside.

By the time it was all cleaned up and I drove home, it was early in the morning, the sun just starting to stretch its arms for its daily climb.

Yawning as I reached the door, I pulled out my phone to text my sister.

Bad news this morning. I'm gonna drive Lyssa in a couple of hours late, if that's all right?

I wasn't surprised when Emmaline answered right away. She usually liked to get a morning jog in before she started her day. Said it helped her not snap at rude customers.

Is everything okay?

No. Not at all.

Want to talk about it?

Later. At lunch? I'll bring food to make up for stealing away your favorite worker.

Oh, yeah, you're on.

With that taken care of, I kicked off my shoes before making a beeline for the bed. Lyssa was still sleeping, as peaceful as ever. The sight of her filled me with so many different emotions. Worry about her safety, gratitude that she was there, fear for her future, joy at her presence.

It was a lot. More than I had ever imagined. But now that I had it, I wouldn't ever give it up.

Pressing the gentlest kiss I possibly could to her cheek, I slid into bed and held my mate tight.

LYSSA

I woke up feeling fully rested and smelling something delicious. Yeah, that was certainly something I could get used to. But then I realized I was *too* rested and grabbed my phone.

“Crap! I overslept!”

Getting dressed in a rush, I practically ran into the kitchen. “My alarm didn’t go off!”

“Ah, I’m sorry, Lyssa. I turned it off.”

“What? Why?”

“I asked Emmaline if I could drive you in later. She said it was all right, but I didn’t want to wake you, so I went ahead and turned it off.”

Normally, I’d freak out that he just did that of his own volition, but something about his tone and the fact that he asked if *he* could drive me in late told me that something had happened.

“Is everything okay?”

“Just more of the same,” he said, letting me know that *no*, everything was not all right.

Mahlan served me breakfast and I paid close attention to his mannerisms. If I had to guess, something had happened to another wolf while I was asleep, which was most certainly not good.

“Hey, I’m going to need your help again soon. I want to put full effort into searching for your family.”

“Okay,” I said cautiously, sensing that there was a caveat.

“I figured we’d start with DNA tests and databases.”

I couldn’t help that my eyes went a little wide. “Geez, are we at that point

already?”

“Yeah. After all the research Jacobian did with your old schools, your parents came up as nonexistent.”

...*What?*

“What are you talking about?”

“The pictures they had on file were stock images that were AI-generated. They’re not real.”

“That can’t be true,” I murmured, shock coursing through me. “You mean someone went in and deleted photos of my parents and replaced them with random google images?”

“Yeah, most likely after you graduated.”

Anger boiled in my belly. It was one thing to be abandoned by my parents, and it was another to know that someone had purposefully tried to scrub them from existence.

“Here, I had Brenton drop off a kit. Open wide.”

I had no idea who Brenton was or where Mahlan had gotten the large cotton swab he was holding, but I opened my mouth dutifully anyway. It was a relatively painless process, even when he took a couple of strands of my hair.

“Thank you for being so understanding,” he murmured, face cloudy as he packaged it up.

“Why wouldn’t I be? You’re helping me figure out what happened to my family.”

“I guess shifters are pretty wiggy about having their DNA everywhere. Probably all the secrecy and fear of being discovered that we’re usually raised with.”

“I get that.”

We finished up our breakfast and then headed out. But instead of letting me out on the sidewalk, he parked and went in with me.

“Hey, guys, did you have a nice morning?” Emmaline asked, bright and chipper.

“We did. Thanks for letting me borrow her,” Mahlan said, giving his sister a quick side hug. “Would you do me a favor and pick out something special for dinner with our parents tomorrow night?”

“Ooooh, you’re finally sitting down with dear ol’ Mom and Dad?” Emmaline asked, grinning like the imp she was.

“Simmer down, Emmaline.”

“Yeah, yeah. I had a surprise in mind anyway. Just don’t expect your love to be ready until right before dinner.”

“Roger, roger.”

He gave a little salute and then kissed me on the cheek before heading out. A bit sheepish, I looked to Emmaline.

“So, a surprise, huh?”



“HEY, it’s three in the afternoon and I’m hungry again. I know you probably ate a nice lunch with Mahlan, but you want something light?”

“Are you kidding me? Dinner’s still like four or five hours away. Hit me up with a full-sized meal, please and thank you.”

It was true... my stomach was already rumbling. Ever since I started to get meals on the regular, my appetite had steadily increased. I didn’t mind it, but man, it made me wonder how much being homeless had affected me physiologically.

“How about that deli that’s nearby?”

I paled, remembering how Mahlan came bursting in and yelled at me in front of the employees like I was a child. We’d made up since I saw where he was coming from, but geez, I didn’t want to go back and possibly see the same people.

“Uhhh, I really don’t wanna go in there.”

“What? Why?”

“I, uh... I’m just a little embarrassed.”

“What if I head there and grab us something while you watch the shop? Then we can eat together in the office and lock up for half an hour.”

That sandwich *had* been pretty delicious. “Okay, that sounds good to me.”

“Perfect. Text me your order. That place always has a crazy line.”

I nodded, already craving their turkey, bacon, and avocado sandwich. I hadn’t thought it would be that good when I ordered it, only because it was a part of a special with a free drink and bag of chips, but there was some sort of sauce or something they put on it that took it next level.

Quickly I texted her the lunch combo and drink I wanted, then focused on displaying items left in the dressing rooms, making sure always to keep at

least one eye on the door.

Emmaline wasn't gone for very long when I got an eerie feeling. It wasn't very specific initially, barely a tingle along my arms. But then it turned into the hair on the back of my neck standing on end, then the sense of eyes on me.

I carefully moved around the store like I wasn't suspicious, but I was using my peripheral vision to scan for anything amiss. It wasn't until I went to straighten the racks by the front that I finally saw him, a man standing just across the street, facing the shop entrance.

I didn't act like I saw him, continuing to straighten things as I studied him out of the corner of my eye. His features were shadowed by the hat he wore, but from what I could tell, he wasn't too large. Smaller than Mahlan. Something decidedly nondescript about him made my eyes want to slide away, and my mind forget him, like a dream obfuscated by the rush of wakefulness.

Geez, someone had the whole blending thing down.

Honestly, I might have never noticed him if I hadn't spent the last few years taking care of myself and developing my ability to tell between paranoia and healthy suspicion. But years of watching my back had honed my ability to tell when I was being surveilled.

Moving to the other side of the store, I tried to go through the online orders, but it was hard to concentrate and keep the man in view without giving away that I was positioning myself around him. For what it was worth, *he* didn't seem to know that I was watching him *back* instead of just watching me.

But then my phone rang, sending me nearly up to the ceiling. I picked it up, thinking it might just be Mahlan checking in on me. But instead, it was Emma, telling me they were out of spinach and asking if buttercrunch lettuce was all right.

"Yeah, uh, that'll be fine."

"You okay? You sound, I dunno, like something's up."

"Everything's fine," I answered, uncertain why I didn't just say what was going on. "Trying to do online orders."

"Ahhh, those are such a pain and I know you hate them. You don't have to."

"It's okay. I don't mind it."

"Well, thank you. I'll be back in ten."

I hung up, my eyes sweeping back towards the other side of the street and the man was gone. That probably wasn't good, and I knew that, but with so much on my plate, I tucked it to the back of my mind to worry about later.

I had a dinner with Mahlan's parents to attend the next day.



I HEADED INTO WORK, a little apprehensive of that strange man from the previous day, but I hardly even made it to the office before Emmaline came hurrying out.

“Is my brother gone?”

“Yeah, he said he needs to catch up on some stuff in the office because he's gotten behind.”

“Sounds about right. A whole bunch has been going on, that's for sure.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I ask because we're going out.”

“Wait, what?”

“I'm closing the shop for today, and we're going out.”

I frowned at her, feeling a bit like a doll in the wind. “I wish you and Mahlan would tell me about things before just doing them.”

“That would ruin the surprise, though. Come on!”

Grabbing my hand, Emma urged me out, locking the door as we went. Although I was a bit annoyed, I was somewhat relieved to break up my schedule. If I was being followed, mixing up my schedule was the best thing to do about it. It could throw them off completely or even give me a better chance to spot them since they wouldn't be as prepared for me.

We hopped into her car and drove into the more affluent part of the city. I had no idea where we were going until she pulled behind one of those high-end spas, and it all clicked.

“Oh! The spa day we talked about!”

“What better way to prepare for a dinner with the parents-in-law, am I right?”

I balked. “Technically, they're not my in-laws. Mahlan and I aren't *married*.”

“You're mated. In wolf culture, that's way more important.”

“Oh...” I needed to think about the ramifications of that.

“But anyway, come on. We’re about ten minutes early, but we should get in there.”

We speed-walked into the spa, which was attached to a super luxury resort. I’d eyed it plenty of times on some of my city exploration stints but naturally had never gone in.

We went through the entrance, which, interestingly enough, had us walk through the left side of the lobby to a set of crystalline doors. We were almost into what was sure to be quite a lustrous spa when something caught the corner of my eye.

“Shit!” I grabbed Emmaline and pulled her behind one of the thick, leafy plants taller than us.

“What the hell, Lyssa.”

“Shh! That’s the CEO guy.”

Peeking my head out, I watched the familiar man walk through the lobby.

“Why don’t we want him seeing us?”

“I dunno. It just seems like we shouldn’t. Crossing streams and everything.”

The man went towards what I guessed was the hall where the elevators were, and I heaved a sigh. “All right,” I said, turning back to Emmaline. “Should be good.”

“I hope so. This is going to make us late.”

We both stepped out from the plant, keeping my eyes on the hall he’d disappeared down. But I was so concerned with that, that I wasn’t quite paying attention to where I was going until I ran smack dab into someone.

“Sorry!” I blurted, stumbling back before realizing exactly who it was. Naturally, it was Rex Bronson. The guy whose company we’d infiltrated.

Just my luck!

“It’s me who should be apologizing,” he said, sounding less imperious than he had the last time I met him. “Are you- Hey, I know you.”

I affixed a smile on my face that I hoped wasn’t awkward. “OMG, yeah. I totally embarrassed myself in front of you, didn’t I?”

I did my best to sound like an airhead. I’d learned long ago that if I presented myself as stupid to men, they would usually believe it and then underestimate me.

“It was a stressful day, I understand. We all have them.”

“Wow, that’s so nice of you to say.” And very different from what Parker had told me later. Mahlan wasn’t happy that the youngest in his pack had

blurted Bronson's insults, but I was thoroughly amused by it.

"Uh, sorry to interrupt, but we only have five minutes until our appointment and these took forever to get."

"I wouldn't want to keep you," he said, tipping his head. "Have a lovely day pampering yourself, ladies."

"Will do!"

Grateful for Emmaline's distraction, we both headed into the spa. It was as gorgeous on the inside as I expected, but I wasn't prepared to be greeted with oversized, incredibly soft bathrobes and champagne flutes.

"Sorry, I can't drink," I said, deciding to be honest.

"Don't worry about that," the woman handing them to us said softly. "That was noted in your file, so this is sparkling, nonalcoholic rosé with strawberries."

"Well, in that case, don't mind if I do."

It was like something out of a movie. We were whisked to the back to sit in a sauna, sweating it up while sipping our fake alcohol and then cool, refreshing cucumber water. Then it was a massage, followed by a facial. A haircut and a soak in their 'mountain spring water' rinse to get any sweat and stray hair from my cut off.

From there, they dyed my hair, doing a subtle sort of honey balayage, then styled it in beachy, effortless waves. It wasn't something I could ever do on my own, but I felt like a million bucks.

I thought that was it. After all, we'd been at the spa for like six hours. I knew I would be paying well into the hundreds of dollars, but thanks to my contract with Mahlan, I had plenty to spare.

Which was wild, by the way. It wasn't even a couple of months earlier that I remembered carefully counting my pennies to see if I could buy a bag of microwavable rice to make at a nearby gas station. Now I had over a thousand to my name. Maybe even more. I didn't really pay attention to my bank account because I still wasn't used to having it, and since I'd given the information to both Mahlan and Emmaline, they deposited my pay in there without me having to bother to keep track.

Wild how much my life improved because I decided to pickpocket the wrong guy. At first, I'd thought it was a curse, but I was beginning to feel the exact opposite.

I thought I was done after that, but then they pulled us into another area that was much more astringent smelling. Confused, I had no idea what we

were doing until I saw big chairs with buckets of water at the base, then racks of nail polish.

Oh! I was getting my nails done!

It was my first ever mani-pedi, and it was an interesting process. I didn't really like her handling my nails, and she kept pushing acrylics, but Emmaline was pretty adamant I just needed polish. She almost seemed outright irritated by the repeat suggestions, but it wasn't until she firmly said, 'our friend group isn't into that,' that I realized acrylic nails probably weren't a good thing for a shifter to have. It would be a shame to spend seventy dollars on a set of magnetic, holographic acrylics just to shift into a wolf and blast them off into space.

Then again, it wasn't like I could shift. Was Emmaline hoping that would change? It certainly seemed so. But as far as I knew, we hadn't made any progress on that front. Heck, my DNA test had only been taken the previous day.

By the time we finished, I felt like I was floating on air. If that was a professional massage, I needed those more often. I was sore, sure, but in an incredible way.

"So, how was it?" Emmaline asked as we walked back to her car.

"Amazing. Magical. More than I ever thought of."

"Glad you had fun. We should do it again."

"Definitely." I was so blissed out that it wasn't until we were pulling away that I realized I hadn't paid. "Whoa, stop the car!"

"Huh? Why?"

"I just ripped them off in there!"

"Pfft, don't worry about that. I took care of it."

"Emma!"

"*What?* It's your first ever spa day. Let a friend treat you. If you want, you can pay for the next round."

"Don't think that I won't," I said, crossing my arms in a pout. But Emmaline just laughed and drove me home, dropping me off and waiting until I walked through the main doors before heading off.

"Hey, Mahlan," I said as I stepped in, realizing that he wasn't in the kitchen where I expected him to be. We still had about three hours before his parents were supposed to show up, but I figured he'd start prepping right after lunch.

Before I could panic, however, I heard him shuffling around in his office.

Heading there, I found him staring dubiously at his computer.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just-” he stopped himself short the moment he looked up, his eyes going wide. “You look *incredible!*”

I did a little spin, really hamming it up since he looked significantly cheered up. “You like? Emmaline and I did a little spa day.”

He let out a whistle, leaving his desk behind. “It seems we have a habit of making you play hooky, but I can’t complain about the results.”

“It was so much fun,” I said, standing on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. The slight stubble of his chiseled chin scraped against me, making a low fire start in my belly. But before I could distract myself with how hot my mate was, I remembered to mention something important.

“I ran into the CEO there, by the way.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t a big deal and he didn’t cause any problems, but it was hella awkward.”

“I’m glad he didn’t cause issues, but I’ll be glad once your self-defense classes start. It will give me peace of mind.”

“Please, it’s not like he would do anything in full public like that.”

But Mahlan just shrugged. “You never know. Until your suppression is lifted, I’m going to continue to be a worrywart.”

“Fair enough.” I didn’t want to go down that rabbit hole, so I changed the topic. “By the by, shouldn’t you have started dinner by now?”

“Crap! I completely lost track of time, yeah. I was supposed to have Taylor pick up the ingredients I wanted!”

“Is there not enough time?”

“Not for her to make it there and come here. I’ll just head out really quick. Would you mind prepping by cutting up the peppers and onions I set out? I’ll do the rest.”

“Yeah, that’s no problem. You do what you gotta do.”

Stepping to the side, I let him exit and headed to our room, trying to pick a casual but somewhat dressy outfit for his parents. I didn’t have a good impression of what style they liked, but I figured if anyone knew, it was Emmaline.

But now that I had a cell phone, it was easy enough to dial her number and wait for her to pick up, which she did on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Emma, it’s me. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Not at all. I had to stop and get gas, but the line is insanely long.”

“Ooooh, maybe I have good timing then because I’m trying to think of what to wear for your parents.”

“Honestly, they’re just so happy that you exist that you could show up in a trash bag and they’d probably tell you that you look amazing.”

“But still, I wanna at least try.”

“Okay, well, they’re a bit conservative, but not backwardly so. My mom is super in love with retro forties and fifties looks while my dad tends to like monochromatic with a single pop of color.”

“Really? Your dad’s fashion sense is that strong?” Maybe it was prejudiced of me, but I was used to men having zero interest in stylish clothing.

“Yeah, he’s the one that got me into fashion. He was a little mystified at what to do with a daughter, so he’d sit down and watch runway shows with me for bonding. The funny thing is that I probably never would have been into it if not for that.”

“Aww, that’s cute,” I said, imagining a younger Emmaline watching Victoria Secret models strut their stuff down the runway. Granted, he probably showed her less... provocative shows, but it was just what my mind went to.

“Here, I’m gonna gather a few outfits and send you pictures. Is that okay?”

“Sure, whatever helps.”

I went to do just that when there was a ring at the door. “Huh, I wonder who that could be?”

“What who could be?”

“The doorbell just rang. Maybe it’s your brother with the groceries.”

“Isn’t that kind of fast?”

“Yeah, a little. But I think he was just picking them up, not shopping. Here, I’ll put you in my pocket for a moment.”

Heading to the front door, I was ready to flex my muscles and do some real grocery hauling, but when I opened it, it wasn’t Mahlan at all.

It was the man from outside of the shop.

Oh, shit!

I yelped and backpedaled on instinct, which usually would have worked great for me but unfortunately allowed him to step into the apartment. I tried

to slam the door and shove him out, but the man tried to grab me, so instead, I ducked and rushed towards the kitchen.

It wasn't the easiest thing to do backward, but I wasn't about to turn my face away from my attacker. I may not have been a self-defense expert, but I knew that much.

"What do you want?" I screamed, going into fight-or-flight mode. My mind supplied me dozens of factoids, from noticing it didn't look like he was wearing a jock to the fact that he was weaponless. So far, at least.

The biggest question was... was he just a human or a shifter? If he was a wolf or any other magical person, I knew I wouldn't get out of this with my skin. All I could do was hope.

He dove for me, trying to grab at my hair, but I grabbed the cutting board and batted his arm away with it. I swung too hard, turning my body enough that he could kick me in my hip and slam me into the counter.

"*Fuck!*" I gasped, falling to the floor. He tried to stomp down on my stomach, but I rolled so that he only caught one of my butt cheeks. Popping to my feet, I dove right over the kitchen island, desperate to get something between us. It worked, but unfortunately, he was on the side of the knives, and I was not.

Probably an oversight on my part.

He grabbed one, because, of course he did, and rushed around the island. I did my best to dodge and keep ahead of him, but he caught the side of my bicep with a thin slice.

"You wanna kill me, is that it?"

We circled the island again, and maybe in another situation, watching two adults playing Ring Around the Rosie would have been amusing. But considering it was my life on the line, I didn't really appreciate the humor of the moment.

And he was getting closer, lunging forward to slash at me multiple instances. It was only a matter of time before one of them hit home, and then I would be a goner.

I wish I knew what to do, but my self-defense classes weren't for another few days, and I'd never had to deal with someone with a knife. The couple of times I had been threatened that way, I'd just run for my life until I was practically on the other side of the city.

The man fainted forward, and I dodged, only for him to elbow me in the side of the head. My entire world spun, and when my vision cleared, I was on

the floor with the man standing over me, knife in hand.

So, this is it, huh?

At least I hadn't died in abject misery. I'd gotten to taste food I never thought I would, wear amazing clothes, and make tons of friends. It wasn't so bad. Still, there was so much *more* I wanted to try.

But he didn't stab me. Instead, he grabbed my foot and dragged me towards the door. Wait... if he wasn't trying to kill me, was he trying to *take* me?

My thoughts flashed to everything Mahlan had told me about the missing wolves, and I couldn't help but think that I was suddenly about to become one of them. Abducted, taken somewhere else, and maybe have my body dumped for someone else to find.

"Stop it!" I tried to fight — I really did. But my head was spinning and then he kicked me in my chin, knocking me prostrate again as he dragged me.

And then the door flew by.

Wait, they're not supposed to do that.

It was like the world suddenly inverted, a dozen things happening simultaneously. The door slammed into the wall, bursting into big, wooden chunks, and a dark shape rushed forward, furry, massive, and full of teeth.

The shape tackled the man in front of me, hitting me with a spray of blood. Screaming and the noise of flesh ripping filled the place, leaving me lying there while trying to come to terms with what was happening.

Mahlan was definitely going to need to hire a cleaner. Probably one that wouldn't immediately report him to the cops.

Eventually, the screaming faded into a wet, gurgling sound, and I slowly made my way to my feet. Cautiously, I walked around the kitchen counter, where I saw the man's body and a reddish-colored wolf standing over him.

The wolf wasn't as big as Mahlan, but certainly plenty intimidating to me. But the moment I came into sight, it shifted back, revealing Emmaline with blood smeared across her face.

"Your phone," she gasped, her visage pale. "I heard what happened and sped here."

"Thank God," I managed to blurt out before rushing forward and pulling her into a hug. "Emmaline, you saved my life!"

"I'm sorry you had to see all that."

"You don't have to apologize for anything. Seriously, Emmaline, I thought I was dead!"

“Never. You’re here and safe. I’ve got you.”

I held onto her for dear life, not sure if I wanted to laugh or cry. Relief was flooding through me, but I also knew that there were going to be so many repercussions to deal with.

“Hey, this caused a real mess. I need to call my brother. Are you going to be okay if I do that?”

The thought of having Mahlan back in the apartment sent an urgent need running through me. “Yes, please. Call him right now.”

“Okay, I’m gonna let go and do that. But you’re safe now, Lyssa. I want you to know that.”

“Trust me, I do.”

MAHLAN

Someone had tried to hurt Lyssa.
Someone had tried to hurt Lyssa!

When Emma called me, I pulled a one-eighty in my car and raced back home. I broke pretty much every speed limit along the way, but no one stopped me. I didn't even bother to park my car, leaving it in the valet section of the apartment building to be dealt with.

The first thing I noticed was that my apartment had no door, and a curtain was hung over it. Several neighbors were out in the hall, looking curious, and I gave them the best chagrined expression I could manage.

“Jealous ex. She won't be allowed back into the building.”

Some looked like they bought it, and some didn't, but honestly, I couldn't care less. After a quick text to Theo to get me a door and a cleaning crew ASAP, I slid inside.

Naturally, my eyes went to Lyssa first, who was holding one of Emma's hands as my sister carefully wiped blood from her face at the kitchen sink. Considering what she told me, I had expected an absolute bloodbath. It was a relief to see she'd only made a mild mess. At least for a wolf, that was.

“Theo's sending a crew soon,” I said, going over to my mate and pulling her into a hug. “I'll cancel the dinner with my parents.”

“What? No!”

I was surprised at Lyssa's objections and looked down at her, taking in her wounds. Emmaline said she wasn't that hurt, but I could see a bruise blooming on her chin and a thin cut on one of her arms.

“Baby girl, I don't think you're in the right place for an in-law meal.”

“No, I want them here,” she insisted, looking up at me with her big, beautiful eyes. “I want to be surrounded by family.”

As stressful as the situation was, her saying that still filled me with all sorts of good emotions. She saw my parents as family. That... that was huge. Goodness, I loved her so much.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yeah. I know you don’t have time to cook, but maybe we can just order something and plate it up?”

“Sure, whatever you want. But let’s get you looked over and cleaned up a little, shall we?”

In truth, I wanted to get her away from the body and all the blood while it was taken care of. So I ushered her to the bedroom and carefully tended to her.

More than anything, I wanted to tuck her into bed and let her rest, but she seemed to be looking forward to dinner with my parents. It was a very bizarre situation, but I wasn’t about to argue with her.

Putting witch hazel on her chin and making sure she took some pain meds, I paid close attention to her scent and her heart rate. She was rattled but didn’t seem to be in shock or shutting down. That was good but a bit surprising. I would make sure to pay close attention to her for the rest of the night.

The cut on her arm was so thin that I just had to wipe it down with alcohol pads and then use some butterfly bandages to make sure it didn’t open later. When that was all settled, Lyssa showed me the outfit she picked out and then changed.

Both of us ignored the sound of people coming in and cleaning. Knowing Theo, he set up police tape outside and probably had Brenton out there while the new door was installed. Theo was always good at the details like that.

What a strange day. I was certainly glad Lyssa was safe, but someone knew where she was. Someone had cared enough to hunt her down. All of my worst fears had been confirmed and shoved into my face.

But I tried not to let my panic show. Lyssa didn’t need that on top of everything else. I kept her occupied by suggesting different socks, tights, or house shoes I thought would go with her outfit. When I eventually ran out of that, I asked her what we should order and was grateful when finding the right place and putting the order in took a good chunk of time.

All in all, it was a little over an hour before Emmaline and Theo knocked

on my bedroom door, their scents concerned but not abjectly aggressive or scared.

“Yeah?” I asked, opening it to find that my sister had cleaned up and Theo was as spotless as ever.

“Door is in, cleaning crew is done, the body is dealt with,” was my right-hand man’s efficient reply.

“I called our parents to tell them what was up. They said you could cancel if you wanted, but I explained Lyssa was pretty adamant.”

I nodded. “I appreciate that. But I still want two bodyguards on patrol on this floor and a permanent one for Lyssa on work days.”

“Wait a minute,” Lyssa objected, walking over to lean into the doorframe with me. “I do not need some babysitter!”

“Lyssa, you were attacked and nearly taken today!”

“But I wasn’t! Besides, I’d already scoped the guy out before. It’s not like he had the total drop on me.”

“What? Are you kidding me? You’ve seen this guy before?”

“Yeah, outside of Emmaline’s shop.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I was still trying to gather more info on him.”

I let out a grunt of frustration and realized it was not the time to yell about it, even though I wanted to. If Lyssa had just *warned* me, we might have avoided the attack altogether. If only she weren’t so determined to always do everything all on her own.

Turning away from her, I decided to address Theo instead. “Get a DNA test on that man. Try to find out what a human was doing attempting to kidnap someone from an alpha’s territory.”

“Yes, alpha.”

He headed out, but Emmaline stuck around. She was a godsend, as Lyssa suddenly seemed pretty angry with me. But I didn’t have the wherewithal to deal with it, so instead, I hopped into my inner circle’s chat, updating them and setting up a meeting for the next night.

Urgency was running thick in my veins, so I messaged Samson too, telling him I needed to meet with him the next day, which was nonnegotiable. I didn’t wait for his reply, as I was notified that our food had arrived.

The rest of the night seemed to speed up after that, with Lyssa and me barely getting the food out before my parents arrived. It was a little awkward, trying to have a normal meal while what happened hung in the air, but Lyssa

seemed plenty soothed by it.

And when push came to shove, I would choose whatever made Lyssa feel better every time. She was my center, my haven, and I would *not* let anyone harm her.

Ever.

Thankfully, my parents were adept at rolling with the punches and heaped plenty of praise onto Lyssa, from her outfit to laughing loudly at her jokes to even jokingly badgering her about grandchildren. Well, that last one was my mother, and while I normally, usually wouldn't let that fly, Lyssa seemed amused by it.

They stayed well into the night, and I got the feeling they were just as much making sure Emmaline and I were okay as they were Lyssa. I felt... alrightish, but it was hard to ignore the bubbling rage building within me.

A line had been crossed and there was no going back. I couldn't procrastinate any longer or try to give the situation space. I was getting our pack's moonstone back and breaking Lyssa's suppression, one way or the other.

It was nearly eleven by the time my parents left, and Emmaline went with them, no doubt anxious not to be alone.

"Let's leave the clean-up for tomorrow," I murmured to Lyssa, taking her into my arms. Strangely enough, she seemed almost back to normal, if not pretty weary. What kind of stressful life had she lived as a street urchin to deal with trauma so well? I knew plenty of wolves who would implode if they went through half of what she did. "I'm sure Emmaline will want the day off."

"Yeah, probably," Lyssa murmured, intertwining her fingers with mine. "Was that her first kill?"

"No, but she hasn't had too many. She's much more of a pacifist than I am."

"But she did it for me."

"Of course. She adores you. She'd fight anyone who ever threatened you."

"I know. And... it's nice not to be on my own anymore. Thank you. For everything. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the man."

"I know you didn't do it intentionally," I soothed. "Come on, why don't we get you to bed and put this awful night behind us."

"Okay. But it wasn't *all* bad. I had an amazing spa day and a lovely

dinner with your parents and sister.”

“Yeah, that was nice, wasn’t it?”

Hand in hand, we walked to the bedroom. Both changing into loose pajamas, we slipped under the covers, and Lyssa nestled safely in my arms. I didn’t think I would be comfortable letting her go for a good long while, but I was sure she wouldn’t complain.

I was all set to go to sleep when Lyssa pressed a kiss to the underside of my jaw, kittenish and soft. I looked down at her, so full of affection and concern, only for her to kiss my lips.

It started tentatively, barely there. But she increased her pressure quickly, an underlying urgency to the act. Surprised, I let her continue until she pushed me onto my back and straddled my waist.

“Lyssa, what are you doing?”

“I would have thought that part was obvious,” she answered, looking at me through half-lidded eyes. Her lips were curved wickedly, smirking at me like she was a succubus in the flesh.

“Lyssa, it’s been a strange day. You don’t have to....”

“I want to,” she murmured, leaning down to kiss me again. “I love you, Mahlan, so much. And I want to be connected to you tonight.”

She loved me.

She. Loved. Me!

It was the first time she’d ever said it aloud and it moved me, moved me right down to my core. I gripped the hair at the back of her neck, holding her to me as I deepened the kiss.

Our tongues moved against each other, my body quickly heating up as she ground against me. Heart thundering, I knew I would give her whatever she wanted.

LYSSA

I could feel myself growing wetter, and it was such a delicious sensation. I knew Mahlan could sense it, too, because his teeth grazed against my lips a pinch harder.

But the slightest sensation of pain made everything better, my body responding in kind.

“You’re so beautiful,” Mahlan murmured when we broke apart, his hand sliding between us to cup my breast, his thumb worrying at my nipple.

“I feel that way when you look at me like that.”

“Then I’m never gonna stop looking.”

“You might need to blink eventually,” I chuckled before the noise shifted into a breathy sigh. God, he felt so *good*.

I knew it was probably strange to want to bang the hell out of my mate after almost being kidnapped and having dinner with his parents, but I was so overwhelmed by my *love* for him. If someone had attacked me before, I would have been SOL. But thanks to Mahlan and everyone he’d surrounded me with, I was safe. Protected. *Cherished*.

And that was a good feeling. A *really* good feeling. One that bubbled through me like a fizzing soda, filling me so full to bursting that I had to share it with Mahlan.

Besides, I’d liked the first time we’d slept together. When he’d first entered me, there’d been a pinch of pain, and the stretching sensation was so *strange*. But I had a good time once I was accustomed to it. I was more than eager to repeat the experience.

I ground against him harder, enjoying the pleasure building up within me.

It felt good to be in control and set the pace with someone so powerful and masculine below me.

When my satin shorts were properly soaked, I shimmied down his body a little, pulling his boxers down. He was already hard, his cock springing forward like it was on a coil.

I swallowed hard, surprised that had all fit inside me, but with a little luck and determination, I was going to do it all over again.

I couldn't wait.

"Lyssa, are you certain?" Mahlan asked, his hand cupping my cheek in his tender way. His touch made my heart flutter and the more open side of me believe that anything could be possible.

"Absolutely," I answered, gripping him. I was quickly getting lost in the moment. The skin of his cock was so different from everything else, smooth and soft, yet also with a sort of turgid leatheriness to it that I hadn't experienced anywhere else.

Positioning myself above him, I slid his head along my slick folds, relishing how he hissed.

"Does that feel good?" I murmured, continuing to tease him. Mahlan liked to call me a brat from time to time, and at the moment, I certainly felt that way. Watching how my body affected him and made him groan was so enjoyable.

"Fuck, you're already so wet for me."

"I am," I agreed, gasping as it brushed over my clit. Oh, I *liked* that.

I kept that up for maybe a minute, Mahlan's hands all over me. Arousal pooled in my belly and spread to every limb, building an inferno inside me.

Even though I was the one doing the teasing, there was only so much I could take, and I positioned his dripping head at my entrance.

"Just take it slow, okay?" Mahlan urged, his large hands resting on my soft waist. Goodness, when he held me like that, I felt so gorgeous. Like a goddess perched on her place of worship, ready to be served.

"I know," I murmured before carefully sinking onto him.

Oh...

The slide was so intense, so quick, stealing my breath away. There was that same strange stretching sensation, but instead of being alarming, it was a promise of something so much more.

"That's it, that's my baby girl. You take me so well."

Something within me preened at the compliment, my ego inflating as I

slowly, ever so slowly, slid down. I *did* take him well because we were meant to be together. He and I, no matter what was going on with my inner wolf.

One of Mahlan's hands left my waist to slide between us, his fingers finding that ever-so-sensitive button above my entrance. The moment he touched that spot, it was like electricity flowed through me, sending jolts of pleasure from my scalp down to my toes.

"Yes," I mewled in a voice that hardly sounded like my own. "Yes, just like that."

I could feel my core fluttering around him at the added stimuli, and with his help, I managed to sink the rest of the way, taking him fully.

"Fuuuuck, that's it, baby girl."

"Oh my God," I breathed, sitting there and letting myself adjust to him. "You feel so good."

"You do too," he rasped, still working away with his fingers. It lit a fire, so I posted my hands on his chest and pushed myself upward.

The friction of it was delicious, sharp, and crisp against my senses. I loved it, pushing myself up as far as I could before meticulously sinking down.

It was a delicious cycle, building with every movement into something incredible. I could feel it multiplying by the second, glowing bright and golden within me.

More, more, *more*. I wanted everything he could give me, so I pushed myself. And what a reward. His other hand left my waist to toy with one of my nipples again, and the counterpoints of pleasure were almost too much.

Almost.

I was surprised how fast we could go, but it was like something else had taken over me. My every sense was dialed up to eleven, urging me to push my limits. Mahlan's solid, muscular form pressed between my thighs, his firmness against the parts of my body that were beginning to fill out. His scent, heady with his own arousal, coaxed me further into mine — the sound of his voice, syrupy thick with desire.

Fuck, it was all so good. I wished it could go on forever, but I felt my end approaching far too soon.

"Are you close, baby girl? I can feel you gripping me like a vice."

I nodded, whimpering instead of using actual words, but Mahlan understood what I meant anyway. His hand between us increased in pressure and speed while he pistoned up into me, driving him even deeper, almost into

my soul.

“Yes, yes, Mahlan, *yes!*”

My orgasm hit me like a tidal wave, all-encompassing and utterly delicious. It whited out my vision, leaving me with no recourse other than to hold onto Mahlan and ride it — and him — for dear life.

As terrifying as the attack had been, it paled in comparison to the rush of being with Mahlan. I was safe. I was desired. I was protected, happy, and oh, so very much in love.

“*Lyssa!*”

I felt it when Mahlan reached his own climax, his hands gripping my hips with iron strength as he thrust up into me a final time. It was perfect in every single way, and when we both returned to earth, I slumped against him.

“You’re perfect, Lyssa,” Mahlan breathed, kissing the top of my head. “In every way.”

“I’m not,” I said, utterly breathless. “But I appreciate that you think so.”

He chuckled, and goodness... it was a sound I could get drunk on, considering how loopy I was from the hormones rushing through me. “Brat.”

“*Your* brat,” I corrected, snuggling against him.

“Yes, my brat. Forever and always.”

“Forever and always,” I agreed.

And I meant it from the bottom of my heart.



I DRUMMED my fingers against the dash nervously as Mahlan drove us to my meeting with the witch. It was my first time meeting the guy, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it would be anything like the blood ritual I’d watched before.

I would do it if I had to, but I really didn’t want to drink anyone’s blood. I realized my opinion on that might change once my ‘inner wolf’ was released — *if* it ever was — but I certainly wasn’t there now.

Although it would have been nice to have Mahlan’s accelerated healing — sure, I’d always recovered pretty fast from little slips and falls, but I had nothing on him. And considering that the bruise on my chin was beginning to darken into deep purples and blues, I sure could use a little mystical healing power.

“By the way, I don’t know if I mentioned it, but this guy can be a bit prickly. Don’t take it personally.”

What did this guy have to be like for Mahlan to feel the need to mention it to me? Big yikes there.

“Is he a real ass?”

“Kind of. But mostly just a witch.”

“I... is that an insult?”

“No, but they do tend to be a particular way. I try not to hold it against them considering their plight in life, but it’s hard not to.”

“Noted,” I murmured.

I was still nervous. But I was also still riding high on the night Mahlan and I spent together, so I tried to just enjoy the ride. We were headed to an area of the city that I recognized, as it wasn’t that far from my old stomping grounds.

“Are we going to his house?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think he wants me to know where he lives, which I respect. We’re meeting up at the skate park that’s partially closed down.”

“And it’s safe to practice magic in public like that?”

“He says so.”

“Huh.”

I nodded, looking out the window as I recognized multiple places from when I was first kicked out. They looked a lot more worn than I remembered, but maybe that was because of the years that had passed. Life in the city wasn’t exactly easy, that was for sure.

Maybe five or so minutes later, we pulled into a cracked parking lot, and Mahlan led me down into a concrete area that I assumed was the skating park. I wasn’t clear on why part of the park had been closed, as I usually avoided it anyway. Too many males who were my age or older when I was still very young.

“Ah, there he is,” Mahlan said, pointing to a tunnel up ahead. I didn’t see anything, but he led me forward towards the large skateboarding structure until I saw there was indeed a man standing there.

... a vaguely familiar man.

“Wait a minute,” he said, stepping out of the shadows.

I took in all of his features. His broad nose, the sharp angles of his forehead and full lips that I’d always been jealous of.

“Sam?” I blurted, completely gobsmacked.

“Holy hell, Lyssa, is that you?”

We ran towards each other, arms open, and I couldn't help but laugh borderline hysterically.

“You know each other?” Mahlan asked with obvious shock, walking a few steps closer to us.

“Yeah, we know each other,” I said, letting go of my long-lost friend to face my mate. “This is Sam, he's the guy who taught me how to pickpocket.”

“What?”

“I met Lyssa here when she was a tiny little bean just coming to the shelter. Totally unprepared for street life.”

“Hey, you're only a year older than me. Why don't you little bean yourself?”

I couldn't believe it. I'd always wondered what happened to Samson since neither of us had phones, and we'd both split from the shelter. I had figured we'd eventually run into each other again, but we never had.

Until now, I supposed.

“Wait, you pickpocket?” Mahlan asked, addressing Samson.

“I am a man of many talents.”

“Why not just use magic?”

“Because magic can draw attention, and I was a teenager. It's not like I was born out of the womb with meticulous skills.”

“... Right.”

“Anyway, how are you, Lyssa? Look at you, all grown up. I tried looking for you, but was sure you had gotten snatched up off the street when I couldn't find you.”

“I changed schools so they wouldn't find out I was homeless,” I answered honestly. “Which put me on the complete opposite side of the city. And then I found this amazing place to squat in, so I didn't stray far.”

“You stuck with school? Amazing. I'm proud of you, friend.”

“I graduated this past month.”

“Incredible.”

We hugged again until I felt a strange tension from Mahlan behind me. Was he jealous? No, that would be utterly silly.

“Can you break the curse or whatever's cutting off her wolf?”

“Wow, chill, man. It's not that quick. Now that she's here, I need to have her soak in my magic for a bit.”

“Think you could get on with it? Someone attacked Lyssa yesterday.”

“What?” Samson said, head snapping to my mate. “Who would’ve?”

“We’re still working on that.”

“All right, so the situation is even more dire than I would like. But if we go a bit towards the west side of the park, these mulberry trees form a sort of fairy circle. We should head there so I can get started.”

“By all means, lead the way,” I said, gesturing in a direction I hoped was vaguely west.

I ended up being somewhat right. Samson walked in that direction before taking a left turn around what I was pretty sure was called a halfpipe. A few moments later, I saw the very circle of trees that he was talking about.

Strangely enough, a ripple went across my skin, like invisible spiderwebs brushing over me, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

“You feel it, don’t you?” Samson asked with a cheeky grin. “The power of it?”

“Yeah, I do. But it doesn’t feel safe.”

“Fae are never safe. You wolves think we witches are slippery, but —” he interrupted himself to let out a whistle. “— we’ve got nothing on the multitude of fairy folk.”

Nodding, I followed him into the circle, trying not to let the heebie-jeebies get to me. Once we were in, he sat down cross-legged, and I followed suit, Mahlan standing just outside the circle.

“Okay, so I’m not gonna lie to you, Missy Lyssie,” Samson said, using a childhood nickname. “This is probably gonna feel uncomfortable to you.”

“That’s good to know,” I answered wryly.

“No, I’m serious for a moment. I’m a green witch for the most part, so my magic specializes in plants. I can do plenty of other stuff without problem, but you’re, uh, very much not a plant.”

“Glad you picked up on that.”

He huffed. “As cheeky as ever. That’s why I liked you. I promise I won’t hurt you, but I want you to be prepared for some weird uncomfiness.”

“If you can break whatever hold is on me, it’ll be worth it.”

“I’m gonna be honest... that’s not happening tonight.” My spirit fell at that, but Samson continued. “Tonight is me magically scouring you and trying to find out everything I can. Even if I find your curse and everything, I’ll need at least overnight, possibly more, to figure out how to break it.”

Oh, that made sense. It was like scientists studying a sickness and then needing time to make an antidote.

“Okay.”

“Good. Now that we’re on the same page, give me your hands and close your eyes.”

I did so, trying to focus on my breathing and exude calm. Samson’s voice continued. “I want you to reach into yourself, the deepest places you can find, and just stay there as best as you can.”

Those were some strange instructions, but I did my best, trying to sink into a part of myself I usually tried to avoid.

I felt what had to be Samson’s magic flow into me. It started at my fingertips and spread up my arms, going into my chest. It was a strange sensation, bordering between something out of a horror movie and a kind of a massage. The green witch part made sense as glowing vines appeared in my mind’s eye, gently spreading through me.

Flashes of my childhood appeared, hazy and pale, but most definitely there. I guessed that was Samson searching through the ‘before times,’ as I occasionally thought of them. I wasn’t looking forward to-

“What are you doing?”

“We’re leaving, Lyssa.”

“Leaving? Where are we going?”

Suddenly, the woman who I’d always called my mother whirled on me. “No, Lyssa, we are leaving. Not you!”

Yeah, there it was. I knew from the moment we’d sat down that I’d probably have to relive that night, but that didn’t make it any easier.

The vines spread further, searching, searching, *searching*, and I found myself being pulled along with them. Past my insecurities, past my fear, down into places in me that was so shadowed I could hardly see anything.

But there, in the center, I could *feel* something. Something... powerful. Angry. And with a whole lot of teeth.

Was that my inner wolf?

Mentally, I reached for the vague impression of a shape, only for my hand to hit something solid. Something that was *not* supposed to be there.

I tried to press harder into it, to force my way through, but the more I tried, the firmer it got, until sharp, prickly bits of glowing purple began to extend from it.

What is this? I couldn’t help but marvel. But then Samson verbally answered me, nearly knocking me out of the meditative state he’d led me into.

“That’s the magic that’s cursing you.”

It looked kind of pretty for being somewhat insidious. How strange to think that was always inside of me. How long had it been like that? Since I was sixteen? Before then?

“Wait, do you see that?”

The vines pointed above me, and I looked up to see a sort of... purple mist pouring from an upper corner of the shield. It curled in on itself, seemingly hanging ominously, but when I mentally stepped back, I saw it was leading somewhere else. I studied it, curious... until Samson suddenly yanked me out of my depths and into the regular world.

“Ow!” I hissed. “What’s with the whiplash, dude?”

But I quickly cut my complaints off when I saw Samson’s ashen face, his eyes wider than I’d ever seen them.

“What is it?” I asked, heart thundering.

“You’re not the only one.”



“IS THIS THE PLACE?” I asked breathlessly, dubiously studying the decrepit-looking cabin in the middle of the woods.

I had a feeling Mahlan would have preferred if I hadn’t tagged along, but once Samson had a vision of another shifter who’d been cursed in the same way I had, there was no way I wasn’t.

We hopped in the car and raced along, Samson giving Mahlan directions in an eerily flat voice. I figured it was just how he spoke while gripped with a vision, but it gave me chills if I listened too hard.

But I couldn’t believe it. Someone else was out there who had been locked away from their inner wolf just like me? I wasn’t nearly as alone as I thought, which filled me with hope.

And a terrible kind of fear. Where was this shifter? Were they okay? Samson’s vision seemed to imply otherwise. Had they been taken by a man like the one who attacked me?

Well, if that was the case, the three of us were about to bust their door down and show them who was who. I wasn’t leaving until we found the other shifter and broke their curse too.

“As far as I can tell,” Samson said, sounding like himself, “it stinks of

tragedy.”

“Yeah, you don’t need magical powers to tell that one,” Mahlan murmured, scenting the air. “I only hear a single heartbeat, but I smell... *a lot* of different scents.”

“You think there are other people in there hiding?”

“No, I would most likely be able to hear them. What I think is that a lot of people have passed through here.” He took another deep breath. “Including some of our missing wolves.”

“Well, I do *not* like that. If we’re lucky enough to have gotten here while the bad guys are out, maybe we should take advantage of our luck and find whoever the other cursed shifter is.”

Mahlan nodded, fur already rippling along his skin. “Let me go first.”

A moment later, he was fully shifted, launching forward and racing towards the cabin. I wondered how he would get in the door, considering the lack of opposable thumbs, but he just barreled through it like it was tissue paper.

Oh.

I supposed that was one way to do it. It must run in the family or something.

“Come on,” Sam said, hurrying after him.

“But Mahlan said to let him go first.”

“And we did. But I don’t want to be out here without him, so let’s hurry it up now.”

“I see your logic there.”

With plenty of pep in our step, we both rushed in. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting in the dilapidated cabin, maybe just a lot of dirt and cobwebs, but it certainly wasn’t the practically medieval torture chamber that we erupted into.

“What the hell?”

I looked around, a bit in disbelief about whether I was in reality or not. The walls were dirty, covered in moss and who knew what other filth while a single lightbulb hung from the ceiling. But the real clincher was the large metal cages. If I didn’t know better, I would think they were kennels. Unfortunately, I got the idea they were for someone else entirely. Maybe that was just my macabre imagination, or perhaps the manacles hanging from the walls in several spots helped urge that impression along.

Maybe.

“There’s no way anything good is coming out of this place,” Samson murmured, calling a little ball of light to his hand. Once things were less terrifying and awful, I would need to take a moment and think about how one of the first friends I’d ever made after being kicked out was secretly a witch. Shit was wild.

“Hello?” A small, quivering voice had all our attention, our heads jerking in unison to a crumbling bookcase that held less pages and more of a voracious termite infestation. “Is anybody there? I need help!”

It could have been a trap. Hell, it *probably* was a trap! But I didn’t care. At that moment, something came over me, and I rushed to that bookcase, ripping it away from the wall.

It didn’t so much fall as it crumbled into a lump of mushy grossness, but I paid it no mind. “We’re coming!” I called to the voice, my heart thundering in my ears. “Just keep making noise, okay?”

Whoever it was, they sounded young and scared, which fueled me even further. I kicked at the wall, only for it to give way like wet cardboard. For the briefest of seconds, I was worried that I’d just stuck my foot through decomposing wood goo, but I quickly realized, no, it *was* wet cardboard.

“A false wall,” Samson murmured, looking over my shoulder.

The weak voice echoed again, sounding less muffled with the bookcase and fake wall gone. “Please, no one’s been here in several days. I’m so hungry and thirsty.”

Mahlan rushed past me in his wolf form, making sure I wasn’t at the front in case something tricky was going on, but all I could think about was that there was someone we could save.

Not just from being locked away from her wolf but also locked away in the literal sense. I didn’t know who was behind the disappearances, but as far as I was concerned, I would be happy to take a baseball bat to their heads.

I rushed down the dark, damp-smelling hall after him, wondering if it would be better to smell the grotty mildew through my nose or possibly inhale whatever mold spores were undoubtedly in the air through my mouth. It sounded like a lose-lose situation, so I just focused on making sure my feet didn’t slip out from under me.

Finally, we erupted from the hall into what looked like a very old root cellar, but one that hadn’t been used in ages. At least not for food storage, as more chains were attached to the wall, dangling ominously. Except for one chain, that was, which was attached to a thick, metal collar around an

absolutely filthy girl's neck.

"Oh my God," I gasped, hands going to my mouth. She was barely a teenager, so small and slight that I was amazed they had a collar her size. But at the same time, my stomach rolled, knowing that someone had purposefully put her down into the earth to rot in her bonds.

"You're... you're not with *them*, are you?" she asked, her voice cracking like she was afraid to hope.

I didn't know my body could move that fast, but one moment I was standing there, shocked, the next I was kneeling in front of her, pulling her into the tightest hug I dared to with her slight form.

"No, we're not. We're here to get you out, okay?"

The girl nodded before her eyes slid behind me to Mahlan, recoiling at the sight. "W-wolf!"

"Don't worry, he's with me. He's gonna get you out of these, okay?"

She nodded uncertainly, unable to pull her gaze away from Mahlan. Not that I could blame her. He was quite the sight in his wolf form.

"They brought other people like him here. Hurt them."

Fuck, my heart. The urge to cry quickly built inside me, but I gently shoved it down. It wasn't the time.

"Mahlan, would you get her collar?"

His giant wolf head nodded, and he strode forward, his teeth hooking into the chain just behind her. With an obscenely loud *crunch*, the girl was freed.

"Here," I said, pulling her into my arms as we stood. "We'll get you to safety. You don't have to worry anymore."

The girl nodded solemnly, and I tried not to think about how light she was. Had they been feeding her? Was she a street kid like me?

I didn't know. But I knew that I was never letting anyone hurt her again. Not if I could help it.

MAHLAN

I could tell from the moment Lyssa saw the girl that they would be inseparable. I didn't exactly want the complication of a preteen in my life, but I wasn't about to argue as we brought the distraught girl home.

"What's your name?" Lyssa asked as we were in the car.

"Ashlee," the girl answered slowly between sips from the bottle of water we'd given her. I was sure she probably wanted to gulp it down, but she listened when we told her that it would make her sick.

"Hi, Ashlee. My name's Lyssa. Do you know how you ended up in this cabin?"

I had to admit, it did make me proud to see Lyssa being so automatically maternal to someone else. My inner wolf seemed pretty satisfied with her actions as well, reminding me that it was never too early for pups, even though it was definitely too early for pups.

"Yeah, my adoptive parents just... gave me away."

"Gave you away?"

"Yeah, people came to our door one night, and my parents told me I had to go with them. I tried to get away, but they caught me."

The anguish in the young girl's voice made my nails grow harder and longer, sinking into the steering wheel. I was going to need to take my car into the shop, that was for sure.

"They brought me to this cabin and then this lady... she used *magic* on me and it *hurt*. A lot. I didn't even know magic was real! And now it's like I can hardly feel any of my emotions. Like they've been all locked up!"

"Don't worry, honey," Samson said, surprisingly sweet considering his

usual demeanor around me. “We’ll get you all squared away and feeling right. You’re with good people now.”

The girl nodded, sipping at her water.

“You got any snacks?”



I TOOK Samson aside while Lyssa tended to Ashlee. It was sweet to see my mate perch the young girl up on a stool and go about making her a grilled cheese sandwich. Not exactly the world’s most gourmet meal, but since Ashlee said she hadn’t eaten in three days, she would need to work her way up to a full spread. At least with a sandwich, she and Lyssa could split it.

“What do you make of this?” I asked Samson in a low voice.

“She’s definitely suppressed just like Lyssa and by the same witch.”

“Now that you’ve seen so much of it, can you break it?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“This magic is way too powerful. Whoever is doing this is on a level that I may never get to or is being boosted by something insanely important. Now that I’ve rooted around in Lyssa’s inner wolf and met Ashlee, I know there’s nothing I can do.”

My heart just about cracked in two, anger filling me. “You’re telling me you’re giving up on Lyssa?”

“Whoa, calm your clam there. No. But what I’m saying is that we might need a slight change of plans.”

Now that had me interested. “Oh?”

“You see, with such a powerful magical signature, it’s hard not to leave traces to follow. And believe me, whoever this witch is, she left a *lot* of traces to follow.”

There it was, hope flickering back to life again in my heart. “You’re saying you can track the witch?”

“With like ninety-nine percent certainty, my wolfy friend.”

“Do it. I’ll call the inner circle.”



I REACHED my clawed hand for the breaker box and ripped all the wires out, the warehouse in front of us largely going dark. If they had any security measures, they would likely be gone now, which was exactly what we wanted.

I let out a low howl before returning to Samson, who was standing idly by the tree line, silent and cloudy-eyed. It had been quite jolting when his eyes had first gone white and he'd started walking, but apparently, that was just how his tracking spells worked. Like a man possessed by a GPS, he led us towards the witch.

We were all geared up for a fight, and with the power out, we rushed the place in our wolf forms. Theo and I burst through the main doors while Parker, Kaleb, and Jacobian went through different windows, showering the floor in the world's most dangerous confetti.

...except there was no one there.

I scented the air, as did my wolves around me, and curiously enough, there was no air of aggression or the smell of nervous sweat. Not even aggressive hormones.

I think it's relatively safe, I murmured, shifting back into my human form. The rest of my circle followed suit, leaving us standing there and looking at Samson, calmly walking in like an exceptionally well-behaved zombie.

He said nothing, moving past us to end up staring at a wall. Then, and only then, did his posture suddenly change, taking on a more casual stance as he turned to us.

"Whoa, that was creepy," he said, shaking his head.

"You should have seen it from our end," I joked. Sure, Samson could be peculiar, but he was beginning to grow on me. Kind of like a fungus with very pretty eyes.

"Hey, we appreciate you helping with this," Parker said. Standing the closest, he offered his hand to Samson for a shake. The witch looked at his extended palm, then to Parker's face uncertainly before taking the kind gesture.

"Wow, such a gentleman. So the rest of you having the personality of wet dogs is a choice then, huh?"

Annnnd there was the annoying part. Moving on, I crossed to him, looking at the wall.

"Is this another false one, you think?"

"Yeah, but it's not made of rotting wood and wet cardboard like the last

one.”

“Do we need to go get drills?” Kaleb asked, sounding somewhat worried. Whether that was because Samson was still holding Parker’s hand or some other reason, I couldn’t say.

“Or, like, a wrecking ball?” Parker added. “This smells like concrete.”

But Samson just clicked his tongue. “I suppose wolves, at the end of the day, are still wolves.”

Turning back to the wall, he lifted his hands and began whispering. For a moment, nothing happened, and it seemed like maybe he was a little tapped out of magic. But then I heard a rumbling from somewhere below our feet. A moment later, vines burst up through the floor, waving and manic, a kraken of greenery.

With simply a gesture, Samson sent the vines rushing forward, and they burrowed their way into the wall, ripping and shredding as they went until just a crumbled mess was left.

“There you are.”

Samson strode forward and we joined him, stepping into what looked like a prison more than anything else. Like a higher-end version of the cabin — there were cages, chains, and all sorts of restraints. And just like the cabin, there was only one person there.

But she wasn’t chained like Ashlee had been. No, she was at the end of the room, with candles and runes surrounding her.

The witch.

We approached cautiously, Samson conjuring a shimmering veil around us that I could only assume was a shield. The woman seemed unconscious, however, floating with three gauzy rays of light encircling her.

“Hey, are those moonstones?”

Glancing to where Kaleb was pointing, I saw there were three moonstones around her, clearly giving the woman power.

“Do we kill her?” Jacobian asked uncertainly. “Is this a trap?”

“No, not a trap,” Samson said, eyeing the woman as she sat cross-legged in the air. “She’s completely checked out mentally. It looks like her entire mind and soul are going into maintaining whatever spell she’s doing.”

My thoughts began to churn out, one right after the other. “You said you can’t break this witch’s curse, right? What if *she* can?”

“What, you want us just to cart her away while she’s in a trance, put her into some sort of magic-locking barrier, then force her to feed us info?”

Samson stopped short, rubbing his chin. “You know, that’s not a bad idea.”
It was quick, but I made my mind up all at once.
“Do it. Let’s bring her home.”

LYSSA

I was tucking Ashlee into bed when I heard the front door open. Kissing her on the forehead, I rushed out to see Mahlan carrying in an unconscious woman.

“Why do you have — Oh my God! Is that *Sarah*?” I rushed over to him, looking at the unconscious face of my friend. “What’s going on? Is she hurt?”

“You know this woman?” Theo asked, his voice icier than I’d ever heard it.

“You should back up,” Mahlan said much more softly. “She’s dangerous.”

Sarah? Dangerous? How? She was the friend who fed me, helped clothe me, even gave me makeup all throughout high school. I’d spent the night at her house more times than I could count.

“Lyssa, your friend is the witch who cursed you.”

What?

“Well, maybe not originally cursed you; she’d have to be pretty young then. But she’s the one who’s strengthened it since you’ve interacted with Mahlan’s pack and put it on your young Ashlee. How is she, by the way?”

“Tuckered out and in bed,” I said, beginning to pace.

My closest friend had known about me being a shifter and helped curse me? That didn’t seem possible, and yet...

“Hey, sorry to rush what is no doubt a heady personal revelation, but I have to get her into a magic sealing circle ASAP. You mind if I draw on your floor?”

“What? Oh, sure. Go ahead.”

Maybe it wasn't my place to give permission to do that, but I doubted Mahlan would object.

And that was how I ended up sitting on a stool at the kitchen island, watching as my mate carefully deposited Sarah within the circle.

“Well, the good news is we got our moonstone back,” Parker said, holding up a strange-looking stone.

“Huh, so that was what you guys were after this whole time?” I murmured, feeling like I was half in the world and half out of it. *Sarah*, my friend of years. *Sarah*, who was funny, sweet, and a bit mother hen-ish, was my enemy. Had tricked me, *hurt* me.

My abandonment complex was flaring up something fierce, and it was all I could do to not spiral back into the closed-off Lyssa that I had fought so hard to grow from.

“So,” Mahlan murmured to me, voice full of concern. “How do you know this witch again?”

“She's my best friend from high school,” I answered weakly. “The whole time.”

“Oh, Lyssa, I'm sorry.”

Mahlan enveloped me in a hug and I sank into him, accepting the comfort. We would have stayed like that forever if Sarah's eyelids hadn't fluttered as her posture slumped.

“Wha...” she murmured, licking her lips and blinking her eyes like she was coming out of an exceptionally deep sleep. “Where?”

She blinked some more before realization must have hit her because her face drained of all color. “You should just kill me.”

Well, that was certainly a turn.

“Sarah, are you serious?” I asked, suddenly more angry than anything else. How dare she!

Her head snapped towards me, her eyes wide as she went even paler. “Lyssa, what are you doing here?”

“Do you think you're in the position to be asking that right now?” My voice was sharp, but I didn't care. “You owe me an explanation, and you owe it *now*.”

She was silent for a long moment, then two, before finally speaking. “It's complicated.”

“Then *uncomplicate* it.”

Sarah shifted for a moment, clearly uncomfortable, but I didn't care. Now that the shock was wavering, I was full of indignant fury. "You had to be locked away, Lyssa. It wasn't my choice."

"How so?" Mahlan asked.

"It's her parentage."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I'm gonna need a little more than that."

"It started with your father, Lyssa. Your biological one. He was close to these two brothers, childhood best friends even. One day, one of them was hurt, and he took them to his pack's alma, who just so happened to be your biological mother."

"My mother was an alma?" I murmured, trying to fit that revelation with everything else that was going on in my head.

"Yes. But she wasn't yet when she was healing the brother. His wounds were... complex. Impossible even, but your mother was ambitious and determined to save them. She created a potion infused with things too powerful for her to use, including her own blood. But she did anyway, and it caused a blood oath between your mother and the injured brother."

"That... is that bad?"

"It can cause psychosis as time passes and the blood fades from their system. Your mother didn't know this, so when the healing brother began to show symptoms of this psychosis, it took them a while to figure out what was happening.

"But once the healthy brother figured it out, he started to look for ways to cure it. He went to witches, sorcerers, medicine men — you name it."

"I'm guessing that didn't go well?" Samson murmured.

"No, not at all. The brothers slipped further into their madness and determination to find a cure, and after an altercation, they ended up killing your parents. You were still a pup, so I think that somehow saved you. Like murdering a toddler was too much for even them."

I covered my mouth, my heart hammering in my chest. My bio parents had been... had been murdered? So there was no chance to meet them. Ever.

The loss bubbled up within me, but I tried to push it down.

"So they took me?"

"Yeah, and put you with people who would raise you, I don't know how."

"And where do you come in with this?"

"They did the same to my parents. They were friends of your father's, and the brothers didn't want them to live. Then they took me and placed me with

a family close to your new one, and I was raised to watch you. Then, later, to curse you.”

Samson straightened at that. “So, you made this curse?”

“No, I was taught it from someone else once I was old enough. I seem to have a certain... magical aptitude that’s fairly unparalleled for my age.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me,” Samson scoffed. “Couldn’t break your curse if I tried.”

“Yes, with the moonstones, it was nearly impossible to.”

“But you don’t have the moonstones anymore,” Parker remarked, holding them up.

My blood ran cold when Sarah smiled, standing to her full height. “No, but I don’t really need them.”

She clapped her hands, and a flash of light filled the room, making all the wolves wince. But I didn’t, so I was the only one who saw her hand grow into a long blade of crackling electricity as she lunged at Mahlan.

No!

Suddenly the world cracked in two as I became aware of several things all at once. First was that my best friend was about to kill my mate. The second was that I was bristling with more energy than I’d ever had in my life.

“*Stop!*” I screamed, leaping forward and letting the energy burst through me.

And then time slowed, thousands of things hitting me all at once. First of all, it felt like I was on fire, but in a pleasant way, heat spreading out across my limbs in an intense rush. Secondly, it was like my body was stretching, *stretching*, cracking, and popping in ways that should have been painful but were somewhat of a relief.

Thirdly, all of my senses turned up to eleven so quickly that for a moment, there was just brilliant light and static. But I didn’t let that distract me. My only goal was protecting my mate, and I was determined to do that.

Finally, I hit the floor on all fours, snarling with my teeth bared.

Wait... all *fours*?

Looking down at myself, I realized that I was a wolf, a real, honest-to-God *wolf!* It was so much all at the same time, but I also couldn’t take the time to comprehend it because Sarah was suddenly trying to impale *me*.

I jumped to the side, aware of the other men shifting behind me, but I didn’t need them. A voice took over my mind that I’d never heard before.

Protect. Defend. Revenge. We’re free! Finally free!

The intensity of feeling from the strange voice almost made me dizzy, but instead of distracting me, it urged me onward. As Sarah tried to cast another spell, the voice within me told me what to do.

Which was to jump forward, catching Sarah's neck between my teeth and *yanking* as I twisted past her. The result was instant, only the coppery taste of blood made me realize I'd just killed my best friend.

Shit.

I skidded to a stop and watched as Sarah's magic fizzled out, then she collapsed to the floor in a pool of blood. Shocked, I idly realized that we would have to hire cleaners again. The neighbors were going to be suspicious.

But I looked down and realized something wasn't right. There, in my center, was a crackling ball of black and purple magic. It felt icy cold and *sharp* before it shot into me, burying itself in my stomach and flooding my insides with its vileness.

I stumbled back, my fur rippling in strange waves. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't *think*, and I realized that my friend had tried to kill me with her last dying breath.

No. *No*. I had just found out who I was, what I could be. I had just discovered *love*. I didn't want to lose it already, not when I'd finally had a taste.

I hugged my inner wolf tightly, trying to cling to it with all my might, but I could feel the cold locking me up and turning me to stone. It would drag me into the darkest depths, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I was going to die.

"Lyssa!"

But then something made it through the storm within me. Blinking as the feeling grew stronger and stronger, I realized that Mahlan had shifted and was *biting me*.

Seemed like kind of a dick move, considering I was dying. But then a beat passed, and suddenly my entire body was filled with a bursting light that I couldn't describe. It attacked the darkness, beating it and the cold back until whatever spell had been cast on me was finally obliterated.

I felt good, euphoric even, but utterly drained. My body, out of energy, reverted back to my human form. Stumbling, only Mahlan catching me kept me upright on my feet.

"You shifted!" He gasped, kissing me all over my face. Which was

probably pretty macabre, considering I was covered in blood.

“I did,” I whispered before pulling him down into a kiss. It was full of so *much*, and I hoped he felt every bit of it.

Speaking of bite...

“Here, let’s get you into the shower and then bed. I’ll have Theo take care of this.”

Nodding, I let him pick me up and take me to the guest bedroom. Maybe I shouldn’t have put Ashlee to sleep in our bed, but I hadn’t been thinking ahead at the time.

And naturally, the guest bedroom had a smaller bathroom where Mahlan carefully washed me down. Usually, I would make some snarky remark about his place having two and a half baths when he was a bachelor, but I couldn’t work up the sass.

The shower was more of a haze than anything, then Mahlan picked me up again, all bundled up in a towel. Typically, I would object to being so babied, but hey, maybe being a little spoiled wasn’t such a bad thing.

But the moment Mahlan set me down, I wrapped my arms around his neck, staring up at his handsome face. I was still reeling from what just happened, but I knew without a doubt that I was ever so grateful he was with me.

“You all right?”

For some reason, my teeth were itching, growing longer and harder in a way that almost seemed pornographic. My eyes slid down to Mahlan’s neck, and before I knew it, I was biting him exactly where I’d bitten him when we’d made love.

Oh.

OH!!!

I hadn’t been expecting something remarkable, yet the moment my teeth locked into his skin, I was shocked through to my very soul. Endorphins rushed me, drowning out all the bad and refreshing my soul.

I felt *connected* to him in a way I never thought possible, my heart swelling in my chest as I felt Mahlan’s emotions. Suddenly my entire world shifted, so he was at the center, someone I could trust. Rely on. Protect with my last breath.

“Was that what you felt when you bit me?” I gasped when I pulled my teeth from his neck.

He nodded, swallowing me hard as he looked at me with so much love

that I could cry. “Yeah, it is.”

I had to pull him down into a kiss again; I *had* to. I kissed him with all I had, yet it still wasn't enough. Thankfully, I had a lifetime of kissing him in store for myself.

“I love you,” I murmured, so glad that he'd found me out of everyone else in the city.

“And I love you,” Mahlan said back.

I believed him, right down to my core. We were wolves together, pack through and through. And I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

MAHLAN

I rewatched a video of Lyssa playing with Parker and Emmaline in our pack's running territory, all three in their wolf forms. Seeing her being her true self felt so good that I could float away on the waves of contentment washing over me.

Finally, after so much time working for it, my mate was fully initiated into our pack, freed from the curse that had blocked her from her people.

I knew more trouble was on the horizon, especially with the witch, Sarah, and whoever she was working for. But those were on the back burner for the moment. Lyssa deserved at least a week or two to celebrate her new connection to her inner wolf and adjust to her enhanced senses.

Putting my phone away, I got out of my car and headed toward Emmaline's shop. Lyssa was there checking out a customer, as professional as always.

"Hey there, handsome," she said, grinning broadly as the customer left.

"Hey there, gorgeous," I answered right back. Goodness, I loved that woman, from the soles of my feet to the top of my head. Incredible.

"What's the occasion for the visit?"

I gave her a hug and a kiss before answering, taking a deep breath. Goodness, she smelled even more incredible than before, which should have been impossible.

"I'm going to a meeting tonight for some leads on who Sarah worked for and missing wolves business. I wanted to make sure that you'd be okay."

"Oh, don't worry about me. Emmaline and I will grab dinner and head to her place for a little slumber party."

Not for the first time, I was incredibly grateful for my sister. Without her, I don't know what I would have done, and I definitely wouldn't have felt safe leaving Lyssa behind.

"That sounds amazing."

"You be careful too, okay?" Lyssa said, reaching across the checkout counter to gently squeeze my hand.

"For you, always," I answered, meaning every word.

She gave me another blinding smile, and I couldn't resist kissing her again. I didn't think that would ever get old. I could be eighty and still locking lips with my mate like we were teenagers.

But when the bell at the front of the shop rang, we parted, and I supposed I had to leave her to do her job.

"Love you," I said, giving her a little wave on my way out.

"Love you," she responded just as warmly, sending me floating to my car.

I didn't want to leave for the meeting, especially such a depressing one. But I would do whatever I needed to protect my mate, my pack, and every other innocent magic person I could.

A storm was coming and I was going to be ready for it.

BOOK 2

EMMALINE

H *mm, is that the right number for the new pink berets?*

I chewed my lips as I shuffled through the tabs on my computer, finding the accessories inventory and sales records to see if my ordering numbers were right. Ever since Lyssa had joined my brother's pack, it seemed that we'd all been running around like chickens with our heads cut off. Which wasn't Lyssa's fault at all, but boy, a whole lot of things did happen around her.

"Huh, would you look at that," I murmured, realizing my numbers were correct. "They're even more popular than I thought."

"What are?"

And that was Lyssa herself, pink-cheeked and carrying a large box of inventory from the back room as if it weighed nothing at all. Ever since her inner wolf had been released, I could tell that she was enjoying all the perks that came with it. Which I was thrilled about, naturally. Lyssa fit into our pack like peanut butter fit with jelly, and I couldn't be happier about my new sister-in-wolf.

"Those pink berets with the metal rings and keyholes."

"Oh yeah, I think an influencer snagged one of ours, because I've been seeing them everywhere online. What was her name? Like...Canister? Bottle? Vial? Huh, I can't remember, but she's really funny."

I grinned broadly, pleased with that particular news. While my parents had never discouraged me from doing right by myself, they always reminded me that I didn't need to work, that the pack would more than provide for me as sister to the alpha.

But I didn't want to just sit on my laurels and be some sort of pack princess. I wanted to prove I was just as valuable as my brother. Sure, none of us were hurting for money, but it was always safer to diversify our investments. No one could argue with that.

"You'll have to show me if she comes up in your feeds again. Maybe we can send her some other merch for free."

"It's crazy that's kinda how advertisements work nowadays, but totally."

I nodded before I remembered something. "Oh, hey, don't forget to give me your exam schedule when your midterms come up. I will be giving you whatever days off you need to be fully rested and prepared!"

Lyssa got that sappy smile on her face that she always wore whenever anyone treated her with basic compassion. It really burned me to know how she'd been mistreated most of her life, and the more I found out about it, the more I wanted to punch someone. Or rip them apart with my teeth. Whatever came first.

I wasn't a violent person by nature, not at all. I'd rather talk than fight any day. But if someone was threatening someone I loved, or an innocent life, I had no problem being the protector they needed. And Lyssa could use all the love and protection she could get.

Thankfully, she was in brilliant hands with my brother. I trusted him more than anyone in the world, and I could tell he loved Lyssa with all his heart just by the way he looked at her. Mahlan had always been a bit too busy and a touch too jaded for romance, but goodness, my sister-in-wolf had come in swinging, breaking down all his walls and really making him a happier, better person.

Which, naturally, made me happy too. I loved Mahlan dearly and only wanted the best for him. Thankfully, I was pretty sure Lyssa was just that.

"You don't have to do that. You've already let me reduce my hours to part-time!"

"Nonsense. Whatever you need, you'll get it here. I don't know who's more excited about your schooling—you or me."

I actually couldn't care less if she went to college or not. What I cared about was that she was doing something she'd wanted to do for ages, and I was of the opinion that Lyssa should get pretty much everything she wanted since she'd been denied even the most basic things for far too long.

And yeah, maybe I brought her one too many sweets, or gave her clothing when I accidentally ordered too much. Oh well. I'd never really had a sister

before, so I was at least a wee bit justified in all my spoiling. Or at least that was what I told myself.

“Sometimes I think it’s you, but that’s because you don’t have to race up two flights of stairs and halfway across campus between your first and second class.”

I laughed, imagining Lyssa hoofing it while carrying her books with that determined look she had on her face whenever she was challenged with something.

“Yeah, I suppose the college looks down on actual wolves racing across their premises.”

“Just a bit, yeah,” Lyssa answered, chuckling right back.

I loved that we could always banter together. What she’d been through since she was just a kid was horrific and I would have understood if it had turned her into a dour person, but it hadn’t. Lyssa was lovely, witty, and whip-smart. Basically, everything I loved in a friend.

“Well, I’m gonna get these all up on the racks, then do reshops. Don’t forget about the family dinner tonight! You still want to come over to get ready?”

“Of course! Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

It had been a little over two months since Lyssa had slid into my world, and while the first few times I’d gone over to her place had been to help her dress, she didn’t really need my help any longer. But our little get-togethers had become a sort of ritual between us, and one that I cherished pretty strongly.

“Sounds good!”

With that, Lyssa was off, continuing to work hard as she always did. As for myself, it was more order forms for me. It was always a tenuous balance, trying to stay ahead of the demand but making sure I didn’t have a bunch left over. Too much shrink was a bad business practice, and although my parents would bail me out if I ever needed it—and hell, Mahlan probably would too—I wanted to be as independent as possible. They’d helped me by investing in my business at the beginning, and that was plenty for me.

The one good thing about having extra left over at the end of a fashion trend was that I would donate it to local shelters and places that helped low-income people have nice clothing for interviews and other important events. Sure, it was a nice tax write-off, but that wasn’t why I did it. I liked to think it was a little way to give back, considering how lucky I was in my station in

life.

Thankfully, the rest of the day went by relatively quickly, with Mahlan coming to pick up Lyssa at closing as he always did. It was so cute to see them greet each other at the door like they hadn't seen each other in ages. Some would find it cheesy, but what could I say? I was a sucker for love.

Even if my own romantic life was nonexistent.

I kept telling myself that I should just give up on Kaleb. He seemed entirely uninterested in me, but for some reason I couldn't seem to stop barking up that tree, all wolf puns intended. Maybe I was a fool for maintaining hope, but sometimes when he joked around with me, or flashed me a grin, I found myself reinvested all over again.

Sigh.

Thankfully, I could always count on getting ready with Lyssa to gas me up. Her gift of perception was pretty strong, so I trusted her judgment.

"You really think there's a chance?" I murmured, looking in the mirror as I applied purple eyeshadow.

Someone had once told me purple was a tacky, desperate color and should never be used with everyday makeup, but they lived a sad, plain life. As someone who had taken basic art classes, I understood the color wheel and could read that yellow and purple were the perfect complement to each other, being opposites. And while my eyes were brown, everyone with chocolate or hazel gazes had a certain amount of yellow and gold in their brown, which was exactly what the purple enhanced.

"I'm not sure," Lyssa answered honestly, which was why I cherished her. "But I feel like the two of you have gotten at least a little closer."

"Really?"

"Well, you seem to talk more. And you two ran together last full moon, right?"

I nodded happily. Sure, it hadn't exactly been a romantic journey in the silver light, but it had been fun. And sometimes fun was enough.

"Yeah! We did! It was nice."

"The only thing I'm worried about is..." Lyssa stopped, tapping her fingers against the makeup case I'd bought for her. It saddened me that sometimes she was still so worried about accidentally rocking the boat too much, but I understood that she'd had a lot of trauma and still had a lot to work through.

"What's that?"

“It’s just, uh...well, a lot has changed since the last time we talked about it, but do you worry about dating one of Mahlan’s best friends?”

“Why not? My brother is dating my best friend.”

“Awww,” Lyssa said, blushing. “But that’s not what I mean. You know I don’t care about the social part.”

“Oh? What is it then?”

“Well, I know I’m new to all of this, but I worry about the danger of it all. You being the alpha’s sister and Kaleb being one of his inner circle really makes the two of you exponentially higher targets. A real two birds and one stone situation.”

“Ooooh,” I said, comforted by the fact that she cared about me deeply enough to worry about the political complications of landing my man. “That’s a risk that’s always going to be there. I’m not going to let fear rule my life.”

“Fair enough,” Lyssa said resolutely. “For what it’s worth, the two of you would look real cute together if he could get his head out of his ass. You deserve to have someone to come home to.”

I smiled fondly at her, my heart so full. “I really appreciate you saying that.” Hope bubbled anew inside of me, galvanizing me to get my guy. I knew I wasn’t imagining things! “Besides, Theo is technically Mahlan’s *best* friend, so even I wouldn’t cross that line.”

“Even though he’s mad hot?”

I gave Lyssa a sharp look. “Ew. Don’t say that about my brother’s best friend. That’s gross.”

“But he *is* hot,” Lyssa said mischievously.

“I’m not denying that, but still, *boundaries*.”

“Right, right. Sounds boring.”

She shared my grin and we went about finishing up, Mahlan waiting in his office as usual. Although he’d been excellent at trying to be home for Lyssa every night, he still had so much work to do. Sometimes I felt bad for him, but he’d always loved staying busy. Honestly, if it weren’t for Lyssa, I was pretty sure he would work seven days a week for months on end.

“Ready?” he asked as we both came out. He gave me a solid nod at seeing my outfit but then practically turned to butter when he looked at Lyssa. Jeez, they were so adorable and sweet, it probably was gonna give me diabetes.

“Ready,” Lyssa said, placing a kiss on his cheek. My heart ached in a

beautifully bittersweet way, my own personal dose of melancholia.

I loved everything about my brother and my best friend being together, but it made me all the more aware of just how single I was. Not that there was anything wrong with being single, but I was at a point in my life where I could do with... well, something else. I hadn't really dated since college, and even then, those were short-lived, unserious relationships. I just had such a hard time clicking romantically with anyone, none of them quite comparing to the quiet, always kind Kaleb.

Maybe it was because it was safe. *He* was safe. I knew him like the back of my hand, and we'd grown up together. And anyone my brother trusted was good in my playbook.

"Alright, I'll start setting out the food. Will you two get the drinks?"

"Roger-roger!"

I placed my phone on the counter and started up some music while we all went about our business. It was all pretty fun, and about halfway through was when other people started to arrive.

Naturally, it was Kaleb and Parker who arrived first. The two were practically inseparable and had been pretty much as long as I could remember. Some people speculated that they were dating, but I knew better. Kaleb had one girlfriend in high school, and from what I knew, she'd broken his heart so hard that he hadn't dated anyone else since. Sure, he could have been using that as an excuse, but I didn't think so.

"Hey, all!" Parker said, bouncing in as he was often wont to do. Honestly, I wondered if his diet was half helium considering how bouncy he was. And that was coming from me, a relatively positive person, if I said so myself. "Man, I am *starving*. My meeting with my financial planner went way overdue, and then I had to meet with a couple of lawyers for this scholarship thing I'm working on, so I didn't have any time to eat! I'm surprised you couldn't hear my stomach from the hallway."

"A scholarship?" Lyssa echoed while she corralled them to sit at the island that had been set for everyone. Sneaky girl! I could tell that she was trying to herd them so I could sit next to Kaleb, since that was the closest seat to me. Shifter-Gods bless her.

"Yeah! One is to help kids from low-income families get instruments so they can play in band or orchestra, and one is for low-income kids to get art supplies that are normally way out of their reach. I'm also thinking about doing one for kids who could use some extra tutoring but can't afford it! My

lawyers say I need to get the other two set up and accumulating interest before I overburden myself.”

“Wow,” I said, genuinely impressed. I guessed I had a bit of a habit of infantilizing the exuberant shifter, but he really did have his shit together. “That’s amazing!”

“Kaleb inspired me, actually. He’s been doing all these matching donations for different hospitals in the city and it totally made me wanna give back. Especially since…” He leaned in, his tone hushed with reverence. “Did you know that seventy percent of homeless and disadvantaged children are either fae, shifter, or LGBTQ? I had no idea until Kaleb showed me the statistics some witches and fairies put together.”

I saw my chance for conversation and slid into the seat right next to Kaleb. “Why didn’t you tell any of us you’re such a philanthropist?”

But Kaleb, being Kaleb, just blushed and shrugged. “Is it really giving out of the goodness of your heart if you brag about it to everyone?”

He had a point, the sweetheart. But unfortunately, with him making his point so succinctly, he piped right back down. Goodness, it was frustrating having a crush on someone so shy.

I didn’t get a chance to coax any more conversation out of him before more and more guests showed up, and eventually, Mahlan’s apartment was nice and full. Although it was hard to have one-on-one conversations, I still dearly loved these events. They made me feel like part of a whole, which definitely eased my occasional loneliness.

But as the meal went on, Kaleb talked less and less, no doubt burning through his social battery. Oh well, there was always next time. I was a girl who didn’t mind biding her time.



“Looks like you kept the store together without me.”

I looked up from the register to give Lyssa an over-the-top glare. “Excuse you, I ran this shop without you before and I am more than comfortable doing it again.”

“Sure you are,” she joked, heading to my office to put her things in her employee cubby. “But in all seriousness, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I confessed, waiting for her to return so I could hug

her. She'd only been out of work for four days to do some special labs at school, but I definitely missed her charming presence around my store. I guessed I'd gotten used to having her pleasant company around, and my shop had felt quiet and empty despite how insanely busy it had been. "You missed such a surge. I don't know if it's that influencer or not, but things have been crazy around here!"

"Oh jeez, I'm sorry. Figured it would happen right as school is going into its final ramp-up."

"Pfft, don't you worry about me. Just focus on that education. I'm a tough cookie, I can survive a rush or two."

"I mean, that is true." Lyssa took a breath and looked around the store. I was pretty pleased with how orderly it was given the chaos, but it certainly wasn't in peak condition. "Hmm, want me to do reshops and any shrink from the dressing rooms?"

"Ohmygodyesplease!" I said without taking a breath. They were tasks I could definitely do, but I hated them so much that I would never not be grateful for Lyssa being willing to do them.

"Alright, no problem. I'll get on that now."

Lyssa headed to the back, leaving me to really wonder exactly *how* I had survived without her for so long. She really was a blessing, in every definition of the word.

But even with Lyssa's help, we had our work cut out for us. We had nearly two dozen online orders before noon, and I still had two other days of shipping to catch up on, which I definitely should have been able to do all that with Lyssa in the shop. But it was clear that our streak was only growing.

"I think I might need some new hands for the shop," I murmured to Lyssa as we both chowed down on subs behind the counters. Normally, we'd just duck into my office for lunch and come out whenever the bell rang, but it was just too busy for that.

We had maybe five minutes between each customer's entrance, and we'd take turns greeting them so we could get some food into us. After all, it wasn't good for a wolf to skip meals. Especially a wolf who was very new to her wolfiness, aka Lyssa. While I could tell she generally had a good grip on her inner beast, there was only so much one could reasonably expect a newbie to be able to withstand.

"Really?" Lyssa asked, eyes wide and a piece of banana pepper sticking out of the corner of her mouth. I teasingly tugged at it until she gobbled it up.

“Yeah. I don’t want you coming off part-time hours until summer, and business keeps increasing. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining, but I think we need someone to handle all the online orders, including shipping, and someone to work the storefront with either me or you. You know, a kind of floater so we don’t have to gobble things down behind the counter like gremlins.”

“I mean, that makes sense, but I didn’t even realize business has improved so much.”

“It really has. Kinda makes me wonder if I haven’t properly been utilizing the power of the internet.”

“Hey, we could always work some more on marketing, maybe sending out some sponsorship offers for haulers on YouTube or Instagram?”

I had never even thought of that and I couldn’t help but stare at my friend in shock. “What? Are you sure you’re Mahlan’s soulmate and not mine?”

“Pffft, you flatter me,” she said, before reaching over and stealing a pickle slice from the end of my own sandwich.

“Alright, never mind. You’re definitely my archnemesis.”

“Thank you. I would hate for my evil to go unappreciated.”

I waved my finger in her face, trying not to laugh. “You just watch it, missy! One night you’re gonna wake up with a pickle craving only to go to the fridge and find all your jars empty!”

Lyssa gasped, her hand over her heart. “You’d drink all the pickle juice, too?!”

“Every. Last. Drop!”

She made a show of fainting off her chair, all the while careful not to disturb her sandwich, and we both dissolved into ugly laughter.

Goodness, I was so glad my brother had found her.

Eventually, we managed to gather our wits enough to finish our meals, Lyssa going off to fill the shelves while I dealt with a group of three women who came in prepared to drop some real coin. All in all, it should have been a good day, but it...it just wasn’t.

I couldn’t say why, or point to anything in particular, but all I knew was that a creeping feeling of *ick* began to work its way up my spine. It was nothing at first, barely the faintest whisper of a sigh. But as the hours passed, it grew stronger and stronger until I found myself repeatedly looking behind my back.

Jeez, I could really use a vacation. But I wasn’t getting one of those any

time soon, so maybe I'd just have to give myself a spa day during an upcoming weekend. That was far more possible.

I did my best to ignore the feeling, focusing on smiling, ringing up customers, sweeping, and wiping down any glass that had fingerprints on it. Busy work, but it needed to be done.

Eventually, however, it got to be too much. But before I could turn around and tell Lyssa we were going to close the shop early, another woman came in.

Instantly, my bad feeling locked in on her, and man, my ketones must have been strong because Lyssa nearly whipped around to look at me. I arched my eyebrows and Lyssa's gaze went to the woman as well, her expression darkening on contact.

She had to be a witch. And considering everything that had happened with Lyssa's once-friend, I wasn't exactly feeling positive about witches at the moment. I hadn't killed someone in a long time, and although I would absolutely do it again if the situation called for it, I hated that last time I'd had to spend three or four hours flossing bits of witch flesh out of my teeth.

Yuck.

"Hello there!" I greeted, with what I hoped was my usual customer service voice. "Can I help you with anything?"

For all I knew, she could just be a witch going about her business, or not even a witch at all. It wasn't like I was an expert on identifying other fae. Shifters, sure, and some demons, but a lot of other things were a toss-up.

"Oh no, I'm quite fine looking on my lonesome."

Yeah, of course she was.

Looking back to Lyssa, I nodded for her to go to the back. After everything she'd gone through, I didn't want her being marked or observed by any unknown magical entity. Maybe that was paranoia, but I just called it being a good sister-in-wolf. I was a ride-or-die kind of girl, except the only people who would be doing any dying were the people who tried to hurt those I cared about.

Lyssa headed to the back without hesitation, thank goodness, and I tried to watch out of the corner of my eye as the woman moved around the shop, touching fabrics but never picking anything off the rack.

The fifteen minutes the woman spent in the store were excruciating, and when she finally left, it was like a weight had been lifted off me. Quickly going to the front, I locked the door, set the sign to closed, then rushed to the

back.

“Hey, what was going on there? Are you okay?” Lyssa asked, a crowbar in her hand.

“What were you planning on doing with *that*?” I asked, some of the tension in me melting slightly at the sight.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. But figured it would be better to have just in case. You seemed pretty upset.”

“Well, let’s thank the ancestors you didn’t have to use it. That lady just gave me some bad anxiety. I can’t really explain it.” I could tell I was freaking Lyssa out, so I tried to manage a weak chuckle. “I’m just being silly, I’m sure.”

“Hey, don’t dismiss your feelings. There’s been a lot that’s going on.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure.” I sighed. “Speaking of going on, Mahlan has a meeting tonight, right?”

“Yeah, him and his circle about what to do with the traffickers.”

“Are we still on for our dinner plans then?”

“Oh yeah, for sure. Wouldn’t miss it!” Lyssa looked past me to the front of the store, no doubt seeing the closed sign with her newly enhanced vision. “You want me to start shutting things down while you catch your breath back here?”

“God, yes. You’re a dream, you know that, right?”

“Keep inflating my ego and I’ll probably start believing that.”

With a friendly pat on my shoulder, Lyssa headed out, allowing me to collect myself.

Come on, Emma, get your shit together.

THEO

I stared balefully at my spreadsheet, wishing it was full when it was anything but. Normally, I had no problems staying ahead of my tasks, even in our busiest season, but with Mahlan taking so much time off due to his new mate and everything else going on, I had a lot more work to pick up.

Not that I was complaining. No, with members of our pack being kidnapped right and left, then the knowledge of witch-aligned traffickers being dropped into our laps, our alpha was needed more than ever. Besides, I could hold down the business for a good while. I was the CEO, after all.

Most people expected the alpha of the pack to be completely in charge of our largest business ventures, but how was he supposed to find the time? He was a shareholder and CFO, but the position was built to give him the flexibility to do whatever he needed for the pack.

Besides, it was nice to see my friend find the love of his life. I'd been suspicious of Lyssa at first, but she'd more than proven to me that she only had the best of intentions for my best friend. I saw the way she looked at him, the way she unlocked her inner wolf particularly to save him. There was an intense, genuine devotion there.

One that almost made me want that for myself.

I'd always told myself I was too busy and had too much responsibility for a mate. I was a beta, after all, so I had no obligation to procreate. I had sex when I wanted it—and it was some pretty great sex at that—but it never went further than that.

But now, seeing how happy both Mahlan and Lyssa were in their

relationship...well, it made me wonder if I should reallocate some energy for romantic pursuits.

Then again, the very idea was exhausting while staring at the spreadsheet in front of me.

Maybe after things had calmed down.

Focusing myself so I could finish my current task, I made a quick plan in my head for my day's schedule. I needed to move onto a meeting about a big project I had coming up, and then do some final review on expensive but vital purchases we had for the expansions. I wanted to do some planning for the first quarter of the next fiscal year, and then maybe inhale some food so I could get some sleep. But if I was being honest with myself, one of those tasks would probably have to go. My money was on me not actually getting to bed anytime soon.

Which I knew wasn't good. Wolves definitely needed their sleep to help with our fast metabolism and healing, but what choice did I have? Stuff needed to get done, and I was the only one who could do most of it.

If I had known that my suggestion to Mahlan right after graduation would turn into a multi-million dollar business, maybe I would have structured the business with a bit more help in place for me. But even with all my ambition, I hadn't imagined our venture would be so successful.

As the largest shareholder, I was set for life. And Mahlan was right behind me. Then the rest was split evenly amongst our inner circle. Except for Ellibie, of course. She'd refused hers from the beginning and said we could just send her money whenever we felt bad about it.

I'd stuck to that, sending her enough that she could probably retire comfortably and never work another day in her shifter life. But expecting Ellibie not to work was like asking the ocean not to long for the moon, so I was pretty sure that she would keep a wrench in her hand until she keeled over.

That would certainly be a loss for the pack. There was only one Ellibie, that was for sure.

"Focus, Theo. Your pack is depending on you."

Finishing up my spreadsheet, I checked out the encrypted report that Addison had sent Jacobian. She was still infiltrating Bronson's company along with Hannah, our secret card up our sleeve while Hannah was the known entity. Although our attention was turned elsewhere for the moment with the traffickers, I figured it didn't hurt to keep a hidden mole in the rival

company along with our public plant; they had shady stuff going on even if they didn't have our moonstones.

After that, I went to my meeting, then double-checked some proposals that had been submitted the previous Thursday before my secondary cell phone rang. That surprised me, and I pulled my blue cell out of my pocket. I had three phones in all—my main line that I used for my social life, my black phone for business contacts who weren't personal friends, and the blue one that was specifically for more... subterfuge-related purposes. I didn't want anyone to be able to track Addison or Hannah's conversations with me, or Jacobian's encryption tech, so I kept that one under a fake name and social.

Illuminating the screen, I saw it was indeed Hannah, and I answered it, worried that perhaps her cover or Addison's had been blown.

"What's wrong?" I asked, tone serious.

"Why does something have to be wrong?"

I resisted rolling my eyes. While I appreciated that Hannah was quite talented at her job, I wasn't always a fan of her attitude. She constantly had something to say that wasted precious minutes of mine.

"Because you usually check in with Jacobian," I answered matter-of-factly.

Which was the truth. While he wasn't in charge, as I was, Jacobian was our resident expert on all things digital. I wasn't technologically ignorant myself, unlike a lot of shifters who viewed that kind of stuff as their enemy, but I also had nothing on Jacobian, who could encrypt, decrypt, hack, and build up defenses like no one else in our pack.

"He already gave his opinion, but I wanted a second one," she answered curtly, like *I* was the rude one.

"You know we trust you to make your own choices."

"I am aware."

The effort to resist rolling my eyes was rising and rising. "What is it you need an opinion on?"

"So I have a potentially complicated interpersonal issue," she said before sighing. "A fellow coworker from a different department—the one that we're having trouble getting access to—asked me to dinner."

Oh.

That hadn't been what I was expecting. I felt a tiny bit regretful for giving her a hard time at the beginning, as that was definitely a nuanced sort of situation.

“That’s certainly more than was asked of you,” I answered her as honestly as possible.

“But it could also open doors to get into that department.”

That I did appreciate about Hannah. She was incredibly practical once she got over all her chit-chatting. “Do you have any interest in the man? Or would this be purely corporate espionage?”

She laughed, and it wasn’t a disrespectful sound. No, she seemed genuinely amused by my question. “He’s handsome enough, but not really someone I’m into. So it would be one-hundred percent professional. But I also recognize that if I botch things, it could compromise my whole mission.”

She was right about that, but honestly, I didn’t think Hannah would do that. She was incredibly smart, and if the man had already asked her out, he almost certainly was going to view her in a positive light.

I thought about what she said, however, making sure I was completely certain before I gave her a final answer. “We’d want you to have covert security if the two of you go out, but if you want to go, I won’t stop you. And I do agree it very likely will be useful.”

“Alright then. I’ll think about it overnight, but I’m banking on going. I’ll send you the details tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good.”

“Thank you, Theo. I’ll be in touch.”

With that, she hung up, allowing me to get back to my day. It picked up into its usual rush, and before I knew it, it was well after when I was supposed to stop. Cursing to myself when my 6:30 alarm went off, I also saw that I had three texts from Mahlan.

Oh, he wanted to meet me after work. Well, I was a bit behind on that. Quickly, I shot him a message back that I was finishing up and went about leaving for the day.

Part of me was tempted to bring my laptop along, but I knew if I did, I’d never get any sleep.

So instead, I made sure to set myself up nice and pretty for the next day, then shut everything down. Weary, I headed down to the main floor where, sure enough, Mahlan was standing there.

“Walk and talk with me?” he asked as I approached.

Mahlan was always great about understanding how much I hated wasting time with pointless small talk. I had things to do, even if those things were as simple as shoving enough calories in my face not to lose weight, and passing

out in my bed. And maybe showering, too, if I was feeling ambitious.

“Of course.”

We strode out to the same parking spot I always used. I was a creature of habit just as much as I was a creature of the moon, but I figured it made me reliable more than anything else.

“Look, I know that I’ve been asking a lot of you lately,” he started, which was definitely the truth. “But I need to ask a huge favor of you.”

“Yes?”

“So, as you know, I love my apartment, but it’s not really the place to build a family.”

Oh? Was Mahlan thinking about that already? I supposed that shouldn’t be surprising considering his mate’s first heat was likely approaching, but I hadn’t really thought about what that meant.

Of course Mahlan would want pups, to expand his family like his alpha drive told him to. I personally was not exactly a fan of babies. I respected them for the little souls they were, but goodness, they were messy, exhausting, and stressful. So while I was annoyed by them, I certainly couldn’t let the baby itself sense that. It wasn’t their fault.

“That makes sense, Alpha.”

“So I’m surprising Lyssa with buying a house. I have people coming to view my apartment and need an excuse to get her out of it where she won’t be suspicious. So I thought if you could host a family dinner, that’d be the perfect ruse.”

Host the family dinner? I would rather stick my hand in a blender.

My cooking ability was minimal, I hated washing dishes, I didn’t want to deal with the setup and then the cleanup after, and hosting was even more exhausting than everything else.

It was too much, especially in my limited personal space. My home was my haven, where I didn’t have to worry about socializing or doing anything uncomfortable. I could just be Theo, a shifter who liked walking around in pajama pants and considered cereal a full and complete dinner, instead of being Theo, the right-hand man to our pack’s alpha and resident fixer.

“Can’t you just have the family dinner at your new house for the surprise?”

“That’s what I originally wanted to do—figured that would be romantic—but things didn’t come together in time. I’m just now closing, and there’s not even furniture inside it yet. Besides…” he flashed me a lopsided grin that

he was wearing more and more often. Mated life really did do right by him. “I would like to uh, christen the house when we first go into it, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand your drift,” I said, while also actively trying not to think about my alpha taking his mate on every available surface in their new home.

It was a nice story—it really was—for Lyssa to have gone from homeless, packless, and under some awful spell that locked her away from herself, to having an undoubtedly beautiful home with a pack alpha who also was filthy rich. Their kids were going to get one hell of a story when it came time to learn about how their parents met.

A truly lovely tale, of course, but if it were me, I’d just rather not have any of the drama at all. Our pack was facing things I’d hoped we’d never have to face, and while it wasn’t Lyssa’s fault at all, she kind of represented a lot of the maelstrom in my mind.

“Alright, I’ll host.”

“Why do you say it like it’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever asked of you?”

“Because it is. Or at least the most daunting.”

Mahlan chuckled. “I literally asked you to secure the house next to it without telling you it was the house next to it two weeks ago.”

“Ah, that’s what that was about. Yes, that’s already been secured.”

“Huh, maybe this hosting business *is* the hardest thing I’ve asked of you in a while.” Shaking his head, Mahlan let out a happy sigh. “You know to tell me if I’m putting too much on you, right?”

“Of course, but I can handle it. Especially since you’re making the perfect den for you and your mate. That’s important to our whole pack.”

“Just know that whenever you need a break, I can step up. And one day, if you have your own mate, I’ll be more than happy to return the favor.”

I let my mind drift for a moment, thinking about having a loving partner and pups as Mahlan’s neighbors. Our kids being raised together, running around like the miscreants they were, just like our inner circle had grown up. We’d built bonds that would last us for our entire lives, that strengthened us and covered our own weaknesses with our brothers’ skills.

I could vaguely see it: us at the lakefront, next door to Mahlan, Jacobian on the other side. Kaleb and Parker weren’t there, if only because it was hard to imagine either of them in a parental role. But even so, they would show up to cookouts and runs, play frisbee with all the kids. We would all be one

happy, harmonious family.

Huh.

Funny that I'd never really taken the time to imagine such things before. As a beta, I didn't have the borderline obsessive need to breed that alphas and omegas did, but that didn't mean I would mind being a father one day, if the timing and partner were right.

It was just unfortunate that having children meant dealing with that whole pukey baby part. I wished there was a way to skip that.

"I know you would," I said to Mahlan finally. "You know, since you've already had me buy the property next to yours, we should probably just grab the whole lakeside in case the other three knuckleheads ever get their shit together."

"You think so? I wasn't sure if Jacobian knows women exist outside of a computer screen."

I chuckled at that, because it was true. While everyone accused me of being a workaholic, Jacobian was far worse than me. He just managed to do everything in the comfort of his own apartment, so people didn't realize how much he was glued to his technology. Really, it was a wonder we regularly got him out for family dinners.

Which I was going to host. I definitely needed to get some things for my apartment, such as an actual dining table. I usually just wolfed my meals down or ate at my work desk in my home office.

"So, you want me to grab them up?"

"Why don't you get a price on it and we can present it to the guys tonight? That way, they can decide to split it however they want."

"This sounds like a cash-offer-in-today sort of situation. You don't want shitty neighbors, do you?" I was always more of a get-things-done-asap sort of person. Why put off to tomorrow what could be done today?

"I appreciate your eagerness, but let's talk to them first. Life is funny. You never know if they have other plans."

EMMALINE

I dutifully applied my mascara as Lyssa recounted her story about a real Karen who had come into the store while I'd been on a call with our supplier. While those tales were a dime a dozen in retail, I did love the way my friend recounted things. She had a quippy sense of humor that tickled my funny bone in all the right ways.

“And the look she had on her face! You should have seen it!”

“I wish I had,” I admitted, grinning at her in the mirror. With her hours still cut down to accommodate her schooling, I preferred to work as much as possible with Lyssa while I could. It felt less like work and more like getting paid to hang out. “Maybe I'll have to check the security feeds tomorrow.”

“You totally should.” Lyssa paused a minute as she carefully painted her lips. “Hey, are you still serious about hiring new employees?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It's becoming more blatantly necessary by the day.”

“Do you have anybody in mind?”

“No. I don't think anyone in the pack would be interested, which is who I would give preference to. I guess I'll just put a help wanted sign up?” I waffled a bit, running through options in my mind. “Although, I'm going to be *incredibly* picky with this stuff. It just takes one bad egg to ruin the awesome atmosphere we've got going.”

“Ew, yeah.”

“And I don't want any bullies, either. I know fashion is full of people who look down on dark-skinned people, or fat folks, and I won't have it. I'm all for body positivity and making everyone feel like they deserve some nice, fashionable clothes.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever told you, but I really appreciate that you’re like that. I know I’m skinnier than a stick, but I’ve always hated any of that sort of stuff. It’s so mean, and dumb! I hate it.”

I nodded along, the normal righteous indignation I had about the subject bubbling up inside me. “I mean, when I was younger, I always felt a bit alienated from other people because I was a shifter. I knew it wasn’t the same, but when I went to public school, I always knew I was different than anybody else. It was isolating, in a way. Lonely.

“And while I know that’s not the exact same as fat or gay or different kids getting bullied, I always felt like they were the ones who understood me best. They didn’t care if I had to miss three days of school every month around the full moon and always returned a bit prickly. They didn’t tease me in gym class for my incredibly hairy legs or the mustache I always got right before said full moon. They were just happy to be my friend.”

I wasn’t that upset about what I was saying, figuring I was just explaining a chunk of my backstory that Lyssa may not know. But the next moment, she was hugging me, resting her cheek against my shoulder.

“You’re such a good person, Emma.”

Good Lord, she really was so sweet. I hugged her back, cherishing the sisterly affection. “Technically, I’m a terrible person considering that I burst into a wolf a few times a month,” I joked. “But I’ll take the compliment anyway.”

“Good! You better!”

The sentimental moment was cut off when I heard Lyssa’s phone ring with what I instantly knew was Mahlan’s tone, if only because my younger friend had set it to “I’m too sexy for my shirt,” but it had been edited to say “skin” instead. It drove my brother up the wall, but Lyssa and I were pretty thoroughly amused by it.

Lyssa picked up and the two exchanged their normal, lovey-dovey greetings. But then I could hear Mahlan continue on, sounding a bit guilty.

“Hey, would the two of you be comfortable having a later dinner? Theo and I ran over to work and we still need to have our meeting with the guys.”

Lyssa looked at me and I nodded. “Yeah, that’ll actually work perfectly,” I said. “We can get some photos done for the website.”

“Oh, you’re right!” Lyssa said, grinning. She was always a fan of getting work done, the dedicated woman. “Emma says that’s perfectly fine. We have stuff to occupy us.”

“Perfect, thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

“See you soon!” Lyssa echoed before hanging up. “Alright, I’m done with my makeup. What do you want to shoot first?”

“You said that the hats are still flying off the shelves, right?” I asked, still trying to get my hair right. It must have been the humidity because it was refusing to lay how I wanted it.

“Yeah, we haven’t been able to keep enough in stock between orders. Usually we’re sold out within a couple days.”

“Okay, let’s do the three new colors we got in. We can kill two birds with one stone if we put you in that new cashmere turtleneck, and...hmmm... we just got a series of plaid skirts in four different colorways, right?”

“Six, actually. Pink, red, blue, green, gray, and purple.”

“No pastels?”

“No, not yet. But I can put in a request to the manufacturer tomorrow if you want.”

“Let’s see how these do first. Anyway, match the skirt to the beret, and then we can use the photos for all three of the item listings.”

“Sounds good! The camera’s still set up in the guest bedroom from the last set we did, so I’ll get started.”

A heaved a huge sigh of relief. “Have I ever told you that you’re a godsend?”

“Every other Tuesday!”

“Remind me to up that to every Tuesday and every third Friday.”

Lyssa gave me a little salute. “Aye aye, captain!”

She hurried off while I busied myself with taming my long, dark hair. I’d taken to growing it out ever since I turned eighteen, and it was getting to be a bit unmanageable. While most humans had a sort of terminal length that their hair would reach before it would eventually just start breaking off, apparently wolf-shifter hair had no such limitation. I’d gotten a trim when I had a spa day with Lyssa, but maybe I should get some layers cut into it and a few inches off.

Then again, I always wanted to shave my head every time my tresses caused me stress. But a few hours later I would be back to forgetting that haircuts were ever a thing.

When I was eventually free, I went to join Lyssa, deciding to shoot some of the rompers that I was sure were going to be popular when the temperature spiked. That was another tricky thing about fashion and retail—being just

ahead of the trends to make sure I could order them in time, but not too ahead that they just sat there and clogged my inventory.

“Hey Lyssa, you don’t happen to know any plus-size models, do you?”

She shook her head as she changed into a pastel pantsuit set that I knew was a little risky but was just too good not to keep in stock. “No, why?”

“Well, I know that we put what sizes are available under our pictures, but I thought it would be nice to actually see some of the clothes on a larger body. Or maybe even get some plus-size exclusive stuff.”

“Sorry, I didn’t have a lot of friends in high school as it was, and I’ve lost contact with most of them.” Ah yes, an unfortunate side effect of how everything panned out. I still wasn’t very happy about that. “Could we ask Hannah? She’s like a size sixteen or eighteen, right?”

“Hmm, maybe, but she’s kind of busy with some big, corporate espionage stuff. She won’t be available for a long while, I’m sure.”

“Okay, well, I’ll keep a lookout.”

We kept on working and my mind was full of so much info between price points, inventory levels, and stock that I didn’t realize Lyssa was staring at me until after a good ten minutes or so.

“Something on my face?” I asked.

“Uh no, just uh...I guess...I don’t want to seem like I’m trying to mother-hen you, but you’ve seemed a bit on edge at the shop.”

She’d noticed that, huh? And here I thought I had been pretty covert the whole week.

“I dunno. I guess I keep feeling like someone’s watching me.”

“You mean like when we were doing that photoshoot out front on our lunch? Because people were absolutely staring.”

“No, I don’t mean anything like that,” I said, chuckling before quickly growing serious. “I expect people to stare at me when we’re in puffy selkie-inspired dresses. This is something different. I’ve done laps around the shop, checked the security cameras, but no one is there.”

“Is it all because of that one customer? She really seemed to get to you.”

“Maybe,” I admitted, feeling absolutely ridiculous. “I’m not sure. I just can’t shake the feeling no matter how hard I try.”

“I’ll try to keep an eye on things, too. Put my new nose to the test.”

“Thanks,” I said, eternally grateful that she didn’t think I was crazy. I suppose Lyssa had had enough crazy things happen to her in her life that it would be rather strange for her to dismiss my experience right off the bat.

“Now, how about we pick out something killer to wear for dinner?”

“Sounds good to me!”

We busied ourselves with finding outfits and I set an alarm in my phone to remind me take a few pictures while we were out if we could find a non-identifiable place to take some promo snaps. With that, I could focus on relaxing for a bit and soon I forgot all about the intense paranoia I kept feeling around the shop.

It wasn't until Mahlan texted us that he was on his way that I realized something.

“Hey, Lyssa?”

“Yeah?”

“Why weren't we at the meeting?”

We didn't sit in on all the meetings, but it wasn't entirely unusual for us to end up at one while we waited for a family dinner or other outing. I never minded, as I could work on my phone, close my eyes to relax, or even pitch in occasionally. It wasn't like we were expected to silently sit there without giving our opinions. If anything, Mahlan encouraged us to share our perspectives.

“Oh, huh. Maybe because I told Mahlan that you and I had a massive order we had to archive online? He's pretty thoughtful like that.”

“Yeah, that was probably it,” I said, nodding to myself as I packed up my essentials in my purse. “He's got a lot on his plate, but he really tries to listen. And it's not like we can't talk about it at dinner.”

“Exactly.”

We finally finished up with our outfits. I pulled Lyssa to the living room to take some more casual shots before Mahlan texted us that he was out front. Then, right after his message, I got a text from Theo.

“Huh, what could he want?” I wondered.

I opened the message and saw it was indeed meant for me, not an accidental text or anything like that.

Family dinner is at my restaurant tonight. Please keep all your sister tendencies in check and try not to embarrass us in front of my customers.

Anyone else would probably think that was a jerk thing to say, but I'd known Theo my whole life. His humor was about as dry and sarcastic as it came, giving the Sahara a run for its money.

Lol, don't be a dick, dickface. I sent right back.

“What are you chuckling at?”

“Oh, just Theo, being an ass,” I answered, showing her my phone. “You know, joking around in that way of his.”

“Wait, Theo jokes?”

“Kinda. In a sarcastic way.”

“Huh, okay. Guess I have a lot to learn about him.”

“He’s like an onion. Layers and all that.”

“They say the same thing about ogres.”

“That’s probably not a coincidence,” I shot back before we broke into laughter.

Somehow, we managed to get ourselves together and go out to where Mahlan was waiting in his car. Sliding in, we boogied over to Theo’s restaurant where we saw most of the others’ cars already parked.

“How many of you guys own restaurants?” Lyssa asked absently as we got out of my brother’s car.

“Pretty much everyone but me. It was part of Theo’s idea to diversify our investments, and it’s worked out pretty well,” Mahlan answered casually.

“Then why don’t you or Emma have a restaurant?”

“Well, I’m not actually a part of the company,” I replied, checking my makeup in my mirror one more time. I knew Kaleb wasn’t really one to care about cosmetics, but I enjoyed looking impeccably styled. “Just a beneficiary on Mahlan’s life insurance.”

“Probably a bad move on my part,” Mahlan joked. “Never give a little sister incentive to drive you into an early grave.”

“Excuse you,” I said with mock indignation. “I am completely innocent.”

“Sure you are,” my brother shot back before continuing with answering Lyssa’s question. “But I just haven’t gotten around to it. I want to find a place I enjoy and in a good area, but has room to expand.”

Lyssa nodded, seemingly satisfied, and we finally met up with the rest of our group. I tried to position myself closer to Kaleb, but by the time I did, we were all headed inside. Annoying.

Once we got to the table, I tried again, managing to get myself the seat opposite of him, but almost immediately, he pulled out his phone and started texting, ignoring everyone, including Parker.

Huh, he was quiet, but normally never anti-social. I began to wonder if maybe something was wrong with him. But how could I find out if he didn’t want to talk?

“You’ve got a look on your face,” Theo said, leaning in from where he

was sitting next to me.

“I always have a look on my face,” I retorted. “That’s what faces do.”

“Clever,” he shot right back, shaking his head. “But you do look nice tonight.”

“Oh? You think my outfit’s up to snuff?” I batted my eyelashes at him, really playing it up.

Theo and I had an...interesting dynamic. When we were younger, we were mortal enemies, if only because girls had cooties and boys were buttholes. Then, when we were teenagers, we developed all the normal snarky antagonism one would expect from juvenile shifters.

Finally, as adults, we were like two somewhat distant friends. We liked each other well enough, we had our own brand of humor with each other, but we were just so *busy* that we rarely had time to talk. Theo wasn’t someone with whom I would ever share my feelings about Kaleb, but I would trust him with most other things.

“I think you do clean up rather well,” he said, putting his arm over my shoulder like he was hitting on me and pointedly looking at Kaleb.

Wait, does Theo know?!

I was shocked. So shocked that I didn’t even react before Theo leaned in and kissed my cheek. Was...was he trying to wingman for me? That was awful nice.

The rest of the table soon dissolved into conversation about Hannah and Addison’s positions within the company and how best to put feelers out into the community about hostile witches. But it all flowed over my head.

Maybe it was stupid for me to be so caught up with a dead-in-the-water romance with a man who seemed more interested in his *Samsung* than me, but I needed something to hold onto given everything that was going on with the pack.

“Do you think the covens really would betray one of their own for us?” Jacobian asked, his tone deathly serious.

“Perhaps not,” Mahlan admitted. “But I have a contact we can trust. I know that for certain.”

“A contact? You mean the green witch who helped us locate the girl?” Parker asked.

Huh, even Kaleb noticed the excitement in Parker’s voice and we all looked at the youngest of the inner circle. But he just shrugged. “He told me next time he saw me he’d give me this plant I’ve been trying to get my hands

on. You know how hard it is to get my hands on a pink princess philodendron?”

“And *why* do you want a pink princess philowhatever?” Theo asked, eyebrow raised.

“Don’t get him started,” Kaleb answered dryly, returning his gaze to his phone nonchalantly. “His plant collection takes up most of our apartment.”

Parker nodded. “It does, and I will not be shamed for it!”

I chuckled despite the tension in my stomach from trying to get Kaleb’s attention while also not looking too desperate. “You do you, Parker-boo.”

“Well, *someone* has to.”

It wasn’t exactly the dirtiest joke, but it wasn’t like Parker, and so we all broke into laughter. Well, failed romance or not, at least I could always count on loving my family.

Not everyone could be so lucky.

THEO

“**L**ook, Jakko-boy, I don’t know why you’re being so difficult with this. Hannah is an incredibly bright woman and if she believes she can handle this, then she can.”

I rubbed one of my temples with my free hand as I argued with Jacobian over the phone. While he’d always been a strong-willed man, he was being exceptionally difficult, which was exactly what I didn’t have time for.

“It doesn’t matter if she’s bright or not. You’re putting her into a situation that’s incredibly dangerous!”

“Yes, a situation that she asked to be in and believes she is fully capable of executing safely. You helped pick her for this position, Jacobian. Has she given you any reason to distrust her as you are now?”

“No... I guess not.” I could tell that Jacobian was saying it begrudgingly, like I was pulling his teeth through the telephone. “It’s just...”

“It’s just *what*, Jakko-boy?”

“Nothing. You’re right. I’m probably just being paranoid.” I could have sworn I heard him growl, but instead of focusing on it, I just sipped my drink.

I was alone in my apartment, having dodged hosting family dinner in my personal space by using the restaurant I’d bought the year previous. I was grateful that the graduation party that had reserved the largest area at my restaurant had called to cancel. If it weren’t for that, I’d have been forced to fit the entire inner circle plus peripherals in my home.

“But I’m telling her she needs a bug before she goes on her date tonight. You can never be too careful.”

“Whatever floats your boat.”

Normally, I would never be so lackadaisical, but Jacobian really was being silly. It was just a date with a mid-level office manager, not a deep dive with sharks that were out for blood.

Thankfully, Jakko-boy didn't feel the need to draw out the argument anymore and I was finally left to my lonesome.

But since I'd just spent the last twenty minutes arguing with our resident cybernetic expert, my mind couldn't help but drift toward Hannah. Hopefully her date would prove to get her some insider secrets and not just pointlessly put her in danger.

Secrets that could potentially corroborate Sarah's story, or perhaps even identify any of the other witches involved. Or maybe even the brothers who had started this whole thing. Wouldn't that be something?

Then again, I supposed there was always the risk that Hannah was a double agent or had converted. It seemed crazy to me that anybody would turn their back on their own kind to align with murderous non-shifters, but my mother had raised me to acknowledge every possibility and have a backup plan just in case. Some people called that paranoia. I just called it being prepared.

It was a risk well worth taking, in my opinion, especially since Jacobian, Hannah, and I had all been tirelessly trying to suss out a connection to the brothers, or even our moonstones, in Bronson's company and databases.

Perhaps there were other avenues we were neglecting. We had another plant, didn't we? That uppity witch who helped us find the treacherous Sarah.

Downing my drink, I called up Mahlan, hoping I wasn't interrupting anything.

"Hey Theo, something wrong?"

"No, I just had a thought. Am I interrupting?"

"Nah, Lyssa's working on homework right now and I was just lifting some weights. What do you need?"

"I was thinking it's time for another visit down to the docks. See what that plant we put there has found out."

"What, Samson? Oh, he left his position there after we captured Sarah. Technically, he did fulfill his promise to us."

I cursed inside my head before my brain automatically rerouted to a different path. Problem-solving had always been one of my most valued skills.

"We need to get a new plant in there then. Someone who's not as

valuable in other aspects.” Although I wasn’t the biggest fan of the iced-coffee-sipping witch, I had to admit he had some pretty remarkable talents.

“Okay, put Jacobian on that. I’m sure he has an intern or a connection that could be our eyes and ears.”

I nodded, even though I knew Mahlan couldn’t see me. “Understood. And have we been in contact with Samson lately? Has his scrying uncovered anything?”

“I need to touch base with him. I know he was helping some of our searchers try to find out which other pack’s moonstones we have since no one else in the area has reported missing any, but I’ve been, uh, occupied.”

Right. Occupied. Which was code for most likely fucking his mate on every available surface of his expensive apartment. Not that I was jealous—because I wasn’t—but I could see the appeal in making hot, amorous memories to pepper my own den. I’d had hookups there, sure, but that was different from what Mahlan and Lyssa had.

“Perhaps we should reach out to the council?”

At that, Mahlan paused and I could almost hear how wide his eyes were on the other side of the phone. Not that I could blame him. The council was a serious deal, not an entity to get into contact with on a whim.

“No, not yet. I don’t want them involved until we know way more about what we’re dealing with. This isn’t like when Sawyer was killed.”

I nodded, my mind thinking back to our previous alpha and his grisly demise. I had thought that was the end of our pack as we knew it, but Mahlan had really stepped up. We weren’t living in easy times, that was for sure.

While the council hadn’t shown up in person to Sawyer’s funeral, they had sent flowers and their condolences, along with a truck full of high-end meat cuts. While the pack could more than afford our own provisions, the thought was nice. Even if it had felt a little...phoned in.

“I understand, Alpha,” I said, taking mental notes and tucking them away in my brain’s vault. “But once we are ready, I’m more than willing to put together a packet to debrief them.”

“Of course you are. Hey, I have another favor to ask of you.”

“What’s that?”

“Can you handle another family dinner? I’m sorry, I just need another week.”

I wanted to refuse, I absolutely did. Mostly because I knew my restaurant was fully booked out for the rest of the month, and also because I knew

family dinner was meant to be a homey thing. Not a go-out-to-eat thing.

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Thank God, really. I know it’s a lot to ask, but Emma offered to help, so there’s always that.”

Emma? Her plate was overflowing as it was, but it figured she would be the one to help. “Sounds good.”

“You’re the best. Really. I owe you so much.” He was silly, that Mahlan. He didn’t owe me anything. I was just doing my duty as his right-hand man and future head beta. “Anything else you need tonight, Theo?”

“No, that should be it. Have a good night, Mahlan.”

“You too.”

We hung up, leaving me feeling more anxious than I would like. I could feel the restless energy crackling within me, and that just wouldn’t do.

Crossing my living room to my personal bar, I was about to pour my drink when I realized that being tipsy wasn’t really going to solve things. The issues with our pack were barely beginning to be uncovered and I knew things would keep growing bigger and bigger until we found the root of it.

Normally, I liked puzzles, but I just wanted things to be over and done with. I wasn’t really comfortable taking over as head beta while things were going on. We definitely needed John’s expertise, even if he was behind the scenes most of the time.

Tapping my fingers for a moment, I decided to work out in my own home gym. I did my standard warm-up, wondering if that would help settle my mind. But when that didn’t, I headed to my reinforced treadmill and got started.

I did a standard jog at first, but that wasn’t doing it for me, either, so I built it up and built it up until eventually, I was going at full blast.

Thank God for the soundproofed mat below my machinery. I hadn’t had that when I’d first set up my place, and that had led two different neighbors to pound on my door and complain about the conga lines I was having all over my apartment. I’d learned then that humans were not used to the sound of shifters running at maximum speed, so I made an effort from then on to ensure that no one would possibly show up at my door uninvited ever again.

I was really getting into the groove of it, my heart thundering in my chest and my breaths narrowing into sharp pants. But right before I hit the sweet zone, my phone buzzed.

Huh, nobody called me so late unless it was important. so I slowed just

enough to pick up my phone and check it without risking dropping it into the ravenous tread of the equipment below me.

I was surprised to see a message from Emmaline. Out of all the pack, she was just about as busy as I was, mostly because she was very insistent on being an independent woman and running her own business. A very successful business, from what I heard, as she was going to need to hire more employees soon. Good for her.

Hey.

Right. A real Shakespeare there. Normally, I wouldn't bother to reply to such a perfunctory statement, but the fact that she was messaging me at all was too interesting to ignore.

Getting off the treadmill, I quickly typed a *hey* right back. I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate on my proper form when running while waiting for her to message back, so I went about setting up some weights to do a proper circuit.

I managed to get it all done before Emma messaged me back, and I couldn't help but wonder if maybe she was just drunk and had accidentally texted the wrong person. Although she didn't drink often, it wouldn't exactly be the first time.

Wiping my hands on my pants, I checked my phone again and saw the little typing bubbles just hanging there. My curiosity rose again, my mind rushing with what she could possibly say.

Did she need a ride? Was she in trouble? Had she finally gotten over her one-sided crush on Kaleb? What did that guy even have going for him? He had all the personality of a rock and spent most of his life going along with whatever whim Parker had. I wasn't even sure if he was straight.

And then the bubble stopped.

"Come on, Emma," I growled, growing frustrated.

The bubbles started again. Then stopped. Then started again. Then stopped.

I was done with the cycle so I quickly typed back.

EITHER YOU'RE WRITING me a whole soliloquy or your thumbs have a severe tap dancing addiction.

THAT SEEMED to do the trick because finally, she answered back.

WHAT TIME SHOULD I come over?

WAIT, *what* was going on now?

I stared at my phone, trying to compute the meaning of her words, then stared some more. She wanted to come to my place?

I imagined the whole situation: her knocking at my door in one of those fashionable little outfits from her boutique, looking like a total smoke show. Meanwhile, I was shirtless, covered in sweat, and my inner wolf was amped all the way up.

It was impossible for my thoughts not to slide to grabbing her, and kissing her like she deserved to be kissed. Ravaging her mouth until she was breathless. Would she be a biter? A moaner? Or would she melt into me like I was what she needed all along?

I kept staring at my phone while my mind built up the fantasy. What she would feel like against me. Whether she would battle me for dominance or succumb to my desires. How her breasts would feel in my palms, soft and—

Whoops, she was still waiting for me to reply.

TONIGHT? Like, to work out?

I SUPPOSE we had talked about working out together a bit ago. While there were still self-defense lessons available to everyone in the pack who wanted some, Emma had mentioned that she wanted to push herself a bit more.

Feeling embarrassed for just a moment, I chided myself for getting carried away. But at the same time, that burning, rushing excitement was still simmering through my veins. Surely there wasn't a crime in a little harmless flirting.

I'm already at it, I sent before turning to my mirror and snapping a pic. I knew I looked good, my muscles all puffed up from my efforts and my skin

shining with sweat.

Once more, that little chat bubble popped in and out of existence like a lanky man in a flying, blue police box. When she eventually answered, I felt my embarrassment increase about tenfold.

No, for Saturday. Mahlan said family dinner was supposed to be at your place? I offered to help.

Well, shit.

I had certainly misinterpreted things, which was fairly unusual for me. I liked to think I was pretty good at judging a situation. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, as the saying went.

Oh, yeah. It's not like you could handle my workout anyway.

IT THAT A CHALLENGE?

IT'S whatever you want it to be.

I DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER to fight the smile spreading across my features. I liked flirting with Emma, even if she most likely couldn't tell I was flirting.

My mind went back to how she'd looked at the last dinner at my restaurant. She'd been dressed up like a bombshell, her style impeccable as always. I had been honest with her that she cleaned up well, if only because I felt like it would have been inappropriate to say to my best friend's sister that she looked hot as hell and better to eat than anything else on my menu.

RIGHT, you're hilarious. So what time?

6:30 ON SATURDAY. Bring something edible.

BESIDES THAT DELICIOUS peach-shaped ass of hers, of course. Naturally, I didn't say that part. Mostly because I had a lick of sense and enjoyed my head being attached to my body.

While Mahlan wasn't a caveman who would be overly protective of his sister's chastity, he probably wouldn't appreciate his best friend casually discussing Emma's posterior.

And that was the crux of the issue, wasn't it? My friendship with Mahlan. I wouldn't give it up for the world. He was my platonic soulmate, my brother from another mother. I loved him deeply and trusted him to the ends of the earth. I would lay down my life to make sure he was safe and protected.

But I'd also been in love with his sister since before puberty.

I'd been angry at the emotions at first. Resenting how important it was to know the smell of her shampoo, or to make sure I always lapped her in gym. But as I got older and realized what an absolute knobhead I was being, I grew more civil.

Granted, that had been a struggle when one summer she went from being flat as a board to relatively stacked. I'd definitely avoided their house for a couple of months until I could stop teenage me from popping a hormone-fueled boner just from smelling the faintest echo of her scent.

And then there was the first time she'd ever shifted. It had happened two days before her birthday, which wasn't supposed to happen, until everyone realized that the leap year had affected her transformation. It was rare, but not entirely unheard of, so no one realized what was happening until she suddenly burst into her wolf form and took off into the woods.

She'd been beautiful, really. Her color was a deep russet like Mahlan's, but with more red. She'd been so powerful, even if she was terrified as she took off, and I found myself enraptured by her. Maybe it was fate that I was the one who ended up finding her and talking her down from the panic she was in.

Or maybe I was just desperate after carrying a torch for her over a decade.

Eh. There were worse things I could do in life. Besides, it was plenty apparent that she'd been doing the same thing with Kaleb. Which made about zero sense.

I liked Kaleb, I did. He was loyal. He was caring. And he defended Parker through a lot of bullshit all through our childhoods. But he was also withdrawn. Reticent, and borderline anti-social. He was never outright rude, but seeing Emma throw herself at a man who clearly had zero idea of her

interest was painful.

I didn't think Emma belonged to me. No, she was her own woman. But I *did* think that anyone who was lucky enough to have her affection should work their ass off to earn it. That she should be wined, dined, and appreciated.

I would never try to sabotage her attempts with Kaleb, in fact I had tried to help at the restaurant, but the whole thing had been like watching her flirt with a brick wall.

I supposed we all had our personal trials to deal with.

ROGER-WILCO. See you there.

PUTTING ASIDE MY PHONE, I decided that was enough working out for the night. Clearly my blood was rushing to all the wrong places. Maybe a cold shower was in order.



THE WEEK FLEW by in an impossible blur, much like they often did. I worked late every night just to come home and begin to set up for the family dinner. Of course I wouldn't ever let Mahlan on to how much the whole situation was stressing me out, but keeping all that bottled in was taking a toll on me.

And to make matters worse, absolutely zero progress had been made on finding information on the brothers and everything else, for that matter. Even Hannah's date had been apparently dreadfully boring, with the guy quoting the office and practically roleplaying Jim Halpert, from what I heard. Jacobian did seem weirdly pleased by that information, but I had too much going on to care about why.

So when Saturday finally rolled around and I still had to spend four hours in the office, I absolutely had to shift.

Did I have time to drive an hour out of the city and go on a run? No. But I did it anyway. As dedicated as I was, I knew that there were times when I needed to take care of myself, otherwise I would be useless.

It was just that more and more kept falling onto my shoulders.

I felt like I should've been able to handle it. After all, it wasn't like I was kidnapped, being hunted, or had my inner wolf locked away. I was just being asked to batten down the hatches while my alpha took care of important things. That was it.

But it was all too much. Far too much. I could feel myself falling apart at the seams if I didn't let my wolf out. So I did. I ran, and ran, hunting other small prey animals until I finally felt less like I was going to combust.

Still, I didn't get to stay out nearly as long as I wanted to, and when I shifted back to human, I was still simmering within my human husk. But I couldn't risk getting to the family dinner late—not when I was hosting it—so I drove back home.

I made good time, the traffic-gods deciding to be nice to me for once, and when I got inside my apartment, I realized I still had a little time to work out before showering and the catered food arrived. I'd used a place that was fairly reputable, and maybe it was overkill to use professionals for a family dinner, but if I had to cook enough food for our inner circle, I might have actually screamed then sublimated into a banshee.

I let myself run again for about half an hour, then spent another half hour of really hitting the weights before popping into the shower and using my scent-neutralizing hygienic supplies. Although some people didn't mind their personal scents and pheromones dripping all over the place, I preferred to be more discreet.

Once that was done, I decided I deserved a little me time to relax. Throwing on some jeans and grabbing a cigar, I headed out onto my balcony to enjoy my little rebellion, although most shifters never got cancer, either from not living long enough or because their accelerated healing took care of anything that tried to take root.

But I barely lit the cigar before there was a knock on the door. Figuring the caterers must be early, I strode over and opened it.

Except it wasn't the caterers. Not at all. Instead, it was Emma standing there, her arms laden with a heavy covered platter.

Shit. I had invited her over early, hadn't I?

"Uh, hello?" she remarked, her eyebrows going up to her hairline. "Didn't realize the uniform was going to be so casual."

"Har, har, you're hilarious," I countered, stepping aside to let her in. "I forgot about our texts."

"Uh-huh, I'm sure you did. But where is everyone? And why don't you

ever have a shirt on?”

“It just seems like I never have a shirt on,” I countered, moving past her, “because you keep looking at the last pic I sent you.”

She laughed, then did just about the last thing I expected. She stepped forward to pluck my drink right out of my hand and take a sip.

It shouldn't have been as hot as it was, but something about her perfectly manicured nails gently surrounding my glass and the look in her eyes as she imperiously sipped it really did it for me. Like, *really*.

But then she coughed, setting the platter down. “Damn, that's straight whiskey, isn't it?”

While I knew Emma wasn't a lightweight, I also knew that most shifters didn't like strong liquors, as both the smell and taste were burningly overpowering when it came to enhanced senses. Mahlan and I were perhaps just a little masochistic in our love of the stuff.

“It's a rough dry,” I responded, stepping closer and gripping the glass. Well, it was more like I gripped the glass around her hand, our skin touching salaciously.

How was the back of her hand so soft? Just that tiny point of contact was like velvet, and twice as beguiling. I wanted to lick it, bite it, and find out if every part of her body was just as soft—or maybe, impossibly, softer.

And then the door opened behind us.

I dropped my hand and whirled to see Lyssa rounding the corner with her arms also full of platters. Naturally, Emma rushed over to help her, ruining the moment I never thought would happen.

Because that had been a moment...right?

“You guys know I got catering, don't you?” I called in a half grumble as I went to help them. It turned out they definitely needed it, because there was a portable cart sitting in the hall that Mahlan *had* to have brought up.

“Uh, I don't think you told us that,” Lyssa said, already setting food out on the dining table that I'd ordered and assembled in my empty dining room. “Unless you said it to Mahlan and he forgot to mention it.”

“No, he didn't tell me,” Mahlan said, entering through my front door, too. Apparently, I didn't need to actually greet anyone or invite them in—they would just waltz in on their own.

Still, I was grateful for their help, especially when the catering arrived and I suddenly found myself a bit overwhelmed. But together, the four of us were able to get everything out and settled by the time everyone arrived.

Yeah, maybe I liked being in such close proximity to Emma while we got things set up, and maybe I took every chance I could to touch her without being a complete creep. Whether it was a hand on her back, or a supporting grip on her elbow, or our fingers brushing together when she passed me things, I cherished every little point of contact.

And yeah, maybe I also thought of what it would be like to fuck her on that very counter, what sounds she might make, how she'd take it. But I managed to force my body not to respond, as that would have made pretty much everyone uncomfortable.

But even though I was certainly feeling the moment, Emma was clearly having a different experience. She didn't so much as give me a glance over her shoulder before she maneuvered herself to sit next to Kaleb.

Fuck.

I would never get in her way. I wouldn't. But it was increasingly frustrating how oblivious Kaleb was. Emmaline was an intelligent, graceful, and ambitious woman who deserved the world.

Too bad my relationship with Mahlan wouldn't let me give that to her.

EMMALINE

“So, do I have the job?”

“I still have a few more interviews to do, but we’ll contact you as soon as we come to a decision.”

Rebecca, my sixth interview of the day, nodded and stood. I made sure to walk her to the door, keeping the conversation friendly, but I couldn’t help but feel off.

I tried to tell myself it was just because I hated interviewing and that was what I had been doing since 9 am, but it was something else. The shop was slowly becoming an uncomfortable place for me, the hairs on the back of my neck always raised along with the feeling that someone was staring at me.

But I pushed through, mostly because I had to. Because if I didn’t, who would? It wasn’t like I could ask Lyssa to make the decisions that could potentially affect the livelihood of my business.

Still, I was quite grateful to be done with it when the last interviewee filed out. I nearly collapsed in a chair next to Lyssa as we went through the pros and cons of all of them.

“So, the first one, Charity? She seems nice but a little...”

“She was stupid,” I said flatly, ironically not in the mood to be at all charitable. “I don’t like to judge people, but she couldn’t handle the basic math questionnaire, couldn’t really carry a conversation, and said something about the earth being flat.”

“Okay, well, not her then.”

We went through them one by one, and while many had great points in their favor, it was beginning to feel like a cheesy montage from some slice-

of-life movie. I knew it was ridiculous to hope that another Lyssa would fall into my lap, but hey, a little hope had never hurt anybody.

“I just feel like most of these women won’t be a good fit,” I moaned, letting my head sink into my hands.

“Maybe you should take some time to think it over. You’ve had a long day, haven’t you?”

I nodded and Lyssa picked up steam.

“You know what? Let’s close up the shop early, give these a real look over, come up with a scoring system, and figure out who does and doesn’t make the cut for a second interview.”

“That actually sounds like a great idea,” I agreed. “But let’s not do it here. I need to get out of this place.” I didn’t want to tell her that the hackles on the back of my neck were practically on fire, sure that someone was watching us. “Maybe we could go to a fancy restaurant and drink expensive champagne to dull the pain?”

Lyssa laughed, her cheeks turning that faint pink they did when she was really amused. “I’m not actually old enough to drink yet, remember?”

“What, you’re telling me you’ve never had a beer at a house party or something like that?”

“Emma, I was homeless. It wasn’t like I could afford alcohol, and whenever I was at parties, I was too busy trying to figure out a way to sneak as much food onto my person as possible. And don’t restaurants check your ID or something?”

“Pfft, don’t worry about that. Fancy restaurants don’t ask. That’s why you pay so much. Besides, I’m never gonna let you drive after so it doesn’t really matter.”

Lyssa gave me a curious look. “I’m kinda surprised you’re so casual about it.”

“Are you?”

She gave me a look. “Not for nothing, my dear, but you are *incredibly* protective. And I’m not complaining! I like it. I just kinda expected you to be hardcore no drugs, no alcohol, no motorcycles.”

A snort escaped me at that. “My brother and several other pack members own motorcycles. It’s only a matter of time until you get on the back of one of those.”

“Okay, fair point there.”

“As for the rest of the stuff, I’m not really a fan of pot, as it can really

mess with your control over your inner wolf, so I wouldn't recommend it to a new shifter such as yourself." Also, the skunky smell gave me the worst migraines. "Then, with alcohol," I just shrugged. "My opinion is if you're old enough to serve in the military, you're old enough to be able to drink. Besides, America has a weirdly late serving age."

"I guess I'm game then. Do you want me to make reservations?"

"No, I'll handle it. You just get ready. Pick out something fancy to wear so we don't get in trouble."

Lyssa nodded and hurried off while I went about booking a table at a nice restaurant that wasn't owned by my pack. But still, I definitely dropped my family name to make sure I got a good table before getting dressed myself.

"Hey, should we take some pictures while we're out and about?" Lyssa said, coming out of the back in a ruched red number that really complimented her growing physique.

I could tell from the start that she was meant to have a very athletic frame, like a volleyball or lacrosse player, but she'd been so starved when she'd arrived at my door that she'd barely had any muscle. Now that she was eating on the regular, her body was finally able to do what it had wanted to all along. I had no doubt that in a year or so, she'd be a formidable fighter. I certainly wouldn't want to challenge her to an arm wrestling match.

"That's a great idea. Let me go get dressed, too."

As for myself, I chose a royal blue jumpsuit with a deep V that went all the way down to my navel. It was a bit more skin than I usually exposed, but it looked so good against my complexion, how was I supposed to resist?

"Ready?" I asked, tossing my car keys into the air and catching them as I walked back into the shop.

"Ready! Let's go."

We headed out, but the moment I got to my car, that awful feeling crawled up my spine. I stopped dead in my tracks, looking around me as if I would catch whatever mysterious force that was causing my paranoia.

Was...was I going into heat? It wasn't something that happened very often, as usually a mate was needed to activate one of those phases. But considering how old I was, it wasn't entirely unheard of for one to trigger on its own.

If it was, it would certainly explain why I was feeling so tetchy. A wolf in heat would definitely want to hole up in her mate's den and fight anyone else who tried to trespass there.

“You alright?” Lyssa said, beckoning me back to the present. I swallowed hard, knowing I must have looked like I’d seen a ghost when in reality, I hadn’t seen anything at all. Which was driving me *insane*.

For the briefest moment, I thought about canceling the dinner, but I really wanted to have some fun time with Lyssa, and her help with all the applicants. The idea of doing it on my own was intimidating, to say the least.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just...” I shook my head. “I think I left all the applications back in my office. Walk with me?”

“Of course. I’m not just gonna stand outside your car looking like a dweeb!”

Chuckling, we both headed back in. I’d been so distracted by my outfit that it turned out I had indeed left all the paperwork on my desk. I hurriedly grabbed it up while Lyssa double-checked that the back was locked up.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but we’re closed now. We’re just grabbing some paperwork before leaving.”

Lyssa’s voice drew my attention, so I shoved all the paperwork into my purse and looked out my office door.

“Oh, I’ll be quick, I promise!”

But then the door jingled again, and that awful feeling I had tripled. What was going on?!

I knew without even looking at whoever entered that they had either ill intentions or some sort of terrible curse on them. If they weren’t backlit, I would have memorized their face instantly, but with the harsh afternoon light behind them, I couldn’t so much as figure out if they were the same lady as last time.

If they were, that woman was definitely a witch. I should have never doubted myself! Wolves weren’t really supposed to be that adept at sensing witches, but the ability ran in my family. While Mahlan could often get a vague sense, I was rarely ever off the mark. And to me, whoever was in the doorway now was practically exuding malice.

I tensed, striding forward into the shop.

“Sorry, we are closed. Please escort yourselves out.”

“Oh, sorry, the door was unlocked.”

And that was all that was said before whoever it was showed themselves out. I would have liked to say that I was relieved, but that would have been a lie. My hackles were raised and they wouldn’t go down until I got some sort of assurance.

Maybe I should call Sam. I just didn't want to worry Lyssa when she'd already gone through so much.

When we were well and truly alone, I made sure to lock all the front doors tightly and that my paperwork was safely in my purse. Sure, the applications were going to get a little crunched, but that was the least of my issues.

"Is everything okay?" Lyssa asked, voice cautious. I felt like she was having to ask that a lot lately.

"Just anxious to get these done," I fibbed. "Why don't you call Mahlan and give him an update so he doesn't come hunting for you?"

"Oh! Good idea!"

She did just that while we walked to the car, and the entire time, I kept my eyes peeled, looking this way and that for anybody with ill will. Thankfully, nothing happened before we got into my car and I peeled out potentially a *wee* bit faster than I should have.

Sue me.

We also arrived at the restaurant without incident, which was a huge relief, and when we got out of the car, I didn't feel any eyes on us. At least, any eyes that made me want to burst into my wolf form and bare my teeth at them.

We certainly did get a few appreciative looks as we took photos outside the restaurant. With all the content we were generating, I *really* hoped my online audience would like it. Sure, they weren't professional-level photos, but I did take them on a DSLR camera and sent them off to be edited by someone who knew what they were doing.

The minutes ticked down quickly when I was having fun and not worried about some monster waiting in the wings to wreak havoc on my life. Soon, it was just fifteen minutes before our reservation.

Heading to the bar, we ordered two champagnes and I pulled out the applications to talk about them. I figured it was better to address them sooner rather than later, as the later it got in the night, the less likely I would be to want to finish things.

And Lyssa was a great voice of reason, helping me go through them much faster than if I'd been hemming and hawing on my own. Besides, sometimes just hearing myself verbalize my reasoning out loud was enough to make me feel more like I was making the right choice.

We were maybe about a third of the way through when Mahlan, Kaleb,

and Theo turned up, my head instantly snapping toward the entrance the moment I smelled my crush's scent.

Goodness, he was looking extra yummy in an emerald button-up and dark slacks, with a pinstripe vest complementing it. While he never was a schlub, he didn't really dig dressing up, so I couldn't help but wonder if he'd done that for *me*.

Okay, maybe a little bit of hope *could* be hurtful. But hey, maybe I liked a little pain.

Waving them over, I tried to act relatively nonchalant about things. I didn't want to appear desperate, after all. One, because that was gross. Two, because I respected myself too much. While I would try with all my earnest effort to bag Kaleb, I wasn't going to grovel at his feet.

"This is a new outfit, right?" Theo asked in that tone he had whenever he was making observations. I was sure it sounded flat to everyone else, but I could hear the tone shift in it. He was saying it in a nice way, not a mean way.

"Oh, you noticed?" I said, standing and doing a little twirl. "Just a little something I ordered for the shop. I have it in black, too."

"Well, you look good," Theo said. "Doesn't she, Kaleb?"

"What? Oh, huh. Yeah, you look amazing, Emma." Boom, there it was. His eyes made contact with mine and an easy smile spread across his features. "Then again, you always do, don't you?"

Two compliments, one right after the other? *Be still, my heart*. I played it off, or at least I thought I did, and sent him a flirty look.

"I suppose I do, don't I?"

He laughed and goodness, that was almost enough to send me floating across the ground. Who cared about the bad feeling I'd gotten earlier? I was about to live my best life.

And it was all thanks to Theo!



I PAUSED as I swept around the dressing rooms, that awful feeling returning to me. And to think, up until that moment, I'd been still enjoying the high of the dinner the night before.

In all reality, nothing that special had happened, but I'd gotten about three

sentences in with Kaleb and just Kaleb, which was basically a world record for me.

But now, all the warm fuzzies vanished from my mind and I whirled around, trying yet again to spot where the terrible, malevolent energy was coming from. Yet, just like every other time, there was no one there.

Enough was enough. I grabbed my phone and called up my brother.

“Hey, Emma, something up?”

“Yes,” I said quickly. “I think there’s something hokey going on around here.”

“Hokey?”

“Yeah. Something bad.”

“I’m in a meeting right now, but do you want me to get there immediately?”

“N-no, that’s okay. But please, send Sam if you can.”

“Samson, really?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s not who I expected you to ask for. Why not Kaleb?”

Jeez, did everyone know about my crush? Way to make me feel like an idiot! “It’s not the time for that, Mahlan. Just send him over, please.”

“You know he’s not exactly our biggest fan, right?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m growing on him, being Lyssa’s best friend and all. If you tell him it’s for me, I bet he’ll come.”

“Okay then, I’ll ask him.”

That was the end of it, but then I realized that maybe my earlier reaction was a bit premature. “Actually, uh...you can invite Kaleb, too. He lives right around the corner, right?”

“Yeah, he does.”

“Okay, yeah. Do that.”

“Alright. If whatever you’re sensing gets worse, let me know and I’ll shift. Pretty sure my wolf can make it there quicker than a car.”

“Okay, good to know. I think I’m okay for the moment.”

“Good. Just make sure you’re not fear-shifting. You know that tends to mess you up for a while.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“Alright, I love you, sis.”

“Love you, too, buttface.”

He laughed, and with that, we hung up. But as soon as the phone line

went dead, dread began to wash over me.

Come on, Emma. It's just in your head.

But for some reason, I couldn't quite convince myself.

THEO

“Now, as you can see from these numbers, our progress hasn’t been matched by anyone else in our sector. We are heads and tails above any other competitor you might find.” I could tell I really had their CEO on the hook and slid right into the projected numbers.

But then my pants buzzed, and I realized that I was getting notifications. Normally, I knew to put all my phones on do not disturb, but I’d clearly I’d forgotten, resulting in it buzzing in my pocket every two seconds like there was a barrel of bees in it. I tried to ignore it at first, but it was getting distracting, with several of the board looking at my trousers, no doubt trying to identify which pocket the sound was coming from.

“Pardon me,” I said with a wry grin. “Let me just shut that off.” I reached in my pocket and flicked the messages open, about to tell the guys to chill before they set my phone on fire. But when I opened the group chat and started to read, my heart sank down through the very crust of the earth.

Something was going on with Emma. Obviously nothing too serious, otherwise we’d be on high alert. But enough for Mahlan to send a witch and Kaleb to keep her company.

Guilt flooded me that I couldn’t be there for her. I was probably the farthest away out of anyone, which really gnawed at me.

Even if Emma wasn’t my mate, and never would be my mate, I still wanted her to be safe and secure. My caring about her wasn’t conditional on her being in a relationship with me.

But hey, if something was going on, certainly more hands would be better, wouldn’t it?

Clearing my throat, I met the gazes of the board, who were looking at me expectantly. “Apologies, but there’s an urgent matter I have to take care of. I’ll have my assistant call yours and we can reschedule. Thank you for your understanding.”

And with that, I walked out, intent on making sure that Emma was safe. Notes could be sent, meetings could be held again, but Emma...she was irreplaceable.

I rushed to my car and hopped in, driving well above the speed limit as I rushed to her shop. If Kaleb wasn’t already there when I arrived, I was going to kick his ass. He was the closest, and if he didn’t get a move on...well, it showed that he really didn’t deserve any of Emma’s affections. I wasn’t normally one for inner-pack beatdowns, but every man has his limit.

When I arrived, I parked right outside and practically vaulted out of the car, rushing inside. Or at least, I tried to. The door was locked when I arrived, and when I peered through the window, there wasn’t a soul within sight.

Huh.

But then I spotted other signs things were not good. There were things knocked over and definite damage inside. Emma would never let her shop look like that, not even if a mob came through it, so I knew something was very, very wrong.

I tried pulling the door again, but it was stuck fast. With no other option, I curled my fist and punched it as hard as I could.

I probably didn’t need to use that much force, because the glass went flying everywhere inside the shop. But that was the last of my concerns as I raced inside, taking in everything I could.

The whole place smelled of Emmaline, but there was something else under it that made me either want to heave or rip a man’s throat out with my teeth. Because underneath all those lovely scents she liked to wear was a smell that was unmistakably her blood.

Someone had hurt Emmaline.

I could feel my teeth lengthen inside my mouth and claws sprout along my fingertips, fur just beginning to try to poke out of my skin in itchy waves. Well, if my inner wolf was going to burst its way out, I might as well make use of it for a fight. And since Emma’s scent was coming from the back, I headed in that direction.

But there was something else there beside the blood, panic, and flowery notes. A scent I couldn’t place. I didn’t have the most sensitive nose—that

feature seemed to belong to Kaleb, Emma, Ellibie, and Lyssa—but I'd never much minded. I minded now, however, wanting more than anything to identify any potential threat to Emma.

“Emmaline!” I called out, ignoring how strange my voice sounded around my canine teeth. If she was around to hear, at least she would take comfort in knowing I was already halfway shifted and ready to save her.

Nothing. Just silence.

Bristling, I stalked to the back more quickly. Kicking open the door and snarling, I braced myself for a fight. Except there were none.

But there was Emma, lying unconscious on the floor.

“Emmaline!” I said, rushing forward and kneeling beside her prone form. She was breathing, which was a huge relief, but before I could examine her, a noise sounded from behind me.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw a woman bolt out of Emma's office and take off through the door.

Oh no, I wasn't having any of that. People needed to learn that there were consequences for attacking one of Mahlan's pack. Consequences that couldn't be escaped or weaseled out of.

I raced off after her, teeth bared and legs lengthening. I knew I couldn't be seen in public in my current form, but I also didn't care. The woman in front of me had hurt Emma and she had to *pay!*

Yet I knew I could reach her, I did. I lunged for her, but right when my claws were about to hook into her shoulder, she turned around and blasted me with...something.

I couldn't say what it was, but one moment, I was flying through the air at her, and the next moment, I was flying in the opposite direction, tons of products and shelves also sailing with me.

Ouch.

I landed hard in a flurry of papers, my vision dazed. I tried to get to my feet, but I couldn't in time, and the woman vanished out the door.

Well, I could revert to my human form and go after her, but that would require leaving Emma alone, and I just wasn't willing to do that. Instead, I raced back to my packmate, cradling her head in my hands.

Phone in hand, I called Savannah, our Alma.

“Theo?” she answered, her voice sleepy. I'd probably caught her during one of her afternoon naps. Considering that most of our emergencies happened at night, Savannah was a fairly nocturnal person so she could

always be on call whenever she was needed.

“Yeah, I’m here with Emma right now and I need your help!”

Savannah’s tone lost all hints of slumber to it. “Tell me what is happening, now.”

“It’s Emma. She’s unconscious with some minor wounds, but she’s not waking up. It’s like...like I can feel her energy draining by the second!”

Emma always had such a bright spark of energy to her wolf, a shining wellspring in a world that could be oh so dull. But now I could barely feel that wolf, all her inner self reduced to barely a flicker of illumination in my lupine senses.

“Emmaline, wake up! Come on, you need to open your eyes!”

“I’m on my way, but I don’t know if I’ll make it in time,” Savannah said, making my blood turn to ice. “This sounds like a lethal curse. Those require strong magic and healing to counter.”

“What do I do? She can’t die!” No, that was *impossible*. Losing Mahlan’s sister would destroy our pack, and honestly, I didn’t think I could come back from it.

“Then either you must have her swear a blood oath or give her a mate mark to save her.”

“She...she’s not conscious enough to do a blood oath, and I don’t have the right ingredients.” Sure, it could be done in a pinch with just my blood and hers, but it required her to be conscious.

Which left my mate mark as my only option.

“Emma, wake up Emma. I need your permission, okay? I can’t do this without your permission. I just *can’t*.” Sure, Mahlan and Lyssa had worked their way through it, but it had caused a *lot* of issues between them.

Besides, I just couldn’t do that to Emma. She was such a strong, independent woman, full of ambition and vigor. How could I take her choice away like that? It went against everything I believed about respecting her and loving her as a fully fledged fellow being.

“I’m sorry, Theo, but if her condition is worsening, you need to bite her before she hits the point of no return.”

I had no idea how Savannah sounded relatively calm when I was losing my mind. I couldn’t take that choice away from Emma. It was more than my worst nightmare—it was a nightmare I never dared to even have, and I was stuck in it.

“Goddammit! Wake up, Emma! Do you hear me!? Wake up!”

But she didn't, and she was growing paler and paler by the second. If it came down to Emma hating me or Emma dying, I knew what choice I would make.

So I bit her.

EMMALINE

I woke up slowly, expecting to feel utterly terrible, but...I was almost in a pleasant mood. But that didn't make any sense, and the sheer discordance of it launched me fully back to consciousness.

My eyelids fluttered and I realized I was being held. And that something was...*nuzzling* my neck?

That was odd. Even in my rattled state, I knew that much. Blinking, I tried to figure out what was happening and why I felt so...so *good*.

And that was right about when I realized that Theo was holding me, nuzzling into my neck. Despite the pleasant feelings simmering through me, I was aware that there was an undercurrent of hurt. Also, I felt so weak. Like even drawing in a breath was too much to ask of me.

“Wake up, Emma. Please, please, *please*. You have to wake up!”

Wow, I didn't think that I had ever heard him sound so desperate or upset. While I was pretty good at reading Theo, he was still a relatively taciturn person. To hear him practically openly weeping over me...well, that was certainly something new. I knew our pack had been going through a lot lately, but I never imagined that he'd sound like that for *me*.

“Emmaline, just open your eyes, please. I'll do anything, just wake up, okay?”

The pain, the fear in his voice was just too much, and I summoned enough breath to say something.

“...Theo?”

He pulled back in shock, the jostling briefly making the pain completely overwhelm any pleasantness I was experiencing.

“Emmaline?!”

I faintly nodded, and even that was too much effort. I wanted to go back to sleep, but Theo’s panic was so thick that I couldn’t quite slip into blessed nothingness.

“Oh my God, Emma!” Theo hugged me tightly, and the waves of relief pouring out of him were almost enough to dull the sharp spike of pain at the movement. “I’m sorry! I’m so, so *sorry!*”

Nothing was quite making sense in my head. What was he sorry for? Sure, his jostling wasn’t exactly appreciated, but it wasn’t the end of the world.

“You have to understand, I didn’t have a choice! I had to save you! I had to!”

My mind was swirling, trying to puzzle out why he was so upset. But that was when one of the tears on his face dropped down to my neck, landing with a splash that viscerally jolted me.

Oh no.

Oh no!

It was like the entire world came to a screeching halt, blasted away with the horror of my epiphany. Hormones and endorphins flooded my body, but even that wasn’t enough to scrub the shock lancing through my brain.

Theo had bitten me. I could feel that was true, down to my very soul.

I had been mated.

I had been mated!

No, no, no, *no*, that couldn’t be true. I had to be wrong. I *had* to!

I tried to lift my hand to touch it, but it was like I couldn’t move. I was cold, so cold, and the pain was no longer competing with the pleasant feeling of his bite. No, it was now a raging inferno that had beaten everything else except for my terror into submission.

Was I dying? I felt like I was dying, slipping down into a tempest of fury, horror, and sheer confusion.

“Emma, you have to bite me back, okay? It’s the only way, and you *have* to live! Can you hear me? Can you?!”

His panic was ramping up again, and he lifted my head so that my mouth was right against his own neck. If I bit him, it would seal our mating ritual. We would be bonded in one of the most intimate ways two wolf shifters could be bonded.

No!

I didn't want this. I was finally getting closer to Kaleb after years of trying. Besides, I'd built my whole life around being an independent woman, one who forged her own way and had a business that was quite literally booming.

"Emma, I know this isn't what you wanted, but you've been attacked by a witch and whatever she did to you is killing you. Sam and Savannah are on their way, but they're not gonna make it in time. The Alma told me this was the only way to stabilize you until she can get here."

I wanted to tell him he was full of shit. To punch him in the face and maybe even pile-drive him with my elbow. But when I couldn't so much as utter his name, I knew he was telling the truth.

I had a choice. I could stick to my guns and die, or I could throw everything away and live.

Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Except it was more like being stuck between physical and emotional death.

Fuck.

What should I do? It was getting hard to think, a cold, inky darkness nibbling at me, pulling away pieces and swallowing them down as I grew lesser and lesser.

At that point, the fear took over, and I did what my instincts were screaming at me to do.

I bit Theo.

It was nothing like how I had always dreamed my mating bite would be. I'd often imagined sweaty limbs and silken sheets, me and my love intertwined together in a dark room illuminated only by candles. There would be romantic music playing softly in the background. Sometimes it was under open skies, with the stars twinkling down on us, sometimes it was in a remote cabin with a crackling fire.

But none of my fantasies involved lying on the floor of my shop, glass digging into my back while I felt my life draining away from me. None of them involved a life or death choice where there was basically no choice at all.

"Emmaline!" Theo gasped in shock, drawing me back to what I was doing. Which, right, was mating my brother's best friend.

I didn't know if it was because I was almost dead, or that everyone around me had underplayed exactly what happened when a mating ritual was completed, but I was in no way prepared for the deluge that hit me.

Endorphins, desire, excitement, joy—it all flooded me ten times stronger than the pleasant rush that had woken me up. It wiped everything negative from my mind, even the exhaustion from my severe emotional whiplash.

And goodness, *Theo*. I felt so connected to him. More connected to him than I'd ever felt to anyone else before. It was like his emotions were channeling through me, influencing my mood, and even my heartbeat began to echo the hammering of his own. But while mine was flying at a staccato beat from sheer happiness, Theo's was fueled by terror.

Well, that wouldn't do. I wanted to comfort him, to tell him that everything would be alright. He didn't have to be sad, because what was there to be sad about?

Actually, I was pretty sure I wanted to kiss him.

As if he could sense exactly what I wanted, Theo pressed his forehead to mine, still whispering, begging me for forgiveness. The anguish in his voice just about broke my heart. I was fine, I was. Everything was going to be okay.

I tried to lift my chin, to seal my lips to his, but it was too much effort. I could only stare at him until the wave washed over me, and I started to come back to myself.

It was anger that reared its head first, sharp and full of its own teeth. Finally, I felt myself begin to warm, energy flowing back into me. The extra energy allowed me to finally reach up to touch my neck, to feel what had been done to me.

Although it was rage that began to build up inside of me, the moment my fingers touched the raised burning bite, something else took its place. Goodness, I was going to need therapy with all the U-turns my hormones were taking.

It was lust. Unfiltered, unfettered, completely unhinged *lust*.

The urge to kiss him returned, but ten times stronger.

And it was more than that. I wanted to tackle him to the floor, rip his pants off, and ride him until he couldn't so much as crawl away. My inner wolf howled for *more*. To sink my teeth into him, to claw him and ruin him for any other woman or wolf.

And while that was quite a thing to experience, it just pissed me off even more. How dare he! How *dare* he?!

"I'm so sorry, Emma. God, I'm so sorry!"

More tears dripped down onto me, my heart aching for him and the

position he had been put into. It wasn't fair to him, but it wasn't fair to me, either, and I needed *someone* to direct my fury towards.

"Let me go," I ground out, my head starting to pound. I had so many emotions within me that they were physically hurting me.

Theo did, helping me sit up before backing away a bit. The space was a relief, even if it didn't really help.

What should I do now? I was mated to my brother's best friend. And someone had attacked me in my own shop! Whoever was going after our pack was getting ballsier.

Theo seemed equally lost, and the two of us just stared at each other, sitting on the floor, silent in our shock. Our entire lives had changed, we both knew that, but my mind felt overwhelmed as it tried to puzzle out all the different variables that were about to alter themselves.

And we were still sitting there when Savannah and Samson arrived within seconds of each other. Both of them rushed to me and started asking questions as they looked me over. I was vaguely aware that I was answering them, but I wasn't really cognizant of what I was saying.

Was I going into shock? I was pretty sure I was going into shock.

"Emma, the curse is still in you. Theo bought you time, but I'm going to have to form a temporary bond with you, okay?" Savvy said.

I nodded. Sure, why not just bond with everyone? Theo, Savannah, Sam, the dog walker on the street, someone's Uncle Steve?

Part of me knew that an Alma's bond was different, and exactly what their purpose was within a pack. By taking her blood into me, it would boost the natural gifts of my inner wolf, including my healing ability. There was a reason all packs had one, as they were one of the best defenses against magical attacks.

Savannah pulled a small vial from one of the pouches attached to her belt and poured it over my head. It smelled just like regular puddle liquid to me; was she trying to tell me I needed a bath or something?

"Mother Luna, it is with your tears that I bless your daughter." Oh, it was moon water. I supposed that should have been obvious. "Grant me guidance and power as I stand in your place, and protect your flock from the evil attacking them."

Then the Alma pressed her forearm to my mouth. I didn't need instructions to know what to do, so I bit her, too. Why not, it was going around anyway?

Her blood was...strange as it went down my throat. Not like Theo's. Not like an enemies either. It tasted of moonlight and morning dew, of ancient secrets that shouldn't be uttered in the light, and the faintest whisper of deep magic.

But after the strange taste, it seemed to meld with the bonding energy already surging through me, and I began to feel better. It wasn't a miraculous healing—it wasn't like I was going to start doing somersaults around the place—but it was much better than how I'd been just minutes before.

"I'm still sensing some poison within you," Samson said. "It's...whew, whoever made this spell had it out for you."

"What do you mean?" Savannah asked, her voice incredibly steady given that my teeth were still stuck in her arm.

"The roots of this spell are based in some bad stuff. Hemlock. Belladonna. Wolfsbane. And a whole lot of bad intentions. You got any containers around here? I need to go get some dirt."

I pointed to the front of the store where my meticulously kept window beds were. Dear Lord on High, if that witch ruined the beauties I had planted and been taking care of for several years, I was going to find her and murder her three times over. Did she have any idea how hard it was to wait two years for my jet-black hollyhocks to produce blooms?!

Wait, maybe my priorities were a little off. But whatever, I'd almost died and I'd been mated against my will. Forgive me for wanting to worry about my flowers and perennials for a moment.

Thankfully, Samson seemed to understand when I pointed to the little mesh shopping bags I had right by the door. He grabbed three of them before heading outside.

"Alright, you can let go now," Savannah said, her voice soft as her other hand gently stroked my head. I leaned into the contact, weariness bogging me down again.

I loosened my jaw, licking my lips as I sat back. While I felt less like the entire universe was spinning out of control, it definitely still seemed like the world was about to ricochet off its own axis and flinging me into outer space.

"Is this real?" I whispered to myself, wondering if I was having the world's most persistent nightmare.

"It is, my dear, and I'm sorry. But please, don't blame Theo. He did exactly what I told him to do."

I knew she meant it to be comforting, but my fury rose, hellfire-hot now

that it had a new target to aim itself at.

I drew in a sharp breath, my tongue readying a scathing monologue of *exactly* what I wanted to say, but I clamped down on it. Which probably was a good thing, because otherwise I would have distracted Savannah from looking over Theo.

“You’re bleeding,” the Alma murmured, crossing to him and looking at his forehead.

Oh, he was, wasn’t he? I knew that Theo was also forcibly mated to me and was no doubt struggling, too, but it was so hard for me to find grace in my heart for him. I was just so *angry*. Angrier than I had ever been.

“Oh, the witch used some spell to slam me around a little,” he said, sounding like he was only halfway there. A real case of the lights were all on but there was no one home. “She was good.”

The witch had slammed him around? She must have been powerful, because Theo was no pushover.

“Here, let me check you out.”

While Savannah looked Theo over, Sam returned, the four bags filled with dirt. Pulling his own pouch out of his pocket, he put a couple of seeds in each before resting his hands over them.

I watched, fascinated, as the air around them rippled with energy until seedlings started to shoot up. They grew and blossomed in real time, until Samson finally pulled his hand away.

“Ew, this is gonna be gross without a mortar and pestle,” he complained as he picked blossoms from two and leaves from the rest. Then, in a move I didn’t see, he shoved all of them into his mouth and chewed. “Twuth me, tith ith worth for me thawn it ith for oo.”

Right. I got most of that.

After masticating them for a while, he spit the mixture out into his hand. Yeah, that was pretty gross. But what was grosser was that he put a smear on each of my wrists, across my forehead, then rolled my pant legs up to wipe it around my ankles.

My day had really gone in some strange directions, but having Samson’s magical plant spit and goop rubbed onto me was nowhere on my bingo list. I needed a long shower once everything was said and done.

“There, this should draw the bases of the poison out of you and allow Savannah’s blood ties to work.”

I nodded, so thoroughly exhausted that I couldn’t manage much else.

“I think I’ll put up a barrier around this place. It won’t keep powerful magic users out, but it’ll alert us to anyone coming and definitely slow them down.”

“Excellent,” Savannah said, not tearing her eyes away from Theo, whom she was still treating. “That would most certainly be useful.”

That it would. If more witches came back and stole our Alma, our pack would be officially fucked.

I observed as Savannah thoroughly examined Theo, spreading her own medicine on his few cuts. After a bit, I realized that I’d healed enough to become restless, and I finally stood. Shakily at first, which caused Theo to surge up and steady me, but I pulled away.

“I’m fine,” I hissed, full of so much conflicting emotion that I wanted to puke.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, before seeming to regain his composure. “The witch who attacked you was incredibly strong. I don’t know if they wanted to take you, or get control of your wolf like some sort of sleeper agent, but if I had been just a few moments later…” He shuddered before his gaze sharpened. “Where the hell is Kaleb!? He was the closest!”

“Oh yeah, he was supposed to arrive with me, wasn’t he?” Samson asked, looking around. But unless he was hiding in one of the upended flower pots, Kaleb was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe that was for the best. I didn’t want to see the man I’d been pining for when I was still trying to come to terms with being a mated woman. It would be far too difficult.

Then again, if Kaleb had been there, would I be mated to him?

The idea was dizzying, and I grabbed onto one of the few inventory racks that was still upright to balance myself. “What if he was cut off by the witch?”

“I’ll have someone call him,” Savannah said, pulling bandages from the pouch at her hip and wrapping them around her forearm where I’d bitten.

“Where is she?! Emma? Emma!”

My head jerked toward the entrance to see my brother. His eyes were the blazing green of his wolf’s and his features had sharpened, as shifters’ did when they were about to lose control. I never thought I would be so relieved to see my incensed sibling, and suddenly I was rushing toward him.

“Mahlan!” I cried, flinging my arms around him. Of course, as I did, I jostled the bite on my neck and a small groan issued from Theo behind me.

Clearly the touch affected him, too, which was another strange thing to wrap my head around.

A moment later, another shape barreled through the door and I realized it was Lyssa, who was breathing hard and covered in sweat. Had she shifted and ran all the way to me from her college? That was incredibly risky.

But she didn't seem to care one bit, her face cracking into a relieved sob when she saw me.

"Emma, you're alive!" she cried, joining our hug. "What happened? Are you okay? I was so scared"

I opened my mouth to answer my best friend, but nothing came out. How did I explain everything that had gone on? How my world had been flipped inside out, turned upside down, and shaken, like an Etch-a-Sketch with an epileptic disorder? That was a bit more complicated than I could handle at the moment.

"A witch attacked Emma in this shop. I managed to get here in time to interrupt her draining Emma, but when I tried to stop her, she was able to blast me away and get enough distance that I couldn't catch up without abandoning Emma."

"Thank you, Theo," Mahlan breathed, hugging me even more tightly and resting his chin on the top of my head. "But where the hell is Kaleb?"

In another strange twist of fate, the back door exploded inward. All of us jolted, with Theo and Mahlan instantly half-shifting before we recognized the mid-sized black wolf that came stumbling in.

"Kaleb!" I blurted, as the black form rapidly began to transform until it was my crush standing in front of us.

He was heavily hurt, with sharp stakes of wood popping out of him as he stood, and green oozing slashes across his stomach.

"I think I ran into the witch," he wheezed, taking a step forward. "I thought I had her but she had...she had back-up."

"Moon take it, when it rains, it pours!" Savannah cried, rushing over to Kaleb and making him sit down. "Here, let me tend to you. Samson, do you recognize what could have made these wounds?"

"I'm fine," Kaleb growled. "I can already feel myself healing." He looked to me, sorrow written all over his face. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here fast enough, Emma."

"It's okay," I murmured, heart sinking. The witches really had deprived me of everything, hadn't they? "You had no way of knowing you'd get cut

off by the witch.”

“Thank you, Theo,” Kaleb continued quietly. “I don’t know what I would do if you hadn’t gotten here in time.”

“Yes, thank you,” my brother agreed. “I owe you a great debt. Anything you need, I will do my best to make it happen for you. You have no idea what this means to me.”

Theo’s face went through several uncomfortable emotions before settling into a placid sort of calm. “There is something I should tell you before you offer me thanks.”

“Oh?”

Theo looked at me and I just stared back. I didn’t want to say it out loud, almost like I feared making it true with my words. Which didn’t make any sense, considering it was so very obviously real and inescapable.

“The witch,” Theo started, and I could tell that he was trying to choose his words very carefully. “She—”

“I recognized her,” I cut in. Maybe I was trying to delay the inevitable, but I knew that I needed Mahlan to be aware of everything that happened and that I didn’t want to admit it out loud. “She’d come into our store a couple times and I always felt something terrible with her, but she never tried anything. This time, she did, I guess.”

“She attacked Emma,” Theo continued. “And she’s powerful. Quite powerful. She cursed Emma and... and...”

“It was killing me,” I said, swallowing hard. “The last thing I remember is passing out while being incredibly cold.”

“I couldn’t wake her up when I arrived,” Theo said, voice just as pained. “So I called Savannah and she said it was serious. That Emma was going to die.”

“But you’re here,” Mahlan said. “And you’re safe, aren’t you?”

“She is not in danger of dying,” Savannah said. “But, Alpha, I need you to know that everything Theo did was on my orders. I made an executive decision as your Alma and he listened, as he should have.”

Mahlan looked from me, to Theo, and then back to Savannah. “I appreciate that you’ve had a hard day, but would all of you stop beating around the bush and tell me what happened?”

There was a beat of silence, none of us wanting to say it, let alone me. But eventually, it was Theo who spoke.

“I had to mate her, Mahlan. It was the only way to save her life.”

“You *what?!*”

Yeah, my thoughts exactly.

THEO

I stood there, simmering in my shame as Mahlan glowered at me. Not that I could blame him. He could separate my head from my body, and that would be a reasonable response to me mating his sister without her permission.

But I hoped that somewhere within him, he knew that I had done it for her. For him. And I would do it again if it meant Emma was safe.

“Alright everyone, I understand this is a complicated situation,” Lyssa started slowly. “Believe me, if anyone knows, it’s me.”

She had a point. It wasn’t even that long ago when Lyssa had been forcibly mated to save her life. Funny how that kept happening, except it wasn’t really funny at all. More like heart-crushing, life-ruining.

“Emma, how about I help you into something clean and you can let Savannah give you one last look over?”

Emma nodded, letting go of her brother and letting the women guide her on either side. She still groaned as she limped along, and I couldn’t just stand there and listen to her be in pain.

“Here, let me help,” I said quickly. Mahlan could kill me if he wanted to, but he could wait until after I made sure Emma wasn’t in unnecessary pain as they walked her to the changing rooms.

Approaching her, I swooped her up in a princess carry. She let out a tiny moan of pain that made me freeze, but within a moment, snuggled to my neck, sniffing gently at the bite mark where our scents were merging.

I stood there a moment, dazed by the incredibly intimate gesture. That was most likely why I didn’t realize that everyone was watching us.

Well, I supposed it was quite a shock to see the two of us acting like mates, but that was our world now. I just gave our spectators a shrug, as if I was daring them to say something about it.

But none of them did, and I ended up following Lyssa and the Alma not to the dressing rooms but rather Emma's office, from where the witch had bolted. I could still smell the powerful attacker's scent lingering in the air, and my lips pulled back from my teeth in a silent snarl.

I managed to get myself under control despite the protectiveness welling up in me, and set Emma down on her desk.

"I'll be right back," Lyssa said. "I'm just gonna go find some clothes."

Emma nodded, looking truly exhausted. I felt so bad for her. I had basically swept in and completely derailed the life she'd worked so hard to build. Sure, I saved her life, but at what cost?

Sure, I would be the bad guy if I had to be, but I wished I didn't have to. I didn't want Emma to hate me. I'd been in love with her since I was a kid, and the idea of being some terrible specter who destroyed her future was soul-crushing.

"Are... are you alright?" I murmured to Emma, almost dreading her response.

"I'll survive," she answered, equally soft. "Thank you, I guess, for saving me."

Her tone was flat and I couldn't get a read on her emotions. Every time I tugged at the bond between us, I was inundated with such a strong swell of emotions that it was indecipherable.

I didn't know what to do. It wasn't like there was a handbook on how to progress when one forcibly mated their best friend's sister to save her life. That would be a real one to find on the shelves of Barnes and Noble.

It wasn't what I had planned. Sure, I'd daydreamed about a future with Emmaline, but in a hazy sort of way. Like a fantasy that would never come true, but kept me company on lonely nights.

"Okay, I found something comfortable," Lyssa said, returning. "Theo, do you mind waiting outside the door?"

I nodded. I wanted to protest, sure. My inner wolf was screaming with all that it had that I should fight tooth and nail to stay right by her side.

Thankfully, I had at least some manners left and escorted myself out. But I didn't go far, standing out of the way on the opposite side of the door.

It wasn't much later when I saw Mahlan approaching me out of the corner

of my eye, which made sense. Of course he would want to approach me when I was alone rather than when I had his traumatized sister right next to me.

“Theo,” he started. Was this where he told me that I’d violated his trust? Would he exile me? Order my execution? “Thank you. I know what you did was difficult, but you made the right choice.”

Oh?

That certainly wasn’t expected. But Mahlan went right on talking, continuing the theme of the day that I had no idea what was going on or what was going to happen next.

“I know this complicates your life a lot, but I am glad you chose to do whatever it took to save my sister. She means the world to me, to Lyssa, to most of our pack. My family will be forever indebted to you.”

I didn’t know what to say, but thankfully I didn’t have to end up figuring it out, because Savannah opened the door.

“Mahlan, your sister would like to speak to you. And I would like to talk with Theo for a moment, if that’s alright?”

“Of course,” we said at the same time, Mahlan slipping inside while I took another step to the side to allow Savannah to join me.

“How are you holding up?” she asked. I gave her a nondescript answer while I strained to hear what was going on in the office. While it may have been rude, my inner wolf was going crazy at the thought of being separated from our new mate.

Emma kept her voice down, but I could hear Mahlan asking the same question Savannah had leveled at me. I wasn’t exactly surprised by how pissed Emma sounded, but it still stung.

“I’m alive, so that’s something,” I heard her growl. “I’m not exactly thrilled at this whole situation or that I was targeted.”

Yeah, I wasn’t thrilled about it, either. In fact, it was taking all of my wolfy control not to rip apart the witches that had hurt both her and Kaleb. But I fought to calm myself, knowing that Emma could likely feel my anger through our bond and didn’t need to deal with any of that.

“Emma, why didn’t you tell us about this woman that you saw twice? We could have maybe prevented this.”

“Because I just thought I was being paranoid with everything that had happened, and you all already have so much on your shoulders!”

I couldn’t have agreed with Mahlan more. It was tempting to go in and thoroughly chastise Emma for keeping it a secret, but I recognized that she

didn't need that. Not when she was healing from almost dying. As much as I loved my inner wolf, I was often grateful that I had such a good grip on his white fur. If he had his way, I'd be in there snarling, shouting, and no doubt making Emma feel even worse.

"I'm sorry, Emma, I realize what's done is done, but you *have* to tell us these things in the future."

"You don't think I get that? I'm *mated* now because it was the only way to save me! You think I wanted that for a second?!"

Again, it was everything I already knew, but it still hurt to hear it. Savannah was continuing to talk, but I excused myself and stepped back into the office. Maybe I shouldn't, but I couldn't stand to hear Emma so incensed when I was close by.

"What are you doing in here?" she snapped at me, her voice much more heated than I had expected.

"You know why," I answered simply, because she did. We were drawn to each other, connected in a very sacred way that couldn't be replicated through any other means.

But something in Emma seemed to boil over. "Get out! Just fuckin' *get out* of my face!"

It was strange to hear such a violent outburst from Emma, but we were certainly in strange circumstances. I didn't know what to say without angering her further, but fortunately, Mahlan was there to intervene.

"It's getting more and more dangerous with all these silent attacks by whoever's trafficking us. There's got to be someone who's heard at least something."

I nodded slowly, trying to keep all my emotions in check. Easier said than done.

"This is too coordinated and planned out, so clearly they've been watching us. We need to disrupt our habits. Theo, can you take Emma home with you?"

"What?! No! I'm going to my own house!" Emma objected, her voice still vicious. The strength I normally admired so much within her now made me want to sink inside myself and stop existing.

"Emma, you really think your alpha will let you be alone after everything you've gone through today?"

"Lyssa can come over! Or I can go to your house!" Emma snapped.

Before I could pitch in that those would be perfectly fine options, Lyssa

cleared her throat. I'd almost forgotten that she was even there.

"Uh, I'll start cleaning up where that explosion was while y'all figure this out."

"What?! Explosion?" Emma blurted, her eyes going wide and her cheeks losing all their color.

"Yeah, didn't you see it when we were helping you over here?" Lyssa asked, clearly equally surprised.

"No," Emma said, getting to her feet. "Show me."

"But—"

"Show me!"

EMMALINE

I stared with abject horror at the front of my shop. It did indeed look like a bomb had gone off in it, with all the displays knocked over, clothes and paper everywhere, and even cracks in the wall. Light fixtures were hanging by wires and some of the HVAC system looked like it was about to crash to the floor.

“No...” I murmured, staggering forward. While technically I knew that it was just a shop, and that the things in it would all be replaced, especially with my insurance, it was still so heartbreaking.

I’d put three years of my life into making the perfect little boutique I could be proud of. I’d painted it. Decorated it. Set up every display on my own until Lyssa came in. And all of it was gone. Destroyed by someone who wanted to kill me or brainwash the wolf inside of me.

The ramifications of it made my stomach twist, and I had to whip to the side to heave into the bottom half of one of my garbage bins. Where the upper part was, I had no idea. No doubt flung somewhere deeper into the store by whatever had happened.

“This can’t be real,” I whispered not for the first time that night, my knees buckling.

But of course, Theo was there to catch me. I both hated and appreciated him, the emotions layering on top of each other and making me truly exhausted.

“I’m so sorry, Emma. For everything.”

Yeah, yeah, he was a real weepy boy. I didn’t have the capacity within myself to care. I just wanted a broom so I could start cleaning up.

“What are you doing?” Theo asked as I straightened and started to pull away.

“Getting a broom so I can start cleaning up,” I answered, as if offended that he didn’t read my previous thought.

Whoops, I was definitely being unreasonable, but I just couldn’t stop myself. Between the Alma’s blood, the mating bites, and Samson’s spit-paste, I had a lot in my system. And that wasn’t even counting the original death curse. Or was it a brainwashing curse? Both? Who knew. Witches were a terribly creative bunch when it came to hurting people. A whole bunch of real go-getters when it came to pain and malice.

“Emma, we’ll have people come to do that. You need to rest and we should finalize our mating on a moonstone now that we have ours again. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise *what?*” I snapped, and the fervor of my own voice made me flinch. Why was I taking it out on Theo? I was sure he didn’t want to be my mate any more than I wanted to be his.

“Otherwise, it’ll keep draining me and I worry about being able to protect you.”

What?

I blinked at him like he was talking nonsense to me, because for a moment, he wasn’t. And then my brain finally parsed out what he meant and it all made sense.

Naturally, if he’d bitten me to stop me from dying, and we were now connected on a soul level, of course he could feel the effects of the magic, too. And while I was stabilized, no one said I was cured. Sam had stopped the poison, then Savannah and Theo had stopped the draining, but no one had banished the root of the magic from me.

Right, we probably needed that moonstone.

But also, being close to Theo made me want to dropkick him into another dimension. Preferably one where forcible matings and murderous witches didn’t exist.

“Okay. I’ll go home and sleep.”

“Emma,” Mahlan warned in a low grumble.

But Theo just held his hand out. “Come on, let’s go to my place. You can have my bed and I’ll keep guard all night. Let Mahlan and Lyssa clean this all up.”

“Actually,” Savannah offered before I could blow my top, “I could keep

an eye on her. My place is already heavily guarded considering the situation.”

I latched onto that, eager not to have to deal with Theo and his stupid, sad face. I was tied to him. Permanently. But that didn't mean I had to go spend the night with him right away, after everything that had happened.

“Yeah, I can do that! I'll stay with Savannah!”

Theo didn't look pleased, but instead of fighting me, he just nodded. Briefly, I had to admire his restraint. While I was so full of anger that my teeth itched, my inner wolf was howling to be near my mate, not separated from him for the night. Thankfully, the rushing violence of my fury was much louder than my wolf had ever been. She always preferred persuasion over a shouting match.

“That works. Why don't I drive both of you over there so you can sleep now?” Mahlan offered, ever the big brother.

“Don't worry about the shop tomorrow,” Lyssa said, setting down the vacuum she'd fetched from the back to hug me. “I'll oversee the cleanup. I doubt it'll be ready for customers by then anyway.”

Well, I *had* just been about to ask her who was going to watch the shop, but I supposed that made sense. There was so much damage that there was no way even a crew of cleaners would get everything done just overnight.

“Okay, yeah, that sounds good. I just...make sure there's no one alone at the shop, please.”

“Don't worry,” Mahlan said. “We'll make sure everyone has a buddy.”

Well, I guessed that was that. Looking at Savannah, I gave her a nod, and she seemed to understand exactly what I meant because she ducked into the office to fetch her things and came back out moments later.

“My car's right out front,” Theo said, his gaze icy and his tone unreadable. Was he upset? Did he hate me as much as I hated him at the moment? Was he just thinking about a particularly good cheesecake? Who knew? Certainly not I.

Actually...that was a bit of a lie. I could reach out at any time through our bond and feel exactly what he was experiencing. But I wasn't willing to. I was pressing against that hatch with all my might, refusing to acknowledge it.

Theo led the way, Savannah and I silently following. And while he did open the doors for both of us, not much else was exchanged in the way of communication.

At least he didn't try to press me for it. I was so exhausted, and confused down to my bones. I felt like if one more thing was stacked on top of me, I'd

spontaneously combust into a fiery ball of human and wolf.

Ugh, what a shit situation.

When our silent car ride finished, Theo walked us to the door, offering his arm to steady me. I thought about refusing him again, but it felt like my legs were about to kick my own butt and walk off without me, so I let him help me to Savannah's entrance.

Strangely enough, I hadn't been to the Alma's house since our last one passed. While I was no stranger to death, that didn't mean I liked it, and all the memories of the kind old woman who used to live there would always echo around my head whenever we got close to the house.

It was a cute three-bedroom, which seemed like a lot of space for one woman until one counted her guards and patients. There was usually at least one patient lingering around in her care. The whole set up was very cottagecore, with breezy curtains and plant boxes at almost every ground floor window, which had to be comforting for the wolves being treated in her house.

And now I was the one spending the night there, in need of comfort. So... that was something. Comparatively speaking, it was one of the smallest somethings of the night, but still most definitely something.

Theo waited until one of the two guards emerged from the dark and opened the door for us before silently exiting. The urge to kiss him bubbled up again, but it was quickly squashed by everything else.

I should say goodbye, I knew that much, but I didn't. I didn't say anything. I just watched him go then walked into Savannah's house, letting one of her guards close the door behind us.

There were two more guards who greeted us inside, but Savannah paid them no mind.

"Are you alright?"

"No," I answered as honestly as I could. And it was like that admission broke something in me, because the next thing I knew, I was sobbing.

It was embarrassing, really, and that was the last thing I needed after everything else, so I tried to muffle myself by pressing my hands to my mouth. It worked somewhat, but Savannah just lovingly patted my back.

"It's alright. You're allowed to be upset. Just let out all the noises that you need to."

It was like my subconscious was actively waiting for her permission, because the moment she gave it, my hands dropped and I let myself wail it

out.

“I know this isn’t what you wanted, Emmaline. It isn’t what you asked for. And I apologize for the part I played in pushing you into this.”

“I know you were just trying to save my life,” I gasped between big ol’ gulps of air. And that was one of the most frustrating things. Not that they had all done what they’d done, but that they’d done it out of the goodness of their own hearts. They were just trying to save me, and they went to extreme measures to do it. I should be grateful. I should be happy to be alive.

But I wasn’t.

“It’s alright, Savannah.” Well, it wasn’t, but what else was I supposed to say? “I know all of you took the same option I would have in your shoes, but I...I’m just grieving.”

“Grieving what?”

So many things! “The life I had planned. My choices for the future. Or maybe just what I thought my future might be. All of that is gone. Poof.”

“I imagine you’re grieving Kaleb a little as well?”

Did *everyone* know about that!? Or was it just an Alma, best friend, big brother, and brother’s best friend sort of thing?

“Yeah, of course I am. But also I don’t know if it’s him so much as it’s the *choice* of him.” I calmed down a little, my body running out of tears relatively quickly. “And it’s not like Theo isn’t smart, or smoking hot. I could have done a lot worse.”

“You could have. But to me, it seems the issue isn’t the suitability of your mate, but rather that you had the choice made for you.”

“Exactly,” I said, sighing with relief that Savannah understood me and didn’t seem to think I was an overemotional, ungrateful idiot.

“That is much to have on your mind, my dear. But none of that will be solved tonight. Why don’t you sleep, and we’ll take all of this a day at a time.”

Suddenly, sleeping seemed like the best idea I’d heard in a long time.

“Yeah, sleep would be good.”

“Here, follow me. I’ll get you to bed.”

With a gentle hand on my shoulder, she guided me to what looked like a guest room, then tucked me in. It was as inviting as the rest of her place, full of soft fabrics and muted colors. Maybe it was silly to be comforted by something that was usually a ritual for young pups and their mother, but there was something nice about being snuggled under covers and given a kiss on

my forehead.

Maybe, just maybe, when I woke up in the morning, it would all have been a dream.



IT WAS NOT A DREAM.

I woke up with my bite still on my neck and a deep longing in my chest for Theo. Which just pissed me off all over again. I wanted to tenderly long for a lover because I truly tenderly longed for them, not because of chemicals that were from something I never wanted. Something I had never agreed to.

So I mostly stayed in bed. Or at least I tried to, despondently staring at the ceiling until I couldn't stand it anymore. Then I got up and called Mahlan immediately, checking on how fixing my store was going.

“Uh, yeah, it's not good news, sis.”

I swallowed hard. Why would it be? Not with my luck.

“Give it to me straight.”

“The lighting and HVAC took a lot of damage and the contractors are saying they'll need to redo the entire place. But they'll be able to upgrade things and make it really nice for you.”

My stomach twisted so hard I was surprised I didn't vom right then and there. It probably helped that I hadn't eaten since the previous day.

“But what am I supposed to do until then? I have so much inventory for the summer's trends and they're gonna all be stale by the time winter rolls around!” Did I hate the wasteful cycle of fashion sometimes? Yes. But I'd timed the expansion of my business for the summer rush, and losing it also meant losing everything I'd set up since the beginning of the year.

“I think you should take over the shop I have next to yours. I haven't used the space ever since I bought it, and if I'm being honest, I always intended for it to be a gift to you when you were ready.”

I drew in a sharp breath. Did I mention I loved my family? Because I did. Not just because they gave me things, but because they really, truly believed in me.

“No, let me pay you for it.”

“That won't be necessary. Just take the week off and let them set that side up for you. Then, once the renos are done and Sam has a chance to ward the

place properly, you can combine the two.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, fighting back tears. “I’ll definitely need to hire more help then.”

“I’ll have Lyssa bring you the paperwork. She said she found your purse in the office and that you might want it.”

“That would be great, yeah.”

“She’ll be by later to drop it off. You just rest for now.”

“Alright. Keep me updated, please.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

“And Lyssa is currently glaring daggers at me until I remind you that she loves you, too.”

“As she should. Love you, Lyssa!”

I heard my brother relay it and a faint positive response from Lyssa before I hung up, feeling the tiniest bit better.

And so the week went on, with daily updates from Mahlan and visits from Lyssa every other night. I couldn’t help but wonder if it would be easier if I could just stay at her and Mahlan’s place, but every time Lyssa tried to bring up the whole mating thing, I was reminded of how that was a bad idea.

Because I didn’t want to talk about it. Didn’t want to think about it. I just wanted to sleep, and eat, and watch Savannah as she kept up on her day-to-day duties as an Alma when she wasn’t working. Actually, it was more night-to-night duties, as she worked full time at her doctoring job, came home to nap, then stayed up all night for pack emergencies. But still, it was nice to help her prepare medicines, wards, and food with plenty of iron in it to replenish her blood supply.

Which was necessary not just because of me feeding on her, but also because she made medicine out of her actual blood. How had I not known that? Sure, I didn’t exactly go into battle like my brother and his inner circle, but it seemed like a pretty vital thing to know.

Maybe I could have forgotten about my bite entirely if it didn’t constantly feel like I was missing something incredibly vital. Like my right hand. I knew what it was, that my mating bond was calling out for Theo, but I was disinclined to indulge it.

My new routine changed on day eight when Lyssa and Mahlan popped up to drive me to the shop so I could look at things with none other than the white wolf himself: Theo.

He stepped in like I hadn't spent the last week trying to forget his existence, then gently hugged me, scenting my neck. Half of my mind was thrilled at the contact and longed for more, but mostly, I was just uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here?"

"It's the first time you've left Savannah's," he said matter-of-factly. Hey, at least I could always count on him telling me the truth. Even when it was something I didn't really want to hear. "Thought I should be present for it, just in case."

Ah, just in case. Most of the time I would say that was an excuse. But considering how Kaleb and I both had our asses handed to us, I couldn't blame Theo for his protective instinct.

"I'm sorry this is all taking up so much of your time. I know you have so much going on."

"Don't worry about it," Lyssa said, waving her hand. "This is what pack is for. And if I'm being honest, I'm super-excited to show you what I ordered from the catalog for your shop!"

"You ordered stuff?" I asked, a bit shocked.

"Yeah, not *everything*, because I figured you'd want some personal touches, but I reordered all the peripherals that were in store and copies of your shelves that were destroyed. Those took the longest, according to the catalog, so I figured it would be better not to wait on those."

"You're incredible," I murmured, throwing my arms around my friend in a hug.

"Just trying to do what I can."

We shared an understanding look, then everyone piled into the car. I was surprised that Theo hadn't brought his own, but maybe he'd had just as bad a week as I did.

I had to admire that he kept his distance like I asked. I imagined it couldn't have been easy for him. If my instincts were calling out for him, his had to be twice as strong, considering he was the one who initiated the bite.

There was this old myth that men felt bonding hormones more strongly than women, but that had long since been proven wrong. Sure, while a lot of dudes weren't taught how to properly handle the intense emotions that came from a bonding bite, they didn't feel it more or less strongly than their female counterparts. There were some folks who still hung by those old adages, but if anything, same-sex shifter pairs were living proof that it was all bupkis.

The ride over was quiet, because of course it was. Every so often, I would feel Theo's eyes on me, but when I glanced over to him, he was dutifully staring straight ahead.

Huh.

We arrived at my shop without any other cataclysmic event happening and I was surprised to see Kaleb, Jacobian, and Parker all waiting outside of Mahlan's section. Well, I guessed it was mine now, considering that he'd given it to me.

"Hey, what are you all doing here?" I asked, unable to miss how I was much friendlier with them than Theo. Maybe we should do couples counseling, or I should take up boxing. Something had to be done about all my internal anger, and I couldn't just keep treating Theo like my personal punching bag.

"We wanted to be here to support you," Kaleb said, a warm smile on his face. But I swore I saw guilt deep within his gaze. If only he hadn't been cut off by those witches, maybe I'd be mated to him instead.

But that wasn't what happened and I needed to get over it. What was done was done. Besides, if wishes were fishes, there'd be a lot more people at sea. Or something like that.

"And also to do some heavy lifting if you needed it," Parker said, flexing his surprisingly developed bicep. While I knew all of my brother's inner circle tended to work out a lot, and even together, Parker had such puppy-dog energy, it was strange to think about him being ripped.

Whatever. He was always going to be the baby of our friend group, and I would continue to treat him like the adorable bean he was. No one could make me change on that front.

"Let's go in, shall we?" I asked after Mahlan gave me the key. There was a small chorus of cheers and I unlocked the door, quite cognizant of the sounds of construction next door. Well, at least I knew the contractors were being busy little beavers.

Wait...had Mahlan hired *Danee-zaa* shifters? If anyone could get the job done, it was them. But I always thought they were more the type for Amish barn raisers rather than an electrical system and HVAC. They were indigenous shifters that had been in the Americas even longer than wolf shifters and tended to be quite traditional, but I guessed even the most staunchly old-fashioned fae could get with the times when it came to their nine-to-fives.

I would have to ask him later. But for the moment, my new shop had all my attention.

Sure enough, Lyssa had indeed ordered a lot. I could see a stack of the trash cans I liked stacked in one corner, with the shelving in boxes against the wall next to them. Then there were light fixtures, curtains for the dressing room, and a bunch of other peripherals that would probably be fun to unbox.

I spent a good amount of time just walking around, looking over things. Mahlan's side wasn't too different from my own, other than the bathrooms being bigger and on the opposite side. Thankfully, everyone just let me walk about, which was quite the relief.

When I finished, I heaved a big breath. Despite everything that had happened, fixing the place was definitely doable.

"Thank you, everyone. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"It's what we're here for," Lyssa repeated, opening her arms for a hug. And naturally, I took it. One did not turn down best-friend embraces in times of stress. But even as I clung to her, I couldn't help it when my eyes swung to Kaleb longingly, and then to Theo guiltily. I could see his pain, like I was holding up a mirror to my own hurt expression. Jeez, we were really a couple of sad sacks, weren't we?

"And you don't have to worry about that awful witch or anyone like her stepping foot in here!" Lyssa said. "Sammy has warded this place to the gills and even got a couple of his friends to put their own layers on it. Your shop will be more protected than Fort Knox!"

"That's good," I murmured, trying not to think about how close a random woman had come to killing me. As a shifter, I was kind of used to being a pretty hard enemy to take down. "Can you send them to my house after this?" It was half a joke but also half serious. I couldn't camp out at Savannah's forever, even if I was learning a lot about our Alma in the process.

"About that," Mahlan said, and I could tell he was about to say something I didn't like. Although lately, that wasn't as much of a wild guess as it was a 50/50 shot. "The witches have obviously been doing reconnaissance on all of us. I think you should sell your house and live somewhere with much more security. Like one of our apartment buildings."

"Excuse me, *what?!?*"

THEO

I cringed the moment Mahlan brought up the idea of his sister selling her house. There was a time and a place for everything, and this *certainly* wasn't it.

"Perhaps we should worry about that when everything's more settled," I cut in, my tone holding no quarter. I wasn't outright challenging my alpha, but I hoped he would take my advice, otherwise I would have to get insistent.

Sure, I would love for Emma to stay at my place. To wake up every morning with her in my bed, for her to traipse around in a towel while she did her hair and makeup before going out. For her to keep far too many beauty products in my—*our*—bathroom, to have at least three half-finished bottles of cold brew in the fridge, and a laundry hamper overflowing with outfits that were less functional and more fashionable.

But as much as I would like all of that, I wanted Emma to be happy. To feel secure in her den. And yanking away the house she'd bought with her hard-earned business money was *not* the way to do that.

"Alright," Mahlan answered slowly, looking between my calm expression and his sister's livid one. "We'll revisit this later. You just keep resting up at Savannah's, Emma."

"Yeah, I'll do just that."

Emma was a reasonable woman, I knew that. But I could also feel that the past week had driven her to a point of anger and exhaustion that wasn't like herself. I wanted to wrap her up in warm blankets and give her hot cocoa until that stress went away, or even better, put her legs over my shoulders and eat her out until she forgot what was bothering her. But since neither of those

were an option, I could at least hang in the background and mitigate anything that might bother her.

Not the mateship of fairy tales, no. And I would *love* if we could have more. But I wasn't going to waste my energy on what could be when I had the present to deal with.

So I kept as far away from Emma as I could, trying to view her in my peripheral vision instead of staring straight at her, but still being close enough so I could intervene and help where she needed.

At least lifting heavy shelving and putting things together helped to distract me. Although I was a good numbers guy, there was still a certain value in manual work. It soothed my inner wolf, who was howling, snarling, and gnashing at my mind, trying to convince me to just go over to Emma and take her right then and there.

That would *not* work out. And even if it would, I respected Emma far too much for that. Nothing would please me more than to have her under me, her back flecked with sweat while I blew it out, beautiful moans spilling from those plump lips of hers. But I would never take what wasn't freely given, and it was clear from her longing glances to Kaleb that my fantasy would *never* be an option for me.

Would this resentment last forever? I hoped not. If we couldn't have a romance for the ages, I hoped we could at least have a comfortable sort of peace. Because, above all else, Emma was my friend and pack mate. I didn't want to be at war with her.

At the same time, I couldn't help some dark, selfish part of me that was thrilled Kaleb had been waylaid by the witches. If he'd been the one to bite Emma...I shuddered at the thought. It would probably be better for Emma, but the very thought made me want to crawl inside myself and stop existing.

"Theo, you mind helping me with this banner?" Parker asked, already up on a step stool. I crossed over to help him, then I was Lyssa's taller muscle when hanging up a few mirrors. The time slipped by surprisingly quickly, and before I knew it, others were slowly saying their goodbyes until it was just Mahlan, Lyssa, Emma, and me.

"You think you're ready to head out?" Lyssa asked Emmaline with a yawn, stretching as she did. "I didn't get much sleep last night and I'm bushed."

"Actually, I was hoping to stay a bit longer," Emma answered from underneath the counter where she said their checkout station would be.

“Why don’t you go?” I said, voice rough after disuse. “With all the wards, it should be safe enough with both Emma and me here.”

“What about your car?” the woman in question asked, sliding out from underneath the counters.

“It’s already here. I drove over and then Mahlan and Lyssa picked me up so we could carpool to you. You know, save the environment and all that.”

“Right.” I watched about a dozen and one thoughts flit behind Emma’s dark eyes. “Yeah, that works for me.”

Mahlan didn’t answer right away. I hated that there was so much tension in such simple interactions between us, but at the same time, I completely understood. “Yeah, alright. But don’t stay out too late. We don’t know if they’ll use the cover of darkness to their advantage.”

I didn’t point out that nearly every attack had happened during the day. After all, there was a time and a place—a mantra I found myself repeating more and more often.

“Yes, Alpha,” Emma said, rolling her eyes. Again, unlike her, but she deserved a little grace.

There were more goodbyes all around, with Lyssa hugging her best friend, kissing her cheek, and making her promise to be safe. After about ten minutes, I was finally alone with my mate for the first time since I’d bitten her.

That fact wasn’t lost on me, and I felt my blood start to simmer with desire. I didn’t try to force myself not to feel it, but I did make myself behave. I wasn’t going to just turn into a feral animal the moment I got some one-on-one time with my mate.

“Would you mind breaking down the boxes and putting them in the trash out back? Kaleb said he made sure they were put right beside the door so you don’t have to leave the wards.”

“Of course,” I said, grabbing as much of the cardboard as I could and hauling it to the back.

Emma seemed relieved by my answer, as if she’d expected an argument, but I was just glad to be in her presence. Anything I could do to extend that was alright in my book.

Breaking down the cardboard and making sure it got into the recycling dumpster took a bit longer than I thought it would, and by the time I returned, Emmaline had finished up with whatever she was doing under the counter and had moved on to hanging up curtains in the newly built dressing stalls.

“You know, I should be grateful that it’s just stuff that took the most damage,” Emma grunted as she fought with a curtain that was somehow caught on the edge of the rod on the inside. “But this is kind of infuriating.”

“I can help,” I said, crossing to her and offering my hand. But at the same time, I couldn’t help but disagree with her. It wasn’t *stuff* that had taken the most damage. It was Emma. And it killed me that so many others seemed to be glossing over that.

“Thanks,” Emma said, handing it over and allowing me to slide my longer finger within the tube, unhooking the thread that had been caught.

“But how are you feeling? As in, *really* feeling, not the mask you’re putting on for other people.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I can feel everything you’re not saying to everyone else.”

“Right. Of course you can.” Emma sighed, but it was nice not to hear malice in her voice toward me. “It’s been an adjustment, I’ll say that. It works both ways, you know. I can feel and smell you, too. I know you’ve been outside Savannah’s a couple of nights.”

I nodded. I felt no need to lie to her. “I was so worried about you that I couldn’t sleep unless I did a couple of perimeters around the house to make sure it was secure.”

“And it was?”

“Yes. I’m still not sure if you’re their primary target.”

“I dunno, I’m feeling pretty primary considering they almost either killed me or tried to do something to take over my inner wolf.”

“While that’s true, I think it might have been more connected to Lyssa. She’s done a lot to mess up their plans ever since she accidentally pickpocketed from Cyprus and Mahlan had to step in to save her. There was no way they could have predicted that, but judging by some of their conduct, I would say they’re desperate to reclaim whatever hold they had over Lyssa.”

“What am I supposed to do then?” Emma countered, and goodness, she sounded so sad. I *hated* that, and I wished I could just wave my hand and make everything go away. “She’s my best friend and my brother’s mate. It’s not like I’m going to avoid them both for safety’s sake!”

“I’m not asking you to,” I answered levelly as I set the curtain down and took a step closer to her. “I’m also not blaming Lyssa for this whole thing. I’m just saying we need to reevaluate our perspective on this and look at it less as them targeting you for being you, and more them seeking out different

weak spots to try to get at their ultimate goal.”

“Which is Lyssa?”

“Which is Lyssa. Hypothetically.”

“What makes me a weak spot?”

“Well, clearly they were hoping it would be her in here and not you. I’m guessing you’ve been changing up her schedule every week to accommodate for her tests and labs?”

“You bet your ass I did!” Emma said defiantly, and I loved that about her. She was one-hundred percent supportive of whatever Lyssa felt she needed to reclaim her life.

“That just might have saved her life. When they realized that they weren’t going to get her in here without you too, they most likely decided to try to take over your inner wolf so that the next time the two of you were alone, you could just attack Lyssa outright. And as the older, more experienced wolf, you probably would have won.”

Emma went a little gray, her hand going over her chest. “Those *fuckers* were going to try to use me to kill my best friend!?”

“I can’t say for certain, but having had a whole week to think about it, that’s the most likely theory I’ve come up with.”

“Ooooh, I’m gonna rip all their throats out with my *teeth!*”

I could feel pure, undiluted rage coming through our connection and phew, it was intense.

“I’m sorry, Emma. I never wanted it to turn out this way, but the witches outplayed us. I’ve replayed that day over and over again, trying to find some way we could have arrived faster, but I was seventeen minutes away. Kaleb should have gotten here, he should have, but they must have scouted out that he was the closest and set up that attack to delay him. I think the only reason he even survived is because I showed up here and chased off the witch with you. She likely told them to tactically retreat in whatever way witches communicate with each other over long distances.”

“Cell phones.”

“What?”

“They use cell phones, Theo. Duh.”

Oh, right. I supposed I was so used to us wolves telepathically communicating with each other in our wolf forms I forgot that witches had full use of both their mouths and thumbs.

Goodness, thumbs were such an amazing tool. If we had them in our full

wolf forms we would be unstoppable.

Both of us chuckled ever so slightly at that, just the faintest hint of mirth, but it was enough to ease some of the tension.

“You know,” Emma murmured, voice low, “it sounds like you’re blaming yourself.”

“That’s because I do. Every minute of every day.”

Her face crumpled at that, and for a moment, I feared that I’d said the wrong thing, that there was maybe such a thing as being *too* honest, but then suddenly, Emma was hugging me, squeezing me tight enough that were I a regular human, my ribs might have crunched.

“You saved me, Theo. Even if this isn’t what either of us were planning for our lives, I am ultimately thankful. I just...I have so much that I have to bury, mourn, and get past.”

“I understand that,” I answered, hugging her back. It was a relief so sharp, I could cry right then and there, but I hadn’t really cried since Sawyer’s widow had openly wept over his grave. It wasn’t that I had anything against expressing emotions, it was just that they often weren’t strong enough to get over the internal walls I’d built within myself.

“But I can feel you’re angry, too. Sorry for acting like I’m the only one in this, especially when I know you’re experiencing a lot of the same things.”

Oh, she thought I was angry because I was mated to *her*? I needed to clear that up. Asap.

“Yes, I am angry, but mostly I want to filet that witch alive for coming in here and hurting you.”

She let out a good-natured scoff. “Yeah, these bonding hormones are something else, aren’t they?”

Emma still wasn’t getting it. So bright, but still unable to see how long I’d been pining for her.

“Theo, I’m sorry you lost your ability to mate freely. That you were forced to give a piece of yourself to save me. I don’t take that lightly.”

“I...” I knew what I was thinking of saying was dangerous, but I hated hearing how sad Emma sounded. Maybe...maybe being out with my feelings would help a little. Or maybe it would make her hate me more, thinking that I’d taken advantage of her situation.

“It’s not exactly a hardship for me,” I said finally, looking her dead in her eyes. Her eyebrows went up at that and I took one last step closer, until we were basically a breath away from each other.

“What do you mean by that?”

I felt my voice lower of its own accord. “Because I’ve wanted you for years, Emmaline Reese. You’re an incredible, brilliant woman. How could I not be caught up in everything that’s you?”

She stared at me like I’d just shifted into a multiheaded chicken instead of telling her about my feelings. Oh well, I supposed I couldn’t fault her too much considering that I tended to play my cards close to the chest. I just liked keeping certain things private.

“B-but—”

My inner wolf had been denied too long, and I gently rested my hand against her waist. “You can feel it, can’t you? Everybody thinks I’m good at hiding what I think and feel, but I can’t keep secrets from you. And I don’t want to.”

She closed her eyes, and I felt the gentlest of tugs against our bond, followed by a soft gasp from Emma. Her lids snapped open, her expression one of shock.

“I know I’m not the man you were after. I get it. And I also know your brother is my best friend. And while I curse this entire situation, while I *hate* down to the pit of my soul that you lost your freedom of choice, I will never bemoan the fact that you ended up as my mate.”

And I meant it. I could see a future stretching out in front of us where we were happy together, full of life and experiencing the world together. Of course, in my vision, our future was peaceful. Considering our current situation, I didn’t know how likely that was.

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured, cupping her cheek in my hand. “Yes, I may have sacrificed my future to give you one, but I would do it again. And again. And *again*. Whatever I had to do to make sure you survived, I’d do it.”

Her eyelids fluttered and she pressed her cheek into my palm. My heart thundered at the action, and I very much wanted to kiss her.

“You can’t be serious. It’s just...it’s just the...”

“I’m completely serious, Emma, and it’s not just the bonding chemicals.” My hand traveled downward, hovering just above her mating bite. I wanted to trace it, to feel the ridges of it against my fingertips, but I also wanted her to have complete control of her emotions. Shocking her with a chemical of feel-good soup wasn’t ethical in any way, shape, or form. “I want you, and I always have. But I won’t force you into this. Yes, we’re mated, but I won’t

push you to do anything you don't want to."

"But that could make you sick, right?"

I shrugged. "It would be worth it. Besides, I'm sure our Alma can cook up something to help."

I wasn't sure what Emma would do next. I hoped it would be that she would relax and be willing to rest for the night, but the last thing I expected was for her to lift her own hand and press it into her mating bite.

Oh!

The endorphins that hit me through our bond were heady, and I couldn't imagine what Emma was feeling. It was a potent surge, one that had my body responding almost immediately.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't *fair*, but it felt so *good*. The restraint I had trembled and I leaned in so that my face was just above hers.

I wanted her. I wanted her with every cell of my body. She was perfect—from her spirit, to her scent, to her voice. I longed to grip her, *feel* her. To map her out until I had every bit of her burned into my soul.

"Move in with me," I rumbled, voice low.

"No," she answered in a breathy gasp that went right to my dick. I swore I was straining against my pants hard enough to pop the zipper.

"Then kiss me," I growled. If she didn't, I might just combust right then and there. But I wouldn't make the first move. I couldn't. I'd already taken so much from her, if she wanted to cross the gap, I needed *her* to do it.

I expected her to push me away. Or snap a refusal. But instead, her arms wrapped around my neck and yanked me into a heated kiss.

Fuck yes!

This time, when I grabbed her waist with both hands, it wasn't gentle. It was rough and full of everything I'd had pent up inside of me for so long. I didn't know why she was kissing me, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. No, in fact, I very much had *other* things in mind for that body part.

We kissed like we were dying and it would be our last goodbye, which, if I had my way, it very much wouldn't be. Our lips moved against each other, tongues sliding, and my grip tightened enough to lift Emma off her feet.

The little gasp she let out was like a drug that went straight to my bloodstream. I was getting lost in the deluge of desire swamping me, hooked on what I had been dreaming about for so long.

Emma wrapped her legs around me, and the feel of her strong thighs

slightly squeezing me was enough to drive a wolf mad. My mouth left hers, trailing down her chin, then the side of her neck, until my lips could seal themselves over her mating bite.

“Oh my God!” Emma rasped.

Oh my God indeed. My eyes practically rolled into the back of my head as my tongue laved against it, Emma’s pleasure flowing into me and mine into her. It was a crescendo of ecstasy that I never wanted to stop, and nothing, absolutely nothing could make me.

“I-I think we should stop here,” Emma murmured, her voice sounding husky and debauched.

Except for that.

Gently, I set her down, aware that both of us were breathing quite hard. I felt like I’d run a full marathon, but it was one that I very much would like to do again—immediately, if that were possible. But judging by Emma’s expression, that wasn’t quite in the cards.

“Are you alright?” I asked, worried that I had gone too far too fast.

“I-I-I’m fine. I just...I just need to catch my breath.” She let out a chuckle, but it sounded more stressed than anything else. “You kind of gave me more to think about than what I already had.”

“Sorry about that,” I said, feeling my cheeks burn ever so slightly. “Just wanted to be honest.”

“I appreciate that.”

We both stood there a moment, catching our breath and composing ourselves. The hours were getting on, so I knew I should start trying to herd her home. And speaking of home...

“But seriously, I don’t think your home is safe. If you want to leave Savannah’s, you should stay with me or in Mahlan’s old apartment. With hired security, that would be much safer.”

“I...I just need time to think about it, okay? The only thing my mind wants to focus on is hunting down that witch to get revenge and how *not* to climb you like a tree.”

“You don’t have to do that second one, you know. Call me sycamore, and all that.”

My comment had the effect I hoped it would and she burst into a surprised bark of laughter. “*Sycamore*? That’s the sexiest tree name you could come up with?!”

“Something, something, comment about having wood.”

She shook her head, giving me a slightly disappointed look. “You’re not going to distract me into a good mood.”

“But I can try. How about you let me take you back to Savannah’s so I can run the perimeter?”

“Fine,” she said with a sigh. “I suppose that’s the responsible thing to do.”

There seemed to be a weight lifted. I wasn’t under the misconception that everything would be a cakewalk between us, but at least it seemed a little less adversarial. Maybe we could work things out and Emma wouldn’t feel like her entire life had been stolen from her.

I checked the front before going to my car, then gave that an entire onceover as well. When I was sure there weren’t any other scents around, I drove my car to the front and motioned for Emma to hop in.

She did, and unlike our previous two car rides, she seemed open to talking.

“Do you know what that witch could have been doing in your office?”

“She could have just been hiding from you so she had a clear escape,” Emma said. “But also, she went through a lot of my things. Maybe she was looking for where we’re keeping the moonstones?”

“Perhaps. If they were, we could potentially use them as bait to fish the witch and her compatriots back out.”

“You should tell Mahlan that. I’m sure all this stuff with me has distracted him, big-time.”

“Yeah, he does love you quite a lot. I’ve met many siblings who don’t really care about each other, but it’s clear that the two of you do.”

“It helps that our parents raised us right and never pitched us against each other. I swear most sibling issues come from bad parenting.”

“Hmm, interesting theory.”

We talked a bit more, but then that same old hesitancy seeped back in. It would be slow going between us, I could tell that much, but at least I had hope. But when we arrived at Savannah’s and I walked Emma to the door, my lean in for a kiss was denied. Sigh. Not the worst thing in the world, so I tried to take it with grace and instead gently pressed my lips to her cheek.

“Good night.”

“Good night, Theo. You know there’s guards all over the place, right? You don’t have to run the perimeter.”

“I know, but I’m gonna anyway.”

She let out a small laugh then headed inside, closing the door in front of me. Well, guess it was time to go running then.



“I HAVE AN IDEA, MAHLAN.”

“Why are you at my apartment at eleven at night?” my alpha asked, blinking at me.

“Because your status was online on your work computer and Lyssa is spending the night with Emma.”

“Huh, fair enough.” Mahlan stepped to the side, letting me in. “You know we do have phones, right?”

“Of course. But I was already out running, so I figured it would be easier to just stop by.”

“Oh? Running in the city?”

I shrugged. It had been three days since Emma first saw the renovations to her store and we hadn’t really interacted since, which was a real shame in my opinion. But, as usual, I wasn’t going to press the issue. If I wanted to win over Emma, I had to do it on her terms, with her timing.

“Patrolling Savannah’s.”

“Ah, I see.” He followed me as I went straight to his kitchen and pulled out a sports drink, which I guzzled down. “So, what was this idea of yours?”

“I think we should use the moonstones as bait to try to trick the witch or whoever’s organizing this into coming out.”

“You don’t think they’re gonna hit the shop again?”

“I’m thinking no. For two reasons. One being that if they were looking for something in particular, they know it’s not there, and second because they’ve lost their element of surprise.”

“Huh. I’m still going to post guards at her shop.”

“And I don’t blame you for that. I’ve spent most of my free time patrolling and making sure that none of them get close.” It was the only way I didn’t go mad from our unfulfilled mating bond. I remembered thinking that Mahlan was a little ridiculous a while back when his and Lyssa’s drama was going on, but I was realizing that I needed to cut him quite a bit more slack.

Mahlan looked like he was about to say something about my nightly activities, but his phone rang. A confused expression crossed both our faces,

and he quickly pulled it out of his pocket to check it.

“Huh, it’s Samson.”

“Samson’s the witch, right?”

“You ask that almost every time. Yes, he’s the green witch.”

“Right, right. I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately and I keep thinking of him as bitchy coffee guy.”

“Don’t let him hear that. Right now, he’s our only lead on a lot of things.”

“Noted.”

“Hey, what’s up?” Mahlan said as soon as he answered the call.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“I mean, like in person.”

My eyebrows went up at that. I knew it was rude to eavesdrop on a call, but it wasn’t like I could help it considering my enhanced hearing.

“You know where my address is. Theo is here, too.”

“Theo, is that like, the grumpy one with the Elsa complex?”

Okay, yeah, that one got me a little and I chuckled. Not that I would ever let Sam know.

“You ask that almost every time,” Mahlan said in an all-too-familiar callback. “He’s my second-in-command.”

“With the Elsa complex?”

I leaned in and raised my voice so I could be sure he’d hear me. “Yes, with the Elsa complex.”

“Ah, Theo. I guess I forgot about wolf hearing. Oh well, I’ll see both of you in half an hour.”

With that, he hung up, leaving Mahlan and I standing in his kitchen. We both exchanged a look before I shrugged.

“Since we’re here, wanna tuna melt?”

“If you’re making them, sure.”

And that was how I ended up making six tuna and cheddar melts in my alpha’s kitchen. I was shirtless, as I’d taken mine off before my run, so Mahlan had given me his apron.

Actually, it was his *new* apron. Apparently, Lyssa had declared his old, plain black one wasn’t good enough and had invested her first three paychecks into custom ordering him a leather one complete with pockets and the pack’s brand burned into it. I almost felt a little nervous wearing something of such value, both monetarily and sentimentally, but I was also

honored that Mahlan trusted me with it.

Or maybe he just really wanted my tuna melts. While Mahlan was an excellent cook, he never could figure out my secret to making them just right, although the reality of it was pretty simple: a little cayenne pepper under the cheese and a bit of pickle juice in the tuna.

They were finished just before Sam arrived, with both of us sitting down at the kitchen island right when the door knocked. Both Mahlan and I scented the air to be sure it was Samson before the alpha let him in.

“Oooo, what smells so good?” he asked, looking at our two plates with interest.

“Dinner,” I answered flatly before taking an unseemly huge bite.

“Don’t mind if I do!” the witch cooed, reaching for my plate. I batted his hand away, glaring, only for him to try again. Since apparently physically striking him wasn’t enough, I grabbed my fork and stabbed it through the slack in his sleeve, pinning him to the dining mat under my plate.

“Hey, Lyssa bought these,” Mahlan said, sounding more surprised than anything else.

“I’ll buy you new ones,” I grumbled before raising my fork and letting Samson pull his hand back. That was the thing about witches—if there weren’t clear boundaries set, they would just keep pressing and pressing until their luck run out. It was essential to be firm right out of the gate.

“Here,” Mahlan said, handing half of one of his three sandwiches to Samson. “Now, what did you want to talk to us about?”

He should have known better. Instead of answering, the witch took a huge bite of sandwich, then washed it down with the iced coffee he was holding. Where he’d gotten iced coffee at nearly midnight, I had no idea. Mahlan opened his mouth to ask again, but Samson just busied himself with finishing off the sandwich.

“That was delicious,” he said, smacking his lips when he finished and draining the rest of his coffee. “My compliments to the chef.”

“That was me,” I said flatly, enjoying my own sandwich.

“Huh! Who knew such a sour face could make such a yummy treat?”

“*Samson*,” Mahlan growled.

“Oh, right. Okay, so I wanted to talk to you about this whole sitch, because basically, I’m getting nervous.”

“Did you end up detecting any other magical signatures in Emma’s old shop?”

“No, not a thing. But then again, it’s not like I’m some hound dog for magic.” His lips pulled into a smirk when he realized exactly what he said. “Whoops, hope that wasn’t offensive to y’all wolfy folks.”

Why did I suddenly feel a headache coming on?

“And your point?” Mahlan asked, with the patience of a saint. I supposed it helped that his mate and Sam were childhood best friends.

“I’m a bit worried about potentially starting an all-out war between shifters and witches.”

My own eyes went wide at that, and I straightened in my seat. “You think that’s a possibility?”

“I have no idea, but I’m not ruling it out. Especially since humans are somehow involved.” Samson sighed, and I saw a serious side of him I’d never had a glimpse of before. “Normallym stuff like this is just a rogue coven, or a witch gone dark, but this seems so much bigger than that. And yet I haven’t heard a single whisper in the underground.” Samson made a broad gesture. “I don’t get it.”

“Is that it?”

“More or less. I’m trying to look more into that Sarah girl who betrayed Lyssa, but I feel like us being basically led right to her was a little too convenient.”

“You’re thinking sabotage from within?” Mahlan asked.

“That, or some sort of very elaborate trap.”

“Or maybe Sarah pissed someone off?” I offered.

“All possible,” Sam said, rubbing his chin. “I just...I needed to explain it all to you in case something happens to me.”

At that, worry bloomed in my chest. I wasn’t the fondest of Sam, but I didn’t want to think about him being hurt. “Do you need a guard? We can have a detail follow you.”

“Pffft, no, then I’ll never get anything done.” And the witch was back to his usual flippant self. “And no offense to you guys, but you puppos kinda cramp my style.”

My grip tightened on my fork and I very much thought about stabbing it into the witch’s thigh. But thankfully, Mahlan answered like the leader he was so I could stick to imagining punting Sam’s head like a football.

“Thank you for telling us,” he said, picking up his own sandwich. “Is there anything else?”

“Well, I’ve been researching Lyssa a bit. Digging into the remnants of

that old curse on her and looking into what Sarah said.”

“Have you found anything?”

“Yeah, the pack that her parents were a part of. The story checks out, but I’m definitely thinking there’s more than just these brothers involved. Also, I have no clue why they’re stealing and murdering random shifters.”

“There are too many things we’re missing,” I murmured, finishing my last sandwich. “I think we need to go over everything from the beginning and map it out.”

“Alright,” Mahlan said with a nod. “I’ll go get a paper and pen.”

EMMALINE

I hummed to myself as I got ready for work for the first time since I'd been attacked. I was both incredibly excited and deeply nervous. Part of me knew that they wouldn't hit the same place twice, especially not with all the protection we had set up. But another part of me worried they would try to circumvent logic and just come out in droves.

Either way, bevy of murderous witches or not, I was going in. Being off work for two full weeks sounded like a fun vacation, but it turned out to be anything but. The first week at least was interesting when it came to observing Savannah and having two sleepovers with Lyssa, but the second week...well, it was *boring*. And maybe that was partially due to being ridiculously horny. Horny, angry, and upset. It was a pretty potent combination.

I paused, scenting the air to be sure. Yep, Theo was definitely around. I'd gotten used to him patrolling once or twice a day, and it did help to make me feel safe. Especially since he never once tried to come in. He was respecting my need for space even after we kissed.

And God, that *kiss*.

Whew, it was something else. I'd had my fair share of kisses in my life, and that one blew me out of the water. Maybe it was just the bonding chemicals, or maybe it was how soft his lips were and how hard he held me. I felt desired, cherished, *lusted* after in a way that left me breathless. Every time I thought about it, I wanted to slide my hand between my legs and finish the job.

But I certainly couldn't do that and still have time to get to my car for my

shift. Theo had been nice enough to drop it off at Savannah's, given how often he ran around the place anyway, so I wasn't dependent on anyone chauffeuring me anywhere.

Satisfied with my reflection in the mirror, I opened the bathroom window and leaned my head out.

"Theo! Go take a nap!"

I knew he wasn't getting good rest with how often he was up. It would be one thing if he just had to run around and keep an eye on me, but he was also a CEO and all-around detail man for the pack. While Mahlan was the figurehead who gave orders, Theo was often the one who did all the little things to make them happen.

But as I looked around, I realized I couldn't see him. Huh, usually my eyes were pretty sharp. If it weren't for our tie together, I wouldn't have known he was there at all.

Maybe he had heard my call and was heading home to actually get a few winks in. And yeah, maybe pigs would fly, too. He probably was just gonna change into one of his fancy suits and roll into the office like he hadn't been running around like a guard dog for hours. I hoped all his workers knew how hard he was going. Probably not, though. Theo liked to play his cards close to his chest.

As much as I wanted to stand at the window and philosophize about my mate and the revelation from a few days earlier, I had a business to run. And by God, I was gonna run it.



I WOKE up feeling more refreshed than I had in ages. My first day with the shop open had certainly been stressful, and my nerves were completely frayed, but it had been as peaceful as could be. I only had a total of three customers, which wasn't surprising considering the renovation, but I had so many online orders to catch up with. I sent out an email to my list apologizing for the delay and included a free gift. It was just a little hairpin that I'd ordered in my two weeks out of work, but it made me feel better to put something extra in for my loyal customers.

Still, even with a full day's work and Lyssa glued to my side the whole time, we still didn't get through half of the orders. I was looking forward to

going in for a second day and busting my ass, but I had something important to do first.

Going down into Savannah's kitchen, I started brewing some coffee, the Alma having already drained the pot in her effort to stay up until 8 am. I could hear her showering upstairs, her music faintly playing from the little speaker she tended to carry around the house.

I'd gotten to know the woman pretty well in our two weeks together and I was going to make a concentrated effort to include her in our family dinners and other things. I had no idea how isolating it could be, being the new Alma after our older one had passed. While Savannah's predecessor had been like a grandmother to everyone, the new Alma was more like a strange but friendly cousin who just moved to town.

I would have to remedy that. But first, coffee.

When the little machine finished brewing it, I poured a cup and fixed it up just how I knew Theo liked it, then walked outside.

"Hey there, you butt. Did you get any sleep?" I called out into the yard without needing to look in any particular direction.

Sure enough, a few moments later, a white wolf emerged from between two trees.

"You can't drink this like that," I said, gesturing with the very full mug in my hands.

I could hear him think something cheeky even if he didn't project it with his wolf voice. A moment later, he shifted back to his human form, wearing gray sweatpants and no top.

"What was that about me making up you being shirtless all the time?" I said as he reached out for my coffee cup.

"It's definitely a figment of your imagination," Theo said before draining the entire mug in one long gulp. "I am a right dapper gentleman."

"Pffft, you're something, alright," I shot back, arms crossed. As much as I was being saucy about it, I kind of was getting used to Theo being around. And the guards he and Mahlan had hired to watch the shop. They were supposed to be inconspicuous, but I could spot them from a mile away. I'd tried shooing them off at first, but after they resolutely ignored me, I figured it was a lost cause.

Besides, it couldn't hurt to be a little extra cautious in case those witchy assholes got any bright ideas.

"Any leads on who attacked my shop?" I asked, taking the mug back.

“The guys are working on it. Mahlan and I met with Samson and made some plans.”

“Got any updates for me?”

“We don’t know if the witches have moved on to anyone else. We don’t know who they’re gonna attack next, or if they’re gonna attack outright at all. We also don’t know their allies, how many there are, and if the witches are willing partners or somehow magically brainwashed.”

“Huh, that’s a lot to not know,” I murmured, trying not to feel overwhelmed.

“I’m sorry I don’t have better news for you. But we are trying to set up a trap of sorts.”

“A trap?”

“I don’t have many details for you, but know that we are doing things, even if it doesn’t seem like it on the surface. The hardest part is going to be setting up a convincing fake perimeter to lure these witches in. They’re awfully perceptive.”

“Thanks,” I said, truly meaning it. “I appreciate you keeping me in the loop.”

“Of course. Sometimes knowledge is the best comfort we have.”

“Yeah, and sometimes knowledge is the worst nightmare.”

Theo let out an understanding sort of huff. “You’re telling me.”

He stretched and I did my best not to stare at the way his abs bunched or his pecs rippled. Normally, I was much more into giant teddy bears with nice bellies and big ol’ arms, and yet neither Kaleb or Theo fit that bill. In fact, Theo was pretty much the opposite. Carved from marble with striations so deep, I could run a finger along them.

“What are you thinking?”

“Huh?” I blurted, blinking and pulling myself back to the real world. But it only partially worked, my mind replaying what it had been like to kiss Theo.

I’m trying to have a conversation here! I scolded myself, focusing on the words coming out of my mouth rather than how shiny Theo’s skin was. Was that like a moisturizing thing or a sweat thing?

“Oh, right. Uh, I was just thinking that they must want Lyssa back really badly.”

“I think so. There are certain things about the story that aren’t matching up, but it’s clear that Lyssa is important to it.”

“You think the story about her dad saving one of them is bupkis?”

“No, that part’s probably true. And we found out her mother really was an Alma. And by ‘we,’ I mean that annoying witch.”

“Sam?”

“Yeah, the iced coffee addict.”

“He does love iced coffee, doesn’t he?” I reminded myself to treat him to one on me. He was doing a lot to help us despite my killing a witch right in front of him, and I certainly appreciated that. But then something Theo had said earlier triggered in my mind. “You mentioned a false perimeter?”

“Yeah. We’re going to see if we can use the moonstones as bait, but there’s a lot of details we need to work out.”

I frowned, my mind racing at a mile a minute. “What...what if we set up the fake perimeter around my house?”

“What?” Theo asked, voice sharp.

“They’ve already targeted me once because I’m close to Lyssa. Whether they wanted to brainwash me, kill me, or interrogate me for info on the moonstones, it’s clear they’ve got all my habits down pat. What if we make a very conspicuous trip to my empty house late at night with our hands full of approximately moonstone-sized boxes? We can put guards on the outside and even have Sam weakly ward it. Baddabing, baddaboom, I bet those witches will be back in under fifteen minutes!”

“No. Flat-out, *no*. There’s a million and one risks in there that just aren’t worth it.”

“I bet you my brother would think that it’s worth it.”

“Like hell he will,” Theo grumbled. “And the witches aren’t stupid. They’re gonna recon your place to death before they make a single move!”

“In that case, I’ll move back in. Act like I’m going through my everyday motions. Meanwhile, I can set my own little traps inside my place.”

I could tell that Theo was about to lose it with me. His protective instincts had to be going haywire, but I couldn’t just sit around and be a damsel in distress. It just wasn’t my style. I wasn’t trying to be reckless, but to me, it seemed that the more time passed, the more people got hurt.

“If you’re living there, then I’m living there, too. You’re not gonna be there alone!”

Well, that wasn’t a hill I wanted to die on. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Sure, if you’re willing to pack up a go-bag and stay at my house, I’m

more than happy to have you. But I'm doing this, Theo. I'm done sitting around."

"You still need Mahlan's permission."

I whipped my phone out, dialing up my brother's number. "On it."

"There's no way he'll agree."

That was the thing. While Mahlan and I loved incredibly deeply, but we were also practical. That was why he'd asked Lyssa to help him with his corporate espionage, and that was why he'd believe me about the importance of setting the trap. Because, so far, it seemed to be the best lead we had.

"Just watch," I said with a wink. "You have no idea what I can do."

THEO

I was pissed.

I was pissed, I was livid, and I was worried.

Somehow, Emma had convinced her brother of her plan and now everyone was moving forward with it. That was how I ended up packing two bags to spend who knew how long at her place.

Frustrating.

It should have been a happy time, the two of us moving in together into her rather nice house. But it wasn't at all. Emma was gleeful with her own ideas of revenge, everyone was working out details, and meanwhile, I was running more time than ever on patrols.

I was falling behind on our business work, I knew that much, and I desperately needed to hire two new assistants to deal with what I wasn't doing. But I just couldn't find the time. The witches needed to be gone so I could focus on stabilizing our pack post-Sawyer transition and my new life with my mate.

Goodness, I was a mated man and I hadn't really had time to come to terms with it. Sure, I'd vaguely think about how we'd kiss every time I managed to nap, and sometimes my dreams would take it further, but that was just one factor of being mated. We didn't eat together, didn't go to bed together. We didn't budget for bills or say goodbye before a long day of work. She didn't rest her head in my lap so I could run my fingers through her thick dark hair, and I didn't occasionally tickle her until she kicked me in the face.

It was all the little things, the moments in between that made a mated

relationship, and missing all those invaluable breaths of love was slowly tearing chunks out of me. I didn't understand how Emma wasn't nearly half mad with it, because I was.

"Here's your coffee," Emma said loudly as she walked onto Savannah's porch, clearly as happy as a clam. I was feeling much more sour as I shifted back to human, taking the cup and draining it down. *Jeez*, I was exhausted. All the way down to my bones.

"You ready for work?" I asked, trying not to sound like a grouch but knowing I did anyway.

"Yeah. You sure the witches won't be suspicious of my car being in the shop?"

I shook my head. In the two days since she'd come up with her plan, there'd been a flurry of preparation. It was strange, trying to balance being efficient and getting everything done, and also conspicuously look like we were doing something else entirely so the witches wouldn't catch on.

We'd done trickier things, mostly during the first big pack upheaval when I'd been a teenager, but it wasn't exactly easy, either.

"Alright, let me put the mug up and we'll head to my shop. The contractors were telling me it would probably just be two more weeks now until the other side is ready."

"That's good," I said. And I meant it, even if I was a real sourpuss. I was just stressed out of my gills and had a rock in my stomach every time I thought about Emma being in danger. I could still feel that biting, sinking coldness that had tried to drag my mate away from this mortal coil.

"Hopefully we can get all this witch business done and over with so I can really focus on the next season," she said before taking my empty mug and heading back inside.

I waited on the sidewalk, thinking about how the simple mug of coffee had become our only daily ritual together. I didn't even like coffee, and the caffeine was processed too quickly through our accelerated metabolisms to be of much use. But I still drank it every day because Emma made it for me, and that was enough.

A few moments later, my mate came barreling out of the house like it was Christmas. At least she let me open the car door for her, although I could tell that she hesitated. We were still finding our own balance, Emma and me. Her independence and ambition versus my innate need to protect my mate. If I was in her shoes, I would most likely be doing the same thing and she would

be the one going up the walls, so at least we had that mutual understanding.

At least she didn't give me the silent treatment on the way to her shop, chattering about how she had eliminated most of the applicants and was down to a handful of promising ones, how she was almost caught up with online orders, and other things that were important to her shop. I listened happily, although I didn't add much to the conversation. Just hearing Emma talk with pride and excitement about something was enough for me. In fact, I would throw out my television and personal laptop if it meant I was going to go home with her every night to tell me about her day.

Wait a minute...

I *was* going home to her every night. Sure, it would be her home, not mine, but I had been so busy worrying about all the terrible things that could happen that I hadn't really stopped to think about the upside.

Huh. Maybe Emma's plan wasn't the worst ever...

She was still animatedly talking as I turned onto her shop's street. I briefly debated "accidentally" going past it just to get some extra time with Emma, but she was so excited to get to work that it felt too underhanded. So instead, I dropped her off out front, making sure I was in a good position to watch until she was all the way inside.

"I'll pick you up after close and we'll head over to your place."

"Right, you need to pack and all that."

"Already packed," I answered. "But I figured I'd swing into the office, finish everything I can before taking a couple of days off, then I'll grab the bags and come back to you."

She let out a whistle. I couldn't help but notice the way her plump lips pursed around the sound and imagine just how they'd look around *other* things.

Jeez, I needed a cold shower.

"You are one busy man," she said, reaching into the car to pat me on the shoulder before turning around and marching into her store, pausing only to call to me right before the door closed. "Catch you on the flip side!" It was a relatively PG action, and yet my entire arm tingled from it.

I longed to go in there and tell her that I would meet her at home, in front of Lyssa or anyone else who might be there, to publicly utter our link to each other. But I knew not to, even if my inner wolf really, *really* didn't agree. I had it bad for her, didn't I?

Teenage Theo would have tumbled over himself if he found out that one

day he'd be mated to none other than Emmaline Reese. But he also never imagined that his best friend would become alpha before his thirties.

After all, Alpha Sawyer had been in great health and his son had been an impressive warrior in his own right. Six foot six with auburn hair and piercing green eyes, we'd all been sure he was next in line. But then he'd been killed. And a few years later, his father was, too.

Strange how things had turned out. I certainly never could have predicted it, even with all my internal ambitions that I knew better than to verbalize out loud.

Someone honked beside me and I flipped them off. I was parked in a literal parking spot, complete with a meter. Where did they get off? Well, road rage or not, I did need to get going, so I peeled away and headed toward the office.

It was hard to concentrate, but I forced myself to focus. Most of the day was spent running numbers with Mahlan, which was certainly interesting considering how pissed I was that he'd agreed to Emma's plan. The tension was palpable between us, but neither of us let it get in the way of our productivity. We had things to do, after all. It wasn't until lunch when he finally spoke.

"I understand why you're angry," he said calmly, in that unflappable way of his. Everyone always said I was the unreadable one, but to me, Mahlan was a consummate diplomat.

"If anyone would, it's you," I answered just as diplomatically, thinking back to how he and Lyssa had to go through plenty of their own compromises when they were first mated.

"I appreciate you trying to stay objective."

We both went quiet as we ate with one hand and typed with the other. But apparently Mahlan wasn't done.

"You have to understand, Emma is very attached to her house. She bought it all on her own, not a dime from my parents or me. She did the same with her shop. While my parents did help her with investment money, she paid them back every cent plus interest."

I nodded. While I wasn't entirely aware of Emma's financials, I did know just how impressive her career was. It was hard to run a small business nowadays, let alone a specialty boutique.

"Look, I respect all of Emma's accomplishments, and they're part of what attracts me to her. But her house is separate from most of the pack's. I

checked and the closest other member is ten minutes away. Do you know how much damage a witch can do in ten minutes?”

Mahlan considered my words for a moment. “As an alpha, and a mate, I get it. I do. I know what that gnawing need to protect can do. But if you force her too much with anything, she’s going to resent you forever. And you don’t want that.”

No, I didn’t. But what choice did I have? I didn’t want to push Emma past her limits, but I couldn’t have her throwing herself into danger every few minutes. It would drive me mad.

“What do I do? Is it all just hopeless?”

“I can’t tell you, because I honestly don’t know, but you need to find a compromise. It’s not fair for her to lose her place and move in to yours, but it’s also not fair to demand you leave yours to go to a less secure place.”

“What...what if we both left ours?”

“Pardon?” Mahlan asked, tipping his head.

“You’re surprising Lyssa with that house, aren’t you? Well, once the two of you move into there, maybe we can move in to the house I bought right next to you.”

Mahlan nodded, a slow smile spreading across his face. “Looks like I might be getting neighbors faster than I thought.”

The tension between us simmered down to nothing and we both continued working up until just after noon, when Mahlan left. I spent the rest of my hours setting up checklists, to-dos, and fail-safes for my assistants and the other members of the board. They all had my number, so I could certainly be called if needed, but my hope was to entirely concentrate on Emma and the witches who always seemed to come out of nowhere.

Before I knew it, my alarm to leave sounded. My inner workaholic wanted to keep going, to get more done so I could be triple sure that everything would flow smoothly. But my inner wolf clamped down on that idea with a vicious snarl. It had waited far longer than any wolf should ever be asked to cohabitate with its mate, and it wasn’t going to wait another moment longer than necessary.

So I packed up, waved to my assistants, and headed to my home. Once there, I took another shower, dressed in some more casual athleisure, then headed to Emma’s shop.

Even though she had guards, contractors next door, and the wards Samson had set up, I was still nervous about what I would see when I got

there. Would the windows be blown out? Would Emmaline be waiting there for me in a pool of blood?

The thought made me sick, and maybe I sped a little to get there. But when I arrived, everything was exactly as it was supposed to be, with Lyssa waving at me from the window.

Turning my radio down, I kept my eyes sharp on my surroundings while I waited for Emma. I knew she wouldn't keep me long, but she probably had her own things to wrap up. I spotted the guards we'd set up for her, then two more. Huh, Mahlan must have added extra. Not that I minded.

Emma didn't keep me waiting long, locking up the door as she and Lyssa exited. For a moment, I wondered if I was supposed to drop Lyssa off, but then Mahlan pulled up right behind me. Maybe when everything calmed down, Lyssa could get her own driver's license. But considering everything going on, I understood why that wasn't a priority. Besides, now that she had her inner wolf unlocked, she could always just run home.

Either way, Lyssa got into Mahlan's car and Emma slid into mine. I pulled away from her shop, ready to start our cohabitation, but Mahlan's words from earlier played in my mind.

"So..."

"Yes?"

"Part of your plan is to use your house because it's the least protected of all our places and relatively isolated, correct?"

"That's the long and short of it." She was still smiling, which I hoped meant she had a good day at work. "Why?"

"Well, once this trap has been sprung, your place could end up in a worse position than your shop."

"Yeah, I'm keeping my fingers crossed, but I've already been putting things I really don't want to get broken into storage in the basement. I figure if anything gets demolished, it's worth the peace of mind knowing our enemies are done for."

She was handling it all better than I could have ever anticipated, so I decided to take a gamble.

"With its location being known as an easy target, and the damage it's likely to sustain if our trap works, I'm not comfortable with you staying there once it's all said and done."

To my pretty strong surprise, Emma laughed. "Okay then."

"I'm being serious. As mates, we're gonna have to learn to compromise,

and me going along with this plan means that you will need to walk away from this house if the witches take the bait.” I didn’t want to have a fight, not on our first real night together, but I also needed to make sure that she understood. I didn’t want any false pretenses between us. Only honesty with my mate, even if it wasn’t what either of us wanted to hear.

“Oh, I know. I love my little house, but it’s not a place where we could stay forever. It’s a two bedroom, one bath without any closet storage. If I want to have a family and grow, I need to invest in something bigger.”

My heart thundered in my chest at the mention of family. As a beta, I didn’t have the biggest drive to reproduce, but the idea of having pups with someone as brilliant as Emma...well, it was certainly plenty appealing.

“But I don’t really want Mahlan’s place, either. Although it’s got his home gym, his office, and two bedrooms, it’s still not really fit for a family. I’m not saying I need to have a whole brood, but I’ve always thought three or four pups would be perfect.”

I gripped the steering wheel as the picture bloomed in my mind. Emma’s stomach swollen with child, a baby in her arms while I played airplane with a toddler. They all had her dark hair and eyes but my pale coloring, cheeks round with all the chunkiness that made babies so adorable.

It was a beautiful image, and I felt my heart squeeze in my chest. I liked that betas didn’t have the compulsion to procreate, as I knew every child I had would be because I *wanted* them, not because I went into rut and my inner wolf took over. They would be purposeful, beloved, and entirely *ours*.

“Maybe if the house isn’t *completely* destroyed, I can sell it and buy another somewhere else.”

There it was, my opportunity. Part of me was still in shock that she was actually willing to give up her house. I thought it would be a fight-tooth-and-nail situation that would devastate not just our mateship, but also our friendship in general.

But also, was it arrogant of me to think I could be included in her vision of the future? I mean, I was her mate, right? Who else would she be having children with? Yet at the same time, I wasn’t willing to ask. Because if she rejected me, I didn’t think I could survive it.

It didn’t take us long to arrive at her place, and I took a deep breath from my nose, trying to see if I could catch any erroneous scents. I caught the guards Mahlan and I had handpicked for the job, but little else. I was still gonna run the perimeter a couple of times, but I could at least enjoy dinner

first.

We both went inside, and I let out a whistle at all the decorating Emma had done since I'd last been in her place. "Wow, like what you've done with the place," I said with an approving nod.

It wasn't the most overly designed, as clearly Emma was a busy woman, but there was a hominess to it. Pictures of her family and some of the pack were displayed in several key places, it was well-lit with crystalline-looking lamps, and she had small plants tucked in illuminated spots near the windows.

"Yeah, you haven't been here since, gee, like three months after I bought it, have you?"

"I think that's right." Despite my raging crush on Emma, I hadn't often visited her place or her mine. Usually at Mahlan's or one of the restaurants we all liked to visit. How insane to think I would be spending the next two weeks to a month shacking up with her.

Sleeping in the same place as her.

Showering in the same house as her.

Getting changed...

I shook my head, trying to empty it of those thoughts. I didn't want to make Emma uncomfortable two minutes after going into her house by spreading my horny pheromones everywhere.

"So, you hungry? I've got some leftovers I can reheat."

"Sure, whatever you normally do. And I'll handle dishes."

But Emma just chuckled. "I have a dishwasher, actually. But you're more than welcome to load it and put it away."

"I can do that."

I had a dishwasher at my own home, but I so rarely used it considering I was just a single person and usually only took a single dish or bowl at a time. I definitely had some adapting to do over the next couple of days, but I didn't mind.

The leftovers turned out to be white rice and teriyaki chicken, but Emma reheated it in a pan instead of the microwave, so it was actually quite delicious. We ate together in relative silence, but not an uncomfortable one. I had my laptop out on the island, answering some emails, while she did whatever she did on social media for her shop. I should probably learn more about it sometime, but perhaps not when she was in the middle of catching up on everything the reno had made her behind on.

Before I knew it, the hours had slipped away and Emma let out a loud yawn. “Holy hell, is it almost midnight already?”

My eyes widened at that. Almost midnight and I hadn’t run the perimeter?! What was I doing?

I jolted, but Emma just put a hand over mine. “Easy now. It’s our first night here. The witches probably don’t even know that yet, and we have five guards outside. You can still go for a run, but the world won’t end because you haven’t done one yet.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m just a little on edge.”

“That’s okay.” She beamed at me, and goodness, that made me want to lean in and seal my lips over hers again. “Why don’t you let me show you your bed and then I’ll pass out while you do whatever it is you want to do?”

That sounded agreeable to me, although my inner wolf was protesting that it couldn’t stay in bed with her. But while it didn’t understand her need for space, I did, and moving in with her—even if it was temporary—was already a pretty big concession for her to make for me.

I would take the win where I could get it, so I graciously followed her to the guest bedroom at the opposite end of the hall from her own sleeping quarters, thanked her, and wished her goodnight.

We both hesitated for a moment, and for just a split second, I thought we would kiss again. But instead, Emma stepped away.

Oh well.

I watched her go to her room before turning around and heading outside. I would run for a couple hours then potentially get the most sleep I’d had in a couple weeks.



I WOKE up the next day and saw Emma off, watching her drive her own car now that it was back from the shop. The witches didn’t know this, but it had been fitted with a tracking device, inner cameras, and a few moonstone dummies for them to find in case they searched it on their own.

I had planned to take a couple of days off, but as soon as I checked my phone, I saw Mahlan had texted me asking if we could talk. Naturally, I told him we could, and about half an hour later, he was at my place with donuts.

“What’s happened?” I asked as soon as he set them down in the kitchen.

“More shifters are missing.”

“From our pack?”

“No. We’re meeting up with Sam at the pack they belonged to, but figured we wouldn’t want to do that on an empty stomach.”

“I’m worried about both of us being that far away. We should have Parker and Jacobian watch over the girls while we are. Just in case the witches decide to take advantage of our absence.”

“Good idea. I’ll call them now and you get dressed. We’ll go over in my car.”

I did just that, dressing up in one of my suits. Although it wasn’t the usual uniform of most wolf shifters, I appreciated the intimidating aura it gave me. Sure, maybe it played into the misconception of me as some sort of ice king, but I was willing to take the wins where I could get them.

The two of us headed out, me shoving donuts into my mouth. We made good time into the other pack’s territory, arriving just as Sam pulled up on a bright mint-green moped.

“Hey, nice timing!” he said, removing his helmet. I had to say, I was somewhat surprised that he cared about manual road safety. I half-expected him to just ride around with a magical cushion of invulnerability. Then again, he was a green witch, and although I generally didn’t understand the differences between many types of magic, I did know that his was different than the typical practitioner. “When it rains, it pours, huh?”

“Unfortunate times,” I said flatly. While he’d done a lot for us, I was still uneasy trusting Sam. After all, if Lyssa’s friend of nearly four years could help hunt her down and poison her inner wolf, well, there was really no telling what anyone could do.

“Ah, there you are!” A tall man who I recognized as the other pack’s beta strode forward. “You got here faster than we expected.”

“We take such things seriously,” Mahlan answered, offering his hand for a shake. “Whether it’s our pack or not, a missing shifter is certainly cause for alarm.”

“We’re glad you feel that way. One of our security was able to actually find footage of them that wasn’t wiped. If you’d follow me, we’d be happy to show it to you and hear your thoughts.”

My interest perked up at that. A real lead? It was about time!

“Absolutely,” Mahlan said. “Lead the way.”

We walked across a baseball field that smelled so much like the other

pack's territory, it was hard for my inner wolf not to want to piss all over the place. Thankfully, I wasn't a Neanderthal, so I made do with breathing through my mouth for a bit. It was just across the field at what looked like a bike shop, where the beta lead us through the back and into a small office.

It was certainly cramped with the beta, one of his security men, Samson, Mahlan, and myself, but we made do, all of us huddling around the monitor. With a nod from the beta, the guard pressed play, and we watched with rapture at our first footage of our enemy.

It was a witch, seeming to melt into the field out of nowhere, where a couple of shifters were having what looked like a romantic picnic. Suddenly things went flying everywhere—benches, rocks, branches—and the shifters tried to scramble to their feet. I leaned in closer, trying to take everything in, but the footage went black.

“Is that it?” I asked sharply.

“It's all that was able to be uploaded to the cloud before the witch disabled the cameras. Some sort of area of effect spell,” the beta answered.

“The only reason we got this is because the owner of this shop is a real tech head,” the guard explained. “She's been in the process of updating everything to fiber-optic stuff, which is why this was able to upload what it did before the magic took hold.”

“Interesting...” Mahlan murmured. “Theo, look into cost estimates for covertly upgrading our own systems.”

“I'll put it first on the priority list,” I said, determination filling me. But there was also something niggling at the back of my head. “Can you play it again?”

“The clip? Uh, sure.”

I leaned in so close that it might have been funny if it weren't a life and death situation. Since I already knew where the witch would appear, I focused my eyes on that area.

Sure enough, it was like she appeared in colorful raindrops. One moment there, one moment half-formed, and the next, completely realized. It was a terrifying display of power, and not one I was aware that witches were capable of.

“Pause it,” I said quickly. The guard did, and I studied the figure further. She was smaller and at a greater distance than the witch I fought previously, but I was able to confirm my suspicions with a long look.

“What is it? What do you see, Theo?”

“This is a different witch.”

“What?” Mahlan was suddenly leaning in just as much beside me. “Two rogue witches? Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” I pointed to her as best I could considering the scale. “Look, she has loose platinum hair, and her nose is quite pronounced. The one I chased in Emma’s store had auburn hair and her features were much more East Asian.”

Sam let out a whistle behind me. “I knew it probably wasn’t one, but this now makes three witches total. I don’t need to tell you all that’s really not good.”

“No,” I said, straightening despite the dropping feeling in my stomach. “It’s really not.”

The rest of them quickly delved deep into discussion of what that meant, Mahlan updating the other wolves with what we were willing to share. As for myself, I walked outside and made a call.

“Emma?” I asked as soon as the line picked up.

“Ah, no man, sorry.” For a split second, I was terrified, but then I realized it was just Parker.

“Hey, where’s Emma?”

“Oh, you know, just being her normal, annoying self,” he said. I could almost hear him sticking his tongue out at her.

“Where are you? Why are you answering her phone?”

“Well, we’re walking down the street to get lunch because she insists on feeding all of us if we’re going to be standing around her shop. We told her we weren’t going anywhere, but then she started walking off without us.”

Okay, that did sound like Emma.

“And that was after she made me fold t-shirts for like an hour. I have a net worth of nearly a million dollars, I’m on the board of a financial company, and I was *folding t-shirts*.”

“It’s good for character!” I heard Emma shout from somewhere close by.

“Yeah, yeah, do you wanna talk with your boyfriend now?”

I heard a muffled response from Emma and then there was some crackling on the phone before she came on the line. “Hello?” she asked, sounding quite happy.

Maybe I could tell her the bad news another time. Would it be so great a sin to let her have a fun afternoon doing things she loved?

“Hey. Just wanted to check in. Having a good day?”

“Well, trying to make use of all the guards I don’t need by making them help me put things out.”

“Hey, it’s for your safety, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you when I get home.”

“Emma, I’m serious,” I countered, feeling my agitation rise.

“You’re always serious.”

“*Emma!*”

EMMALINE

I sighed, recognizing that something else was going on behind the scenes. “Did you find out something bad?”

“It’s not good,” Theo answered tersely. “Can you just go back to the shop?”

“After I get food.” I could hear his irritation through the line, and although I felt bad about it, this damsel wasn’t gonna be distressing in her tower. “What happened? Are more shifters missing?”

“Yes. They seem to be attacked similarly to how you were.”

“Damn, that witch really gets around.”

“It’s a different witch.”

I paused at that, stopping dead in the middle of the sidewalk. “’Scuse me?”

“It was a different witch,” he repeated, and it was like every word drummed deeper into my adrenal gland.

“Are you certain?”

“Different face shape. Different hair color and style. Yeah, different witch.”

“Fuck.” The others all finally noticed I stopped and looked back at me with curiosity. Well, they were just going to have to wait for some answers because my mind was quickly recalculating everything with the new info I’d been given. “This means we need my plan more than ever.”

“It means your plan is more dangerous than ever. We should call it off!”

“No, Theo. I’m not going to go in circles about this. You’re gonna have to trust me and my brother’s judgement.”

“I’m going to be his beta. I’m sure that if I insisted, he would call it off.”

I felt my temper rise, hotter than the hell of Hades, but I fought to keep my tone civil. “You can, and yeah, he probably would. But then I’ll know that you’d rather go around me and pull rank rather than trusting me as a partner.” I knew my tone was sharp and full of venom, but I didn’t care. Theo had done a lot of right by me since the bite, but I would *not* tolerate someone trying to pull rank on me. Especially since I was certain my plan would work. “Is that really what you want to do, Theo?”

He didn’t answer for a long, long moment, and my heart was thundering in my chest. “No,” he said finally, and I swore my knees might collapse right out from under me. “But we need to have a discussion when we get home.”

“We certainly do,” I agreed. “I’ll see you then.”

I hung up, thoroughly done with the conversation. Looking away from my phone, I saw that everyone in my little entourage was staring at me somewhat awkwardly, some looking intensely curious and some looking like they wished they could be anywhere else.

“Let’s go get a fucking sandwich,” I growled, stalking forward.

I didn’t know if I was wearing my emotions on my sleeve, or if everyone’s tense expressions tipped the employees off that I wasn’t having a good day, but when I finally unwrapped my sandwich when we were back at the shop, I realized that they had given me double cheese and double meat for free. Well, at least that was nice.

I tore into my lunch with gusto, partially because I was hungry and partially because I was spitting mad. I was sure that everyone noticed, but no one said anything.

When we finished, I looked at Lyssa, who had a grim expression on her face.

“Hey,” I said, wiping my mouth, “Lyssa, I want to take inventory in the back and I need your opinion on a couple of things. Come to the back with me?”

“Sure,” she said, standing up.

“As for you boys, you can either return to your boring old guard positions or keep on folding stuff. Y’all are champs.”

With that, Lyssa and I hurried to the back on our own. I quickly updated her on everything Theo had told me, which she listened to with that same serious expression.

“I feel like I’m more trouble than I’m worth,” she murmured, looking

down at her hands like they had the answer written across them.

“Don’t say that,” I urged, gripping those hands so she would look up at me. “You are worth all of this and more. You aren’t the issue—these assholes and whatever they want is!”

“You’re right, you’re right,” she murmured, heaving a sigh. “I’m sorry for making it about me.”

“Hey, that’s alright. I just wanted your opinion on whether it’s stupid for me to be mad or not at Theo for trying to go around me.”

“Yes and no,” Lyssa said, telling it straight like she always did. I appreciated that she wasn’t an ass-kisser who would just say what she thought I wanted to hear. She had a pretty strong moral code that I could rely on. “Theo shouldn’t be making *carte blanche* decisions for you. Goodness knows I fought Mahlan on that kind of thing. The two of you should be a team.”

I agreed with her wholeheartedly on that, and it made me feel better that she thought the same as me.

“*But*”—there was always a but, wasn’t there?—“he isn’t wrong that you need to be careful, and that perhaps you’ve been a little blinded by your need for vengeance as fast as possible.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say I was *fueled* by vengeance.”

“I would,” Lyssa continued. “And I get it, I do. But look, you and Theo got pushed into a situation that’s pretty close to what I went through. If you want to survive it, both of you will need to learn how to forgive a mate for making a decision that’s fueled by both love and the bonding hormones flowing through you, even when that decision is annoying, bothersome, or even wrong.”

“Easier said than done,” I grumbled, although I could feel that what Lyssa was saying was true.

But the biggest issue was that I didn’t *love* Theo. Sure, I cared for him a great deal, and I was definitely attracted to him, but there wasn’t love yet. I hoped there would be one day, but considering the circumstances of our bond, it wasn’t something I would feel right out of the gate.

Then again, hadn’t Theo basically confessed to already being in love with me? The revelation had been shocking, that was for certain, but it had to be so difficult to be in love and mated to a woman who was chasing after someone else.

Messy, messy, messy. And it was all because of the witches.

“Look, I know my desire for justice may seem like it’s a little over the top, but this whole thing is personal for me. They tried to hurt you. They tried to take me, and they destroyed part of my shop, something I’ve put blood, sweat, and tears into. And it’s not just me. They’re taking other wolves and doing who knows what with them. Even that girl you rescued was terrified out of her mind. Has she been able to say a single thing since?”

Lyssa shook her head. “Not really. She’s being cared for right now, but there’s still a lot of trauma she’s processing. Whoever held her captive... actually, I don’t want to get into it. Let’s just say they weren’t nice.”

“See what I mean? These people won’t stop until we make them, so if I have to let myself get taken in order to bring an end to all this, I will!”

“But why does it have to be you?” Lyssa objected, sounding so upset that it stopped me in my growing furor.

Suddenly, I saw the whole situation through her eyes. A young girl who’d just stepped into adulthood and found out that she was a part of a magical race, who found a home and family after so many years of being othered. And all of it was being attacked right in front of her, while her friend seemingly wanted to go on some sort of suicide mission to get back at the bad guys.

“Hey, it’s gonna be okay. I don’t get why they chose me, but we gotta take advantage while we can. I’m sure our plan will work. Especially if Samson puts a tracking spell on me.”

“I...I just need you to be careful. I can’t lose you, you understand?”

“Don’t worry, you won’t.” I hugged her again before parting, taking a deep breath. “Okay, let’s go back to the front of the store before the boys destroy it.”

“Sounds good,” she said uncertainly. “I hope you’re not just saying what I want to hear so I don’t tattle on you to Mahlan.”

“No, Lyssa. I promise to always be honest with you except when it comes to birthday presents and other surprises.”

That seemed to break her growing dread and she let out a little laugh. “Fair enough. But does that mean you’re hiding a surprise from me now?”

“I plead the fifth!” I called singsongingly as I rushed out front.

“Oh no, you don’t! Come here and spill the beans!”

“I’ll never surrender!”

It was just what we needed to reset the mood, and the rest of the afternoon went by much better. However, good things could only last for so

long, and I knew that I was going to need to talk to Theo once Mahlan dropped him off.

And of course, the alpha was right on time to pick up his mate. My brother was one punctual shifter, that was for sure.

Lyssa and I said our goodbyes, then Theo walked with me to where I parked my car in the back. He didn't say much, but jeez, the storm he was projecting certainly said a lot.

"Would you like to grab something to eat somewhere?" he asked as we both got in, surprising me.

"Oh sure, where were you thinking?"

"A new dim sum place opened a bit away from our office. Want to try there?"

I smiled softly, appreciating the gesture. Mahlan had never been head over heels for sushi, dim sum, and hot pot like I was, so I had no doubt Theo had noticed that and stored it in his brain to surprise me someday. He really had all the capacity to be a great mate.

It was a shame how everything had turned out.

"Yeah, that sounds great!"

"I'll put it into your car's GPS," he said, leaning forward to interact with my dash. A few moments later, I was following the path it set out for us. Rush-hour traffic wasn't exactly the greatest, but we managed to catch mostly greens and arrive just as my stomach was growling.

"You sure you have time for this?" I asked as I parked. Between his patrols and work, I was surprised he even had time to think.

"It's worth it to make time."

He said it so bluntly, like a throwaway statement, but his words stuck with me. I knew how seriously Theo took his position, how much he cared about our pack. The thought he'd rank me as important enough to put those things to the side was a pretty heady one.

I didn't comment on it, mostly because I didn't want to make him self-conscious or discourage him from feeling that way, so instead we just went in.

We were seated relatively quickly, but I waited until after our first round of food before getting down to business.

"Do you have any update on things?" I braced myself for him to tell me that he'd gone to Mahlan and everything was off. It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it was important to be realistic about things.

“We have Samson looking for signatures right now to see if he can find anything that puts us closer to figuring this out,” he said, not mentioning Mahlan at all. That was certainly interesting. “There’s still just so much we don’t know.”

Huh. Nothing about canceling my plan. Maybe I should cut Theo some slack. He was certainly trying hard enough.

“Maybe we should call a family meeting tonight at my place, have everyone brainstorm. Might cause more attention to be drawn to my house and also give us an opportunity to all be in the same place.”

I was pretty sure that there hadn’t been a single family dinner since I was attacked, which was a terrible tradition to let fall by the wayside.

But Theo nodded slowly, one of his cheeks full of the steamed dumplings we were going to town on. “Sounds good.”

“I’ll text folks now. Oh, and I’m *definitely* inviting Savannah.”

THEO

I slowly drank one of the sports drinks that Emma tended to keep in her fridge, waiting for people to arrive. Our dinner had actually turned out to be quite nice, with both our bellies filled with delicious food. I felt a bit less like the world was ending.

I still wasn't *happy* about Emma's plan, but I also recognized that at the moment, it was the best one we had.

Emmaline, for her part, was pacing around her kitchen island, chewing on her lip as she waited for people to arrive. I wanted to stop her, to pull her bottom lip out from between her teeth with my thumb and kiss her until she forgot why she was worried.

But we weren't there yet, and we might never be.

Unsurprisingly, it was Mahlan and Lyssa who arrived first, the women greeting each other with hugs and enthusiasm. As for our alpha, he sat next to me with raised eyebrows. I just shrugged. I wasn't in charge of the meeting, Emma was.

Everyone else arrived in the next few minutes, and once we were all assembled around the kitchen island, including Savannah, Emma cleared her throat.

"I ordered pizza. It should be coming in an hour or so, so none of you should have to worry about starving."

It was said in jest, but late-night wolf munchies were not unheard of. My mother always told me it was our body's way of getting us to stuff it with more calories before sleeping, as going eight straight hours without eating could be hard on our bodies even when unconscious.

“But I called this meeting because what we’re doing isn’t working.”

Wait, was she abandoning her trap plan? That was the easiest argument I’d ever won.

“Emma,” Mahlan said reproachfully, “do I need to remind you that I am the alpha here, and I’m trying to keep you and my pack safe?”

“Oh, come off it,” Emma said, rolling her eyes.

The only reason she got away with that was because she was Mahlan’s sibling, but boy did it make my stomach roll with anxiety. I would *never* talk to him that way.

“Look, my house being a trap is a good way to draw them out, but we’re playing defense when it’s clear we need to play offense.”

“It’s difficult to play offense when we don’t even know who the enemy is,” I remarked, still sipping at my drink.

“We need to put together a full list and map of everyone who’s been taken. I’m talking entire files on their history, where they were taken, their gender, abilities, what kind of shifter they were, and who they were with. We’ll compare all of these and see if there are any patterns we can find.”

“That could work,” Parker murmured, pulling up his phone. “I started doing that with everything I happened to pick up about them. I’ve already got all their names and addresses, but I can contact their alphas and get much more detail.” He looked at Mahlan sheepishly. “If you think that’s a good idea, of course.”

Mahlan nodded. “It would give us a better direction to go in while Samson works. And maybe him seeing the completed map will help him do some sort of spell.”

“Alright, then it’s decided,” I said with a nod. “Everyone forward me the information you have and I’ll add it to my own, then compile it into a few databases to look for any connections.”

I wasn’t hopeful that we would find any. Every time a new shifter went missing, I always found all the information on them I could and filed it in my office, trying to find some sort of clue that would bust the case wide open. But it wasn’t like I had an exhaustive picture of their lives, so maybe there was something we could find in the mist.

“You know, the council would likely have all the information we need about the early records of the missing shifters,” Jacobian offered, his umber skin almost seeming to glow in the warm light of Emma’s kitchen.

“I’d like to involve them as little as possible for now,” Mahlan answered.

“But what if the council finds out about everything that’s going on around here and is upset we never mentioned it to them?” Emma countered, always thinking on her feet.

“The council can’t punish us for protecting our pack or researching a threat. If anything, they’ll be grateful to us for not involving them and adding more to their daily to-do list.”

Parker snorted. “More like daily snooze list. Those guys do like one thing a month, then spend the rest vacationing.”

“Perhaps it would be best not to speak ill of the council,” Savannah chided softly. “You never know who may be listening.”

Mahlan cleared his throat. “Point blank, we need to find these brothers, but I’m beginning to think that they’re not tied to Bronson’s company.”

“Not legally, at least,” I muttered.

But Emma just nodded, full of all that determination that seemed to run so fiercely through Reese blood. “Then we have our plan. The trap is set here at my place, but at the same time, we research our butts off to try to catch our enemies unaware. We focus on the missing shifters and trying to find these brothers.”

“That does sound like the long and short of it,” Mahlan agreed.

I took a deep breath, strangely relieved. For some reason, I thought the meeting was going to involve a lot more yelling and throwing things. Perhaps I needed to have a little more faith.

But faith or no, the discussion ended just in time, because Emma’s phone went off. Taking a cursory glance at it, her face lit up in a wide grin.

“Looks like the pizza’s here!”



AS SOON AS I finished my morning run, I started using my second day out of the office to reach out to every alpha and beta who had a member of their pack kidnapped. Some of them were quite grouchy at having to take the time to answer every question of the about hundred and ten that I had, but there seemed to be an undercurrent of camaraderie as well, even if it was reluctant.

Sure, Mahlan had become the head alpha of our area in a very bizarre and unpredictable way, and that had rubbed a lot of the other packs the wrong way. But they were just as eager as we were to see whoever was hunting us

be caught and brought to justice.

And by brought to justice, I mostly meant be ripped to shreds until the birds couldn't so much as find a decent morsel.

But even after I managed to contact every single one of the other pack leaders, and have them agree to either email or mail me the missing shifters' personal records, I couldn't identify any sort of pattern. It seemed so random, with their only connection being that they were all shifters.

I hoped that Emma was right, and there was something that was missing that would be unturned by mapping everything out. But that also seemed far too convenient.

Ugh.

I was chasing myself in circles, so I picked up my phone to distract myself. Where were the days when our battles were actual battles? Teeth and claw and bloodied fur, not corporate espionage and detective work. Those had certainly been simpler fights.

Curious, I flicked to Sam's contact and sent him a text asking if he'd uncovered anything on his end.

WHOA, is this the great wyte wolf texting me?

DON'T CALL ME THAT. That was a nickname I didn't mind among my own people, but I wasn't a fan of a witch using it. Especially when I could practically hear the snark in his voice as he said it.

OOOOKAY, what's up? Kno ur not texting me for fun. Not like we're bffs or anything.

CAN I CALL YOU?

YIKETH. It's that serious? D:

IT'S JUST a lot to type out. And I'm still thinking out some peripherals.

GOD, you even text like a stiff. Yeah, hold on, lemme get out of this internet cafe.

I WAITED ABOUT five minutes but sure enough, my phone started buzzing. I answered it, only to hear Sam panting slightly.

“You better not be calling me while you’re having sex,” I snapped.

“First of all, ew,” the witch snapped. “Second of all, I just told you I was in an internet cafe.”

“None of that explains why you’re out of breath.”

“I scaled the fire escape to get on the roof, *duh*,” he said, like that was the natural thing to presume. “But good to know that the first thing you think about is me doin’ the do. Take me to dinner first, jeez.”

I took two calming breaths. Sure, it was my fault for bringing it up, but he was like a little brother I never had nor wanted. “Sam, please realize that in the past three weeks I have been fully mated to the love of my life but we have been sleeping in separate beds the entire time.” I wasn’t a man to kiss and tell—I found that disgustingly pathetic—but I figured that was a respectful way to put it.

“Oh fuck—or rather, no fuck. Sorry, man. Tell ya what, next paycheck I get, I’ll buy you the nicest pocket pu—”

“*Sam.*”

“What? It’ll be from that bad dragon site! They’ve got wolf molds and dragons, too. It’ll be just like doing the real—”

“*Samson Fischer, do not finish that sentence.*”

“Alright, alright. Talk about being pent up.”

“*Anyway,*” I continued tersely through gritted teeth, “I think perhaps we should give you another false identity.”

“Really? Why?”

“To sign you on as Hannah’s assistant. Addison works well as our ghost since no one pays attention to disabled people. Hannah is our known

honeypot. They know she works for us and she draws plenty of attention to help Addison work behind the scenes. But I'm thinking we need someone else to balance it out."

"Ah, so you want me for my devilish charm and dashing good looks?"

"Somewhat."

"Huh. Is it bad that I was expecting an insult there?"

I just ignored him and kept on. "While Hannah works as a distraction for hetero men and any gay women they have there, you would help entice any gay men and straight women."

"And we both got the lock on the bisexuals."

"Sure," I said, waving my hand. "Whatever. But while you're working as a honeypot, you could also work whatever magic you have to give us a leg up."

"You remember I'm a green witch, right? It's not like I can enchant all their computer screens into scrying bo...actually, that's kind of a good idea."

"I don't care what you do, we need more access and we need to find out more."

"Sure, I'll just tell all their plants to give me all the latest deets."

My eyes widened. "You can do that?"

"No! I mean, kinda, but they don't speak our language. They more tell me their impression of things. Their person is stressed, or seemed dehydrated. Not exactly the high-level espionage you're asking for. Unless, like, you want to know when the female plant carers are on their periods. Plants are always mystified by that."

"That's more than I need to know."

"Oh please, wyt—*Theo*, the menstrual cycle is a normal part of—"

"I don't have a problem with uteruses or reproductive functions," I snapped. "But my mate's life is on the line so can we *please* stay on track?!"

I swore I heard Sam swallow and his tone turned serious. "Sorry. Humor's how I've dealt with a lot in my life. I forget that not everyone has the same response."

Well, that sounded like a genuine apology. "I can appreciate that you haven't had the easiest time. But please, Sam, I need your help. We all do."

"I know, you don't gotta tell me twice. I lost Lyssa years ago and I'm not about to let some assholes hurt her right when I found her again."

"Even if those assholes are your own kind?"

He snorted. "What have witches ever done for me?" He must have sensed

my shock at his statement because he kept going. “Look, I’m chill with the covens in this city who just kinda want to do their own thing and live their lives. But I’m not a part of any of them. When my entire clan was wiped out in an inter-coven war, none of them helped me. I was alone, just coming into my magic, and completely lost.”

His tone turned even more bitter and I had a feeling that I was hearing something a lot of people didn’t get to. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be a black, cursed orphan in America right now? I don’t know why I survived what killed the rest of my coven, and it took me two years to break it before I could move on.

“So yeah, I don’t care if these assholes are witches, I care that they’re assholes. And everyone’s life would be a lot better if there were less people like them and more people like Lyssa in the world.”

I couldn’t agree more. “Thank you, for explaining that. For what it’s worth, I’m glad that you’re on our side.”

“Not your side, Lyssa’s side,” he corrected. “And, for what it’s worth, I do think I have a functional enough moral compass to always be on the opposite side of people who are kidnapping and murdering innocent folks.”

“Good to know.” This was quite the heady conversation, so I took a deep breath to reset everything. “I’ll go talk to Mahlan about getting you another identity. Keep your eyes on your email.”

“Ew, time to be gainfully employed again.”

“Looks like it.”

I hung up, feeling quite a bit better about Sam, and headed toward Mahlan’s office. He was actually there for once, his honeymoon period with his mate seeming to slowly wane.

“Hey, I talked to Sam.”

“I heard,” Mahlan said with a nod. “And it got me to thinking as well.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I think we should follow Lyssa’s line back through several generations, visit her old pack, the places her parents lived, and visit the comatose brother.”

“Wait, we know where he is?”

“We always have. He’s been in an assisted living facility for over a decade. They tend to him multiple times a day and he hasn’t moved a muscle.”

“What’s the point in going then?” But something about that didn’t make

any sense. How could the brothers be a part of the grand scheme of missing shifters if one half of them was essentially brain-dead?

“Sam, actually. I think his magic might be of particular use for interacting with a comatose human.”

I let out a sigh. “You know he’s gonna *love* this plan, considering I just got off the phone with him,” I said, pouring all the sarcasm I could into the world.

“Oh, I am aware. And that’s why I’ll leave that to you.”

I withheld a groan. “You’re lucky I think you’re a brilliant alpha.”

“Yes, very lucky indeed.”

EMMALINE

It almost felt like things were getting back to normal as I dropped Lyssa off, both of our security details following close behind. I waved goodbye to my best friend as she trotted into Mahlan's place, then headed home, actually excited for my day to day chores.

Who knew that laundry, dusting, and cooking could be so thrilling? But after two weeks of staying at Savannah's as a guest and worrying about my future, it was nice to get back to something a little same ol' same ol'. So I set about while whistling, feeling more at peace than I had in weeks.

I had finished an entire load of laundry and had another in the wash when I heard Theo enter. I was still folding on the kitchen island so I figured I would greet him once I was done.

However, when I heard his footsteps in the kitchen entrance, my mind spat out a daydream-like scenario with him picking me up, carrying me up the stairs with the muscles I had seen so many times, and throwing me on the bed to ravage me.

I tried to clamp down on my pheromones as hard as I could. I didn't need Theo to think I was insanely horny over just his presence, or over the laundry. Both had some pretty embarrassing implications.

"Hey," he said in a simple greeting as he crossed to the fridge in my peripherals, grabbing one of the shakes I'd made that morning. It was a recipe my brother had taught me for times of stress. Combining fresh fruit, juice, wheatgrass, and prenatal vitamins made quite a yummy treat that had enough of the nutrients that we needed.

"Hey," I echoed, struggling to keep my voice steady. Was it hot in the

kitchen? Suddenly it felt *very* hot in the kitchen.

At that, he exited, and I heaved a sigh of relief, continuing folding. But that relief was short-lived when I heard him stop in the doorway as he exited with his drink. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw he was leaning on the wooden frame, his arms crossed in that inexplicably attractive pose that men seemed to naturally take.

“Do you need something?” I asked, potentially a little sharper than I should have, but I couldn’t help it. My body was screaming out for him, to throw myself into his arms, to taste, to *take*.

But my pride and my mental state weren’t having any of that. I wasn’t the type to just leap into bed with people. I needed time. I needed...I needed not to have my choice made for me. And while I knew Theo was in the same position as me, I was grieving a love that would never come to be. Meanwhile, if what he said about always liking me was true, he essentially had gotten the mating of his dreams.

Ugh, if I thought about it like that, I would start to resent him. I needed to clear my mind. But that was easier said than done when he was standing there, staring at me like he wanted to devour me.

And my inner wolf absolutely wanted to be devoured.

Or maybe she was the one who wanted to do the devouring. I could feel her desire bubbling through my chest and out into my arms, making my nails much sharper than was convenient for folding clothes.

I closed my eyes and tried to shut Theo out, but it was hard when he was like a wellspring of attraction, beckoning my wolf to him.

I lasted maybe a minute, wondering why I didn’t just tell him to fuck off, until he pushed off the doorframe and walked toward me. The silence was borderline painfully intense as he set his empty bottle beside me and his other hand rested on my hip.

That same lurid scenario played out in my head, but instead of that or any other salacious thing happening, he just gently kissed the top of my head.

When he spoke, his voice was low, but tender, in a way I’d only ever heard it once before. It was a tone that made me feel so *valued*, like I was hearing Theo’s deepest truths while everyone else only ever got surface-level information.

“I’ve always daydreamed about coming home to you, but the real thing is so much better than I ever could have imagined.”

Good Wolf-Lord-on-High! My breath caught in my throat and it was like

every process in my body came to a sputtering halt. He...he couldn't just *say* things like that.

And yet, he had said it, and I had most definitely heard it, and I swore my heart was growing in my chest at the same time I was drenching my panties with want, which was certainly an interesting combination of biological functions.

I turned so that we were face-to-face, and goodness, the expression in those intense eyes of his made my knees weak in a way I wasn't used to feeling. Even in all my time crushing on Kaleb, I'd never had such a visceral reaction to a man.

I told myself it was just the bonding chemicals, that it wasn't really me, but I knew that was a lie. I wasn't reacting to a chemical soup caused by a bite above my mating gland. I was reacting to being *respected*, cherished, and adored.

Years spent pining over Kaleb had left me with tiny kernels of attention, barely enough to sustain me and leaving me in a state of affection-starvation for far too long. And yet, Theo was right in front of me offering a feast of genuine appreciation. Of friendship. Of desire, and *love*.

It hit me right down to my soul, filling me with a type of affirmation I hadn't even known was possible, and the next thing I knew, I was kissing Theo.

And maybe I was crying too, but that was okay. I was so full of so many different emotions that I felt like I might explode. But if I did, I wanted it to be with *him*.

My arms wrapped around him as I clung to him, my moving lips saying everything my brain couldn't. And for what it was worth, Theo also embraced me, his strong arms encircling my middle and practically crushing me to him.

But I loved it. *Loved* it. Everything I had been denying myself for so long was flooding over me as I realized just how much I could have if I gave up the ghost of nothing I had with Kaleb and let myself move on.

We kissed for so long that I swore our hearts syncopated, thumping in a rapid rhythm against each other. One of my hands moved from around Theo's shoulders to run my fingers through his blond hair. How had I never known it was so *soft*?

I groaned, especially when Theo caught my lower lip between his teeth and pulled. I was so caught up in it, in him, and in everything rushing through

me, that I couldn't even think.

And then someone poured a bucket of cold water over me.

Well, that wasn't what actually happened, although it felt like it. In reality, Theo just pulled away, breathing hard and looking at me like I'd stabbed him.

"What?" I gasped, thoroughly confused and feeling anger rising at the emotional whiplash. I'd finally given in and he was blue-balling me?

"I can't do this," he murmured, sounding distraught.

"Did...did I do something wrong?"

"No, it's just—" He shook his head and took my hand in his, lovingly tracing it. "I love you, Emma. And almost losing you showed me I love you even more than I ever thought possible. Believe me when I say that I crave you. I longed for the moment when you'd happily mate with me. But if you're just doing this now to relieve frustration, or you feel like you have to, it'd break me. I'd rather you never touch me than feel like it's something you're being forced into."

Oh, Theo. Noble, loving, *sweet* Theo. I really didn't understand how everyone thought he was such an ice king, because to me, he was one of the kindest people I knew.

Gently, ever so gently, I raised my hand to cup his cheek, stroking the faint stubble along his jaw. "I can't say that I love you yet," I answered honestly. "You've got a lot more years on that front than I do. But I can say that I care for you immensely. No one is forcing me to do this, and I don't feel obligated. You make me feel...feel so *wanted* and *seen* in a way I never thought possible."

I stood on tiptoe so that our lips were barely a breath away from each other. "In this moment, I want you, Theo. *Me*, as in Emmaline. Not the mating bite, not my wolf. So kiss me, Theo, and show me how much I mean to you."

He drew in a shuddering gasp, and that was right when my world turned upside down again.

Or maybe it was just when Theo kissed me. Who knew, they kind of felt the same. It was like I'd unleashed a feral animal with how he grabbed me, kissing me for all he was worth.

But I went with it, moaning into his mouth as I held on for dear life. My blood was thundering in my veins and I could feel my teeth sharpening in my mouth, but that just seemed to entice Theo more.

The next thing I knew, I was being lifted. But before I could even wrap my legs around his waist, he deposited me on the edge of the kitchen island, knocking my folded laundry onto the floor. In any other situation, I would have been upset at my hard work being undone, but funnily enough, the thought of getting railed was a higher priority in my mind.

“I thought about doing this when you came over to help at my apartment,” he said, his voice barely more than a growl. It sent shivers all down my arms and I swore I felt a pulse between my legs. Oh yeah, I was absolutely primed and ready.

“Did you?” I gasped before his mouth attacked my neck. Licking, sucking, and biting. It was heavenly, and yet at the same time, the purest sin, making thought more than a little bit difficult.

“Oh yeah. Every time I brushed against you in my kitchen, every time I caught your scent. It was torture.”

“But in the best way?” I teased.

“In the best way,” he agreed before his mouth sealed over my mating mark.

Shit. I swore my soul left my body as endorphins rushed through me, blanking everything out. I faintly heard myself mewl as my hands gripped him, and the sound seemed to drive Theo even wilder, his hands scrabbling to free me from my pants.

Jeez, pants were stupid. Whoever invented them got a zero out of ten in my book.

When he finally got my annoyingly fashionable slacks off, his hand was on me in a moment, teasing my folds just over my underwear.

“These are soaked,” he commented, his shock barely coming through the visceral desire in his voice.

Fuck. When had anyone ever talked to me like that? *Looked* at me like that? Certainly not Kaleb.

Kaleb who? The thought echoed somewhere in the back of my mind, and I couldn’t agree more. Why had I been punishing myself by going after someone with no interest in me, when I had someone who wanted to worship me right at my side?

“Told you I wanted this,” I said, diverting to sassiness as I always did. What could I say? I had a quick tongue and quicker wit, even when I was thirsting so hard I thought my soul might invert.

“Such a good girl,” he purred before his fingers slid against me again and

shit, his words went right through me and I could feel my womanhood throb against his touch. “I can feel how bad you want it.”

“If you can feel it, why are you making me wait?” I challenged.

I swore Theo’s eyes flashed as he caught my lips in another kiss. “Patience is a virtue.”

“If I was worried about your virtue, I wouldn’t let you do this.”

He chuckled and the sound was like liquid sex pouring over me and my ears as I shivered. Thankfully, I didn’t have to divert my thoughts to trying to maintain banter, because then Theo finally moved my underwear to the side and slid his fingers directly across my slick folds.

“O-oh fuck!”

I’d never had a simple touch be so visceral, but of course nothing was ever simple with Theo. He spread my wetness all over, going between my entrance to that sensitive bundle of nerves at my apex. But he never quite touched it directly, leaving me squirming with impatience.

“Come on,” I begged, leaning forward and kissing at his neck. The moment my lips touched his neck, I felt him stiffen, and then his fingers finally plunged into me.

“Oh! *Oh!*”

He curled his fingers just so, his fingertips sliding against that spongy wall within me, and it was all I could do not to scream. I felt so keyed up, every single moment of pleasure building on top of each other into a cacophony of ecstasy.

God, it never felt as good with my own fingers, but maybe that was because I couldn’t get the right angle, or maybe it was because his were so long and thick. Either way, my wolf was demanding I grab his wrist and ride it out until we were boneless.

But Theo seemed to have other ideas, because right when I could feel myself heading toward my climax, he withdrew his hand.

“Hey!” I objected, like he’d just taken away my favorite toy. And for what it was worth, he kind of did.

“Don’t worry, kitten. I’ve got something better for you.”

His hand went to his zipper and *oh*, I was most definitely on board with that. Licking my lips, I watched as he pulled his length out, already straining for me, dripping slightly at the tip. It was physical proof that he wanted me, and that turned me on even more.

I felt his blunt head nudge my opening, spreading me open bit by bit. He

was trying to be careful, so careful, but me and my inner wolf were having none of it.

Once more, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, but this time I used the hold as leverage to lift myself up just enough to drop myself right onto his dick, filling me up in one fell swoop.

“Fuck!” Theo gasped, his fingers biting into my hips just the way I liked it.

And I couldn’t agree more. I was breathless with how he stretched me, filled me, made me feel so utterly hot, I could melt right there on the counter.

But it wasn’t enough. I wanted *more*.

“Come on, white wolf. Show me what you got.”

He looked up at me and I swore there was literal fire in his eyes. But I wanted to be burned by it. To be charred to ash and then scattered on the winds so a new Emma could be reborn.

“As you wish.”

And then he drove into me, pulling out then sliding back in with a punishing rhythm. But I took it, I took it, and demanded more, meeting his every thrust with movement from my own hips.

We really were two becoming one, our bodies, our souls connecting through desire. Through pleasure. I would never be able to look at him the same way again, and I sincerely hoped that he wouldn’t be able to regard me the same way, either.

No, I wasn’t magically in love, but I was...open, in a way that I wasn’t before. The anger was abating. The resentment was fading. Perhaps with just a little longer, I could fully release myself from my stupid, time-wasting crush on Kaleb, the loss of the future I’d planned, and everything else that had gone up in smoke.

But in the meantime, I was perfectly content with being dicked down good.

I was going to walk funny the next day, but I didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was Theo, and the way he was looking at me. I drank up everything he gave me and returned it in kind, the two of us pushing each other to higher and higher heights.

I was getting close, I could feel it bubbling under my skin. But I needed *more*. Desperately, I gripped his shirt, yanking it up over his head so I could get at his skin. It felt good under my nails, heated and full of life. I wanted to lick him all over, to memorize the taste of him and every change in texture

along his body. But considering that I was currently holding on for dear life as he pistoned into me, that would have to wait for another time.

Huh, we hadn't even finished our first time together and I was already thinking about the next. That was certainly progress.

"Don't stop, Theo, don't stop!"

"Wasn't planning on it," he shot back, voice practically feral. And then his teeth were in my neck again, biting right over my mating mark. My mind went white, my body tensing like a rubber band until suddenly everything snapped, and I came harder than I had in my entire life.

"Oh my God! *Oh my God!*"

"That's it, kitten. Come for me. Let me *feel* you."

It wasn't like I could stop. I swore my whole body spasmed as I endured the waves of pleasure washing over me, drowning out any other thought. By the time I started to come down, I could feel Theo losing his rhythm, his pants growing desperate.

"Ya gonna give it to me?" I panted, somehow mustering the ability to circle my hips one last time.

"*Fuck*, Emmaline!"

"I'll take that as a yes."

That seemed to do it for him, and a beat later, he was releasing within me, filling me with a primal sort of warmth that absolutely satisfied my inner wolf.

The two of us stayed there for several moments, locked together as mates. Breathless, and definitely a bit shaky, I took my time getting down from the kitchen island.

"Want to take a shower?" I asked, offering Theo my hand.

And he took it, his grin genuine. There was my good friend. It was nice to know I hadn't lost him with all the blurring lines around our relationship.

"Lead the way," he answered, voice so soft and sweet that it made my heart swell.

Things were going to be alright between us, I was pretty sure. As long as those witches didn't get a say.



I HUMMED to myself as I charred the steaks I was cooking, feeling loosey-

goosey and all sorts of *good*.

“You sure you don’t want me to do that?” Theo asked from where he was wiping down the kitchen island with industrial cleaner. It may have been a bit overboard, but considering a majority of shifters had incredibly developed senses of smell, I didn’t really want people to know I’d gotten my brains fucked out where they were eating. Rude, and all that.

“No, I’m enjoying myself,” I said, shooting him a smile. Yeah, things were a teeniest bit awkward between us, as they always were whenever two people hooked up for the first time, but I didn’t mind. I was happy what happened, happened, and I was looking forward to what the future brought.

Especially since I hoped it would bring the death of those witch-bitches who were attacking people.

“So, Mahlan and I have a plan. One that doesn’t involve you playing bait, so you might not want to hear about it.”

I rolled my eyes at Theo’s teasing. Others might think he was saying it straight, but I could hear that slight dip in his tone that told me he was joshing. “What’d the two of you cook up?”

“We’re going to track down the brothers that started this. Apparently, we’ve always had the information of where the comatose one is. Just no one ever visited him because he’s basically deader than a doornail, brain-wise.”

“What if he’s not and the people at the home are either covering for him or tricked?”

“I would think that was more likely than anything else if the council didn’t have someone there to monitor things. They would sense if there was any magical hokey pokey going on.”

“Huh, okay. So it’s just you and Mahlan?”

“And Samson.”

I nodded. “So you’re more comfortable on the trusting him front then?”

“Yes. I had a long conversation with him, and I feel like I understand him a bit more. Besides, if he wanted to sell us out, he knows where all of our moonstones are. The witches would already have them if he wanted to betray us.”

“I’m glad the two of you are on the same page. Lyssa adores him and he’s proven to be a good ally so far.”

I took the steaks off the oven and set them aside to rest for ten minutes. Crossing back to the fridge, I took out my jar of caramelized onions and scooped some into the hot pan before slamming the lid over it. I’d long since

learned that I didn't have the patience to caramelize onions every time I wanted a deluxe burger or perfectly charred steak. So instead I did them in huge batches and put them in jars in my fridge. That way, they took maybe five minutes to heat up and I could have a full meal of delicious, umami goodness.

"I hope you're hungry," I said as I stirred my mashed potatoes one last time. I had cheated and used an instant mix, but hey, I was a woman on the go and didn't always have time to make things from scratch.

"You could say that I've worked up a bit of an appetite," he said behind me.

I just turned and waggled my eyebrows at him. "Are you talking about the food I've made or my ass?"

"*Porque no los dos?*" he shot back with a wink.

I cackled and started loading up our individual plates. "Well, let's handle one of those now and see if the food coma will allow for any extracurricular activities."

"Yes, ma'am!" Theo finished cleaning up the kitchen island and fetched our drinks from the fridge. I set the plates down in our spots, right next to each other, and settled in for a comfortable meal.

"So, about this trip to see coma guy," I started cautiously between bites of deliciously blue-rare steak. I knew that wasn't for everyone, but shifters did tend to like their meat on the rare side. Or completely raw, considering the elk Theo, Jacobian, and I had taken down on the last run.

"Yes?" Theo said, equally cautious.

"I want to come with you."

He froze with his fork halfway up to his mouth, mashed potatoes and onions sliding from it. "I...I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Come on," I said, hoping it wouldn't dissolve into a fight. Not after the great moment we'd just had. "If I wasn't your mate, would you let me?"

He didn't even hesitate on his answer. "No, probably not."

"What?! Why?"

"You underestimate how I've felt about you for years. Why do you think I've never brought a date to family dinners or any events like everyone else?"

Oh...he had a point there, didn't he? "I dunno, I just thought you were like, dedicated to your work."

"I am," he answered primly, finally taking that bite. "But that's because if I was ever going to mate, it was going to be you." He looked at me with that

insanely open expression of his, the one that made my toes curl in my shoes. “It was always you.”

I swallowed hard and tried to recover from the moment. Somehow, I managed a laugh. “Huh, you really played the long game, didn’t you?”

He nodded and I felt all the care he had for me push through our bond, leaving me breathless. I really, really was lucky to have a mate like Theo.

It was just—as I’d thought about a million and one times before—a shame about the circumstances.

“I won’t tell you no, but I ask that you don’t come with us,” Theo said finally.

I heaved a breath. This was that compromise thing that Lyssa was talking about. “I...I need to think a moment. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow, sometime just after noon.”

I blinked in shock at that. “Wait, you’re leaving tomorrow!?”

“Yeah, we thought it was best to get on this as quickly as we could so the witches and whoever else couldn’t catch wind of it. We’ll be gone for one night, potentially two.”

I thought for a long, long moment. I wanted to go, I really did, but that meant leaving Lyssa alone in the store. And honestly, if I was in her position, I would be worried sick.

Finally, I let out a sigh. “Jeez, I’m really slacking on this hiring new people thing. I should probably hang back and handle all that.”

Theo smiled at me, and the gratitude in his expression was almost worth having to stay behind and run a boutique. “Thank you, Emma. I really do appreciate it.”

“Hey, I’m doing it for the sake of my shop, not because I’m scared.”

“I know,” he said, leaning over and kissing my cheek. “You’re the bravest woman I know.”

“Well, when you’re right, you’re right.”

We shared a laugh and finished my dinner. I just hoped that I wouldn’t come to regret my compromise.



I FELT strange going in to work the next morning. Somehow, in less than a week, I’d gotten used to Theo being around the house when I woke up. The

thought that he wouldn't be there the next day, and potentially not the day after that, either, made me a bit unsettled.

It didn't help when I arrived at work to see double the usual security there, sticking out like sore thumbs. Maybe to the everyday onlooker they didn't, but I could spot them in less than a moment.

Nevertheless, a promise was a promise, so I headed inside. Lyssa arrived a moment later, her face flushed and her hair mussed.

"Sorry I'm late! I just—"

"Had a quickie before Mahlan ducked town?"

She flushed but nodded her head anyway. "Yeah, pretty much."

"I'm glad you had fun," I said, ruffling her hair up even more as I passed her. "You're gonna need it today."

"Why, did something happen?"

"No, something's *gonna* happen. Today we're going to do the final hiring for this place."

"Whoa, really?"

I nodded. "Yep. Enough procrastinating. Let's get this over with so we can finally catch up and get them onboarded before we combine both sides."

"Aye aye, captain!"

The morning was a flurry of activity after that, with both of us making sure we'd made the best decision for the shop. And yet, I was still nervous as I made the final calls, inviting Lindsey, Kailey, and Holly to work with us provided they passed a background check.

And by background check, I mostly meant a thorough magical screening that they would have no idea about when Sam greeted them at the door. Maybe it was paranoia, maybe it was just being cautious.

The rest of the day rushed by pretty quickly, and it wasn't until nearly closing that I remembered exactly what was going on. Theo was out on his fact-finding mission, and I was about to go to my house all alone. Normally, that wasn't something that bothered me, but normally, I didn't have a group of witches trying to capture/brainwash/kill me in order to get to my best friend and sister-in-wolf.

"You okay?" Lyssa asked for what probably was the fiftieth time in the past month, but I didn't mind. I knew I looked strange, standing in the doorway of my office, looking toward the front door while I tried to think.

"Yeah, just uh...I dunno. Kind of don't want to go back to my empty house."

Lyssa let out such a relieved sigh that I had to give her a double take. “Sorry, it’s just I was thinking the same thing. With Mahlan out, I don’t really wanna go back to his apartment and be all on my lonesome.”

Whew, we really were two peas in a pod. “Wanna go grab dinner then? At someplace with really slow service? And drinks!” Most *definitely* drinks. Goodness knows my nerves needed it.

“God yes, that sounds amazing.”

“It’s a plan then!” That cheered my mood considerably.

I’d lived on my own for so long that it wasn’t entirely unusual for me to go home and enjoy my empty house. It was relaxing not having to answer to anybody, and to be as gross as I wanted. But now, after only a small bit of time living with Theo, I’d kind of become used to the company.

I liked the way he enjoyed the food I cooked. I loved that he loaded and unloaded the dishwasher and did the vacuuming. Maybe I was a bit of a shifter stereotype, but I *hated* vacuuming. The sound always made me want to grit my teeth and shed my human form so I could run far, far away.

I liked that I had someone to talk to while I ate. Someone to watch cheesy reruns or binge entire shows with. He didn’t seem to care if it was reruns of *Project Runway* or a full season of *Peaky Blinders*. Whenever I asked what he wanted to watch, he would just reply that he liked the shows I picked.

Crazy. Absolutely crazy. I was getting attached, and as much as I tried to tell myself it was just happy bonding chemicals, I knew it was more than that. Theo had always been my friend, but he was kind of becoming my *best* friend, tied right up there with Lyssa.

Except I didn’t have a singular drop of sexual attraction for Lyssa while I absolutely wanted to climb Theo like the tree he was.

“Hey, we should invite Hannah and Savannah!” Lyssa said, pulling me out of thinking about exactly how I wanted to grate my face across Theo’s abs and whether I would start with tongue or end with it.

“Oh yeah, totally! I’ll text Savvy if you text Han.”

“Okies dokies.”

I went about doing just that, expecting our Alma to take a bit to answer, but she replied pretty quickly.

I can do that in about two hours?

Hey, the less time spent alone, the better. I happily took the offer.

Sure! That works for me.

Great! See you then!

Sliding my phone back into my pocket, I looked to Lyssa. “Savvy said she could make it in two hours. Wanna put in a little overtime if that works for Hannah?”

“Yeah, lemme add that to my message to her.”

Hannah took a bit longer to answer, which wasn’t a surprise considering how hard she worked. I didn’t know her overly well, but I did know that she was very dedicated to her work. Especially since she was in a rather delicate position with the whole corporate espionage thing.

But twenty or so minutes later, Hannah answered that she was in and to text her the address of wherever we were going. And just like that, we’d inadvertently made a girls’ night out. Unsurprisingly, it had been a long time since I’d had one, and usually it was just me and a few girls I knew from college.

Because before, there had been no Lyssa, no Savvy, and Hannah had been so busy with college that she never had the time. Even family dinners were hard for her to make. And Addison wasn’t really one for family gatherings, either. She wasn’t standoffish, but the woman didn’t seem to be into big social events. Which was one of the reasons she made such a good mole.

Huh, I’d never thought about how much my friend group had grown. It was nice to be close with a handful of female wolves. Don’t get me wrong—humans were just fine, I wasn’t xenophobic like some folks—but there was something special about sharing all the troubles and tribulations that came with being a shifter who also had a period.

Ugh. Periods.

“Well, now that that’s all settled,” I said, as it was indeed settled, “wanna take some more photos for the website?”

“Oh, yeah! That sounds fun!” Lyssa grinned broadly. “I call the sparkly pink jumpsuit!”

“No fair!” I objected. “I’m the owner of the shop!”

But Lyssa just batted her eyes at me, the brat that she was. “Yeah, but you love me.”

“I suppose I do. Alright, let’s go!”

I didn’t have my camera with me, so that meant we were pretty much taking selfies and cell phone pics of each other, but that was fine. I had an “as seen in real life” section on my website, and ever since I’d started regularly updating that section, sales had significantly jumped. People liked to see items in more natural settings along with the professional photoshoots.

It was easy for the time to flow quickly while we worked together, and I didn't even pay attention to the clock until a strange expression crossed Lyssa's face.

"Hey, something bothering you?" I asked, eyeing her in my peripheral vision.

"Oh, no, not really. Just had a funny thought, that's all."

"Care to share with the class?"

"It's just crazy to think that Theo and Mahlan could be meeting my extended family. If I even have extended family." Lyssa paused, looking up at the ceiling like it contained all the answers she was looking for. "I thought my family abandoned me because I was too much. But...what if I've had family all along? Family that wanted me. Mourned me."

Her smile turned tremulous as her gaze flicked to me, her eyes ever so slightly watery. "I don't know what to think about all of this. I...I probably should be happy. But mostly..." She took a shuddering breath. "But mostly I think I'm just scared."

"Oh, my sweet little bean," I said, throwing my arms open and hugging her with all I had. Sometimes it was easy to forget how young she was. "It's okay to be scared. None of us know exactly what we're gonna find, or how they're gonna react to finding out you survived and were kidnapped. But I'm certain that once they meet you, they'll truly know how much they were robbed of an amazing pack member."

"They won't fight to have me back, will they? I want to get to know my family, but I'm with Mahlan and you guys. I don't want to leave."

"Honey, you don't gotta worry about that at all! Sure, they might want to hijack you for some holidays, but a mating bond is a mating bond is a mating bond is a mating bond. That's a sacred thing that they won't mess with unless you ask them to."

"Do people do that?"

"Occasionally. Sometimes a mate will become abusive, or perhaps fall into addiction. While mating is for life, there is always the freedom to leave if it's unhealthy."

"Well, that's good then." Lyssa sniffed a bit. "That there are ways out if anyone gets into a bad spot."

"Of course. We wolf shifters are loyal, but the majority of us want what's healthiest for our pack members. And sometimes that means kicking an alcoholic husband to the curb, or helping a shifter break his bond with his

wife who likes to throw things at him when she's angry because she knows he'll heal."

"That's really good to know." Lyssa pulled away slightly, taking a deep breath. "I've still got so much to learn."

"Yeah, but you've got all of us. We'll be right beside you no matter how many witches, bitches, or trafficking assholes try to get in the way."

"I'm glad I don't have to worry about some sort of custody battle between y'all. I mean, I wanna meet them if they wanna meet me, but I've built a family here with you. I've lost so much of my family, I don't want to give up any more."

I couldn't help it, I had to hug her again. And maybe I squeezed her hard enough to break a human's rib, but she was a shifter now so I didn't have to worry. So I just hugged her until I felt like we hugged enough for the moment, which turned out to be about five minutes. I probably could have done ten, but my alarm went off reminding me that it was almost time to go.

"Okay, one last check-in before we rush off," Lyssa said, composing herself. Not that she needed to compose herself; she was handling everything remarkably well. "Are you okay? What's the situation with you?"

"I...feel a bit left out I think. I wish I was with Theo. I could just call my parents and they'd probably let me crash there until he comes back, but I don't want to put them in danger." I paused, thinking about it in a way I hadn't really slowed down enough to do since everything happened. "I think I'm ashamed, in a way."

"Ashamed?" Lyssa echoed.

"Yeah. I just didn't plan any of this, and I was always so proud of my big ol' *plan*. And they've been as supportive as they can, all things considered, but I've mostly been, I dunno...avoiding them, I guess."

"Hey, I get it. You're in a complicated situation right now that takes a lot of navigating and processing. If you need a month or two until you're ready to deep dive with them, that's okay."

"Thanks. I needed to hear that." I took a deep breath, wiping my suddenly sweaty palms on my thighs. "It's just intimidating, you know, how are we all supposed to progress from here?"

"I dunno. I wish there was an easy explanation. But you had a thing for Kaleb, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did, but I realize now that it was going nowhere. When his attention swung to me, it felt good, but that happened less often than a leap

year. Now that I've had some time to think about it, I almost wonder if I chose him because he was safe."

"Safe, huh?"

"Yeah, like if subconsciously I knew he'd always be too busy or distant to ever commit to something, so that way I could have a crush but also focus completely on my business."

"Well, I suppose I've heard more far-fetched things," Lyssa said with a nod. "Makes sense to me."

"It does?"

"Sure. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm not even twenty yet, but from what I've observed, life is complicated and our minds try their hardest to cushion us from all the bad bits. Sometimes those coping mechanisms aren't the best, but hey, at least it's trying to protect us."

I chuckled at that. "Well, you certainly have a point there."

"That's what I do. But what *we* need to do is get going or we're gonna be late."

"Oh shoot, you're right! Let's lock up and head out!"

It was a quick drive to the bistro we'd picked out, and sure enough, Savvy and Hannah were waiting for us. It was kind of weird to see our Alma step out of a car, but I supposed she had to get herself around somehow. Usually I just assumed she always had her drivers chauffeur her around, but that probably wasn't very practical.

"Hey there!" Savannah said, grinning like it was Christmas itself. Goodness, we really needed to invite her to more things. "I've been wanting to go here for ages but I never had anyone to go with!"

Yeah, we *definitely* needed to invite her out more.

"Likewise over here," Hannah said, and like it was completely normal, she pulled her *hair right off her head*.

"Oh my God!" Lyssa cried before we both realized it was a wig, revealing bright green hair underneath.

"Relax, it's temporary dye that'll be out in a week. I just wanted something to help me de-stress considering how intense this subterfuge position is." Hannah gave us a wink that was downright salacious. How was the girl single? She had that old-school Hollywood type of beauty with plenty of curves and a soft tummy that was perfect for resting a head on. "A girl's gotta have some tricks up her sleeve."

"Girl, I cannot believe you just did that!" I crowed, clapping her shoulder.

“I totally thought you just scalped yourself!”

“Hah! If Jacobian doesn’t get off my back, I just might.”

We all cackled like a bunch of harpies and went in, where we were seated without much fuss. I supposed it helped that it was a weekday, so the dinner rush wasn’t that bad. It was so nice to just have a girls night, even if it was quite impromptu.

“So, how’s the store going?” Hannah asked as we sat. “I’m so sorry that I’m behind on everything, but Jacobian has been riding me nonstop.”

We all paused at her choice of words, staring at her. It took her a solid couple of seconds to get why, and once the realization crossed her face, we all broke into hysterics. Shit, we were being really rowdy, but I was disinclined to shush any of us. I would just have to give the waitress a really big tip.

“The contractors are almost done, so I’m definitely looking forward to being able to merge both of the storefronts.”

“Whoa, you’re combining both?” Hannah blurted, looking genuinely impressed. “Didn’t you just finish setting up the one you have now?”

“Well, I set it up knowing that I would need to combine with my old space once it was fixed up, so I won’t have to do much rearranging. I’ll probably have to shut down for a few days when they knock down the wall between the two in the floor area, though.”

I sighed at that, not wanting to lose even more time being open when I’d missed so much already. Maybe I could kidnap Lyssa to my place and just do an entire marathon day of shooting. We’d be exhausted after, but it might be kind of fun, and definitely productive.

“I’ve always admired your business skill and planning,” Savvy remarked, sipping at the tea she’d ordered. “I certainly don’t have that talent.”

“That may be,” I quipped, “but your blood can help heal people and I can’t do anything like that.”

“Hah! Fair enough. And you better not start because then I’ll be out of a job.”

“We wouldn’t want that.”

“You’re welcome to spontaneously develop skills and take over my job whenever you want,” Hannah cut in, taking a long swig of the wine she’d ordered.

“Jeez, is it that bad?” Lyssa asked, wide-eyed.

“It is and isn’t. It’s pretty obvious to me that this whole company is a

front, but I'm still there in the trenches trying to figure out how and if they're connected to our moonstones."

"But they have to be, right?" That was Lyssa again, gripping her soda with white knuckles. She was so good at rolling with the punches that I had to be somewhat on alert to see her little signs. Maybe I should have Mahlan talk to her more about the business. "Isn't that the whole reason why this started?"

"We got a really reliable tip-off that they were involved," Hannah answered. "Or at least, that's what I was told. And I'm supposed to figure out why, how, and find some connections about who they're working with. But it doesn't seem to be going anywhere."

"And get this, I've been asked out three different times and gone on three different dates with these dudes to see if I can suss anything out, and I swear to Werewolf-Jesus on High, they've been the dullest dates of my *life*. And with every date, Jacobian gets even more unbearable. Like, dude, I can't help it each of these guys are worthless on the intel front!"

I shook my head. "Sounds like you need another drink."

"You bet your ass I do. If we don't leave here with the server judging me, then I've held back too much."

I laughed, shaking my own head. Normally, I didn't encourage overindulgence, but as shifters, our accelerated metabolism helped us process alcohol about five to ten times faster than a human. "She's gonna cut you off."

"That's a problem for future Hannah to care about. I never liked her much anyway."

That actually got a laugh out of all of us.

"Why didn't I know you were so funny?" I asked.

"Probably because I had to be such a hard ass to get through school and into Jacobian's intern program. Like, it's no secret that the company has incredibly high standards, but I was determined to get in."

Savannah cleared her throat. "Well, I for one am glad you got in."

"Me too, despite my bitching. But hey, who wants a sampler? I'm feeling like stuffing myself silly on a broad variety of foods."

"Sounds good to me!" I said along with a chorus of affirmative noises from the others.

Eventually, our server returned and we ordered a truly absurd amount of food. The poor waitress had such a concerned look on her face as the four of

us relatively small women asked for three different appetizers—including a sampler, naturally—and two entrees each as well as several more drinks.

But it was nice to be excessive, and it wasn't like any of us were hard up for money. While there were plenty of packs across America that were struggling with modernization and being financially literate, our pack did not have those same issues. Thankfully the Silent Ridge pack had always been good at adapting. Even when our alpha was killed and our moonstones were stolen.

Or we were forcibly mated. An increasingly common circumstance.

From there, the conversation drifted to Savvy's life since I'd last stayed with her, then the food, and then a bunch of other things that were entirely fun and nothing about witches or moonstones or whoever was trying to pick off shifters. It was fulfilling in a way I never realized it would be, making me appreciate my fellow packmates even more. When we eventually wound down, I found myself less dreading the solitude of my house and more longing for my beautiful, fluffy, and warm bed. And hopefully when I woke up, Theo would be there to greet me.

THEO

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Mahlan said as we strode into an empty bar with the alpha of Lyssa’s pack. Well, relatively empty. There were maybe ten patrons total and it didn’t take a shifter’s nose to guess that they were all pack members.

“I’m sorry I didn’t have much firsthand information. I’m still catching up after the last alpha died. Never dreamed that I’d end up in a leadership position when I married into this pack.” The newer alpha, Landon, chuckled slightly. “But I try to do my best by her.”

I opened my mouth to ask more questions. Although we’d already been talking for an hour before we’d walked together to the bar, I was still desperate for more information. But I didn’t get so much as a syllable out before the alpha’s phone rang.

“Whoops, sorry, this is my beta. Need to take this.”

With that, Landon stepped out of the bar, leaving Mahlan, Parker, Jacobian, Kaleb, and me. Oh, and Sam, I supposed he was important, too. Kind of. We ordered some drinks while we waited for Landon to return and gathered around one end of the bar.

“I know I’m not a wolfy like the rest of you,” Sam said, taking a sip of his beer. Was it bad that I had assumed he’d have some fruity, overwrought drink? Probably. “But isn’t this pack kinda, ya know, *small*?”

I nodded, relieved that he had noticed it, too. “According to the file Landon gave me, they only have about fifty registered members and no pups at all.”

Parker let out a whistle. “Not a single little one? That’s really not good.”

“When did you have time to read that?” Mahlan asked curiously, raising his eyebrow at me. “He gave that to us maybe twenty minutes ago.”

“I read it on our walk over here.”

“Oooh, love a man who can multitask,” Sam said, sending me a wink that was less flirting and more teasing. Was he trying to be friends? I supposed I could roll with that.

“I’ve always been a good multitasker,” Parker remarked before taking a gulp of his own beer.

“What was that?”

“Huh? Nothing, I didn’t say anything,” Parker sputtered.

Surprisingly, it was Kaleb who spoke next. Not that the guy was mute, but he was definitely the quietest of our inner circle. “Parker has always been an excellent multitasker and plant dad. You two should talk about it.” He then sort of nudged his friend toward the green witch before excusing himself to the bathroom.

“Anyway,” I continued once that very subtle drama was over with, “while it’s common for packs to lose members due to marriages into other packs, it’s really, really unlikely they went from over three hundred members to barely enough for a track and field team.”

“Ew, sports.”

“Thank you for your input, Sam. But what I’m getting at here is that Lyssa’s case isn’t likely to be the only thing to shake things up around here.”

I knew we were surrounded by shifters, so I didn’t bother to keep my voice down. Even whispering, they would be able to hear me, and it would only come across like I had something to hide.

“Huh,” was Mahlan’s only reply before Landon returned.

“Sorry about that,” he said, an amiable grin on his features. “Important stuff. You know how it is, Alpha Reese.”

Mahlan nodded, but I could tell his tone was measured as he spoke. “Landon”—Huh, no honorific. That was significant—“have there been cases of stolen pack members other than Lyssa and her family?”

The pack’s new alpha paused for a moment, then sighed and took a seat. “I wasn’t there for it, but yeah. A while back, there were. Why? Is this about more than that girl who was kidnapped about thirteen years ago-ish?”

“You could say that,” I answered. “There’s been a rash of shifters disappearing in our parts. And we caught a combative witch who was a part of the thefts of our moonstones, who confessed that it was a pair of brothers

who were behind a lot of this.”

“Brothers, huh?” he heaved another sigh. “Yeah, that lines up with rumors and ghost stories I’ve heard.”

“Oh?” Mahlan pressed. I admired his neutral response. I felt like I was about to leap out of my skin with curiosity.

“Yeah. Like I said, I wasn’t a part of the pack then, but ya hear things as an alpha, ya know? These brothers rolled into town, killed your mate’s parents, and rolled out with her in tow. For a while, people thought it was a random tragedy, but then...*things* started to happen.”

“Things?” I echoed, taking Mahlan’s approach. His posture was still, taut even. I was sure that him hearing about his mate’s family being brutally murdered was not easy for him. He was such a protective soul.

“Don’t get me wrong, I know that we shifters tend to be suspicious types, but this is something different. People started to leave. Sure, some went on to other packs, but most just...disappeared. And the more that disappeared, the more rumors there were that the pack was cursed. And once that became a sort of common knowledge, well, you can guess how that went.”

“But there weren’t any other bodies that showed up?”

“No, just, uh...what was her name?”

“Lyssa.”

“Right, just Lyssa’s parents.”

“Hmm...” Mahlan murmured. “And are there any of Lyssa’s kin left that we can speak to?”

“Actually, yeah. That’s what my beta was calling about actually. Her grandparents are still kicking, I believe.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah, actually. I can’t say how they’ll receive you, though. From what I’ve been told, they don’t exactly enjoy talking about how they lost their kids. They had plenty of that right after it happened. Especially since the murders were grisly enough to spread to the human police.”

I let out a low whistle. While it wasn’t completely unheard of for police to occasionally get dragged into shifter affairs, we did our best to avoid that. That was half the reason we and a few other packs had men on the inside of our city’s police department.

“Sounds like a mess.”

“It really was. I mean, if I heard about it after becoming their alpha about a decade later, then you know that it left an impression on the pack.”

“If you don't mind me asking,” I cut in, “why did her grandparents stick around when so many others left? I figure that they would be the first ones to forge a new crossroads with a new pack.” I knew I probably shouldn't be so skeptical, but we were in unprecedented times after all.

“I can't speak for certain to their reasoning, but if I had to guess, I would say they were probably holding on to the hope that one day, maybe they'd have their granddaughter back. After all, her body was never found.”

“And now we're bringing her right to their doorstep,” Kaleb said with a hushed sort of reverence to his voice. The guy didn't speak a lot, but his voice was packed with emotion.

For a moment, I was surprised, but then I remembered his mother had gone missing when Kaleb was very young. No one had known what had happened to her for a solid week before her body was found along with her goodbye note.

Our entire friend group had been there for him in the difficult months following. Unfortunately, while our shifter nature allowed for enhanced healing, it couldn't affect mental illness with the same sort of miraculousness. That was probably right about when Kaleb stopped talking so much, Parker becoming enough of a voice box for both of them.

“Wait, she's with you?”

“I think he means metaphorically,” Parker interjected from where he was still sitting with Sam. “Like, we could get her literally, but she's sort of somewhere safe now.”

“That's good, if half of what you're telling me is true,” Landon said. “Although I do really hope that y'all are exaggerating the situation.”

“I wish we were,” Mahlan said with plenty of wistfulness. “That would be quite the relief.”

“I'd imagine. But yeah, I'll give you the grandparents' info, but don't be shocked if they don't want to talk to you and only want their grandkid.”

“Good to know.”

I was ready to launch myself out the window and literally roll there, but apparently Mahlan wanted to be a real Nancy Drew because he kept on asking questions.

“So, these disappearances, was there anything the victims had in common?”

“I wouldn't know about that. Like I said—”

“You weren't here at the time. Yes, we know.”

I felt like I was vibrating in my own skin, my impatience fueled by two different things. The first being the sense that we were *so close* to discovering something that would crack our mystery right open. The second being wondering how Emma was. If she was safe. What she was doing and...and if she missed me.

It was stupid, I knew that. I hadn't even been gone more than twenty-four hours—how could I miss her? And yet, I did. Somehow, in barely any time together, I'd grown used to the cup of coffee she gave me every morning. And the soft smile she'd give me whenever she thought I was being silly in her eyes. Already, I was missing the dinners she would make, or the tantalizing scents that would drift out of her shower whenever she washed the stress of her day off.

Huh. I wasn't sure if I liked that or not. I'd always been a little gone on Emma, and by gone, I meant hopelessly in love with her, but this seemed like something else entirely.

It was *domestic*.

That was a word I never would have used to describe myself, but maybe it wasn't so bad. Maybe it was a way I could be comfortable with describing myself.

"What about your moonstone?" Mahlan asked.

What? Oh, right. We were in the middle of a fact-finding trip. I needed to get my head in the game.

"What about what?" Landon repeated.

"Your moonstone. Surely I don't have to explain what that is to you."

"I know you city shifters are all high-ranking and that, but I could do without the condescension," Landon replied tritely. "I was attempting humor. But to answer your question, we ain't had a moonstone since before I married into this place. It's another reason people left. You know how it is; without that rock to swear on, people just don't feel as protected by their pack or obligated to help it out."

"I understand that exactly," Mahlan said. "The same happened right when I was taking over as alpha."

"What did you do?"

"We took a blood oath instead," I answered. "Quite effective in a pinch."

"A blood oath, huh?"

Landon looked rightly curious, but before any of us could say anything, Sam popped off his stool.

“Hey, so, um, what if I had your moonstone?”

Landon’s face went through an interesting procession of emotions. From irritation, to surprise, to suspicion, to shock. It was funnier than it should have been, but I swallowed my mirth down as best I could. Landon was a friendly guy, and seemed pretty set on helping us, and I didn’t want to piss him off any more than we had to. Last thing we needed was for him to ice us out.

“You what now?”

“I uh, may or may not have two moonstones that clearly belonged to a pack but we haven’t been able to find out who.”

“You brought those here?” Mahlan asked. “I did not give you permission for that. It’s not safe to just go traipsing around with those!”

“First of all, I do not *traipse*,” Sam shot right back. “I sashay. And secondly, I don’t just take these beauties to the mall and get my rocks off—hah, pun fully intended.”

Maybe we weren't friends. Maybe I most definitely still wanted to strangle him.

“But I brought them because I thought it might actually be useful. And here we are, with them being useful. I know I shouldn’t say I told you so, but I totally told you so.”

At least he didn’t stick out his tongue as he grabbed them from his messenger bag. A sort of hush fell over us as we watched Landon approach him, holding a hand over each.

Could it be? Was Lyssa’s pack the owners of the last stone? That seemed so significant in a way that I couldn’t quite say how.

But after a few minutes passed, the man let out a melancholy sort of sigh. “I’m not feeling any allegiance to either of these.”

“Really?” Sam said, sounding more put out than I expected him to be.

“Not a drop.”

“But that doesn’t mean that it’s not yours, though,” Kaleb said, a real chatterbox lately.

“Yeah, I know. When evil is done upon a moonstone, it can possibly turn itself away from its pack to try to save them. So our stone could have done the same. By abandoning us, it couldn’t be used to track us down or hurt the members who swore fealty to it.”

“I didn’t know that could happen,” Mahlan mumbled, rubbing his chin. “How did you, Kaleb?”

“Read it once. Don’t remember where.”

“Huh.”

Sam put the stones back into his bag before chipping in his opinion. “But it makes sense, though. There’s some complicated magic in these, magic way older than anything I’ve ever studied, so I would totally believe there was some sort of...uh, I dunno, *awareness* to it whose whole purpose is to protect the members devoted to it.”

He paused for another moment and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“Sam, what aren’t you telling us?”

He shot me a look. “You’re learning way too much about me without taking me to dinner.”

“Could you be serious for once?”

“I’m always serious when it comes to getting a richy-rich bags to buy me food.”

“*Sam.*”

“Fiiiiine.” Despite his acquiescence, he still hesitated. “Okay, so maybe the pack ties in these stones were stronger before Savannah and I began using them to heal some hurt shifters, and help seal the bond between Mahlan and Lyssa.”

To his credit, Landon seemed to take that fairly well, only one of his eyebrows raising. “What happened there?”

“It was a complicated situation, but Lyssa and I are fated mates.”

Naturally, Sam needed to add his two cents. For being so broke, he seemed to do that a lot. “And by complicated, he means betrayal, witches, curses, and Lyssa’s inner wolf being magically trapped within her. You know, a usual Tuesday night.”

“You’re fated mates?” Landon said, gaze locked onto Mahlan.

“Yes, we believe so.”

“Why didn’t you mention it earlier?”

“I did.”

“No, you said you were *mates*, not *fated* mates. That’s a significant difference.”

But why? I didn’t see how it was relevant to our situation.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to withhold important information. I didn’t know it would affect the situation.” At least Mahlan knew how to roll with the punches. Some alphas were so hotheaded that they ended up bringing

misery on their pack.

“Yeah, I get that. But it does change things. Given this new information, I’m going to call the grandparents and summon them here. That way, they will be disinclined to refuse.”

Wait, did that just make our situation better? It was certainly unpredicted.

“While I’m not unappreciative, I’m not sure why you’re doing that.”

“Because fated mates are not something to trifle with. And the fact that a group of witches and a pair of vengeful brothers want her makes me all the more suspicious of the coincidence. The sooner you get to the bottom of this, well, maybe the sooner our pack can heal itself.”

“Well, it is appreciated, thank you. Your help will not be forgotten by our pack.”

Landon gave a nod before stepping out to make some calls. The casual merriment from before was gone, leaving the entire bar feeling somewhat tense. By the time Landon returned, it seemed like every person was staring at the door, waiting for whatever he said.

“The grandparents and one aunt are on their way.”

Wow. It was actually happening.

When I’d first met Lyssa, I’d been happy for Mahlan, who hadn’t had a single mating interest since college, but I’d also been suspicious of her. The fact that she didn’t know so much about shifter culture had been alarming, but even after I’d learned of her history, I couldn’t help but feel like it was a bit *too* convenient.

However, in the months since, I’d discovered what a loyal and impressive woman she was. She loved Mahlan fiercely and feared almost nothing. She was kind and sweet, plus Emma liked her.

So naturally, with her turning out to be such an excellent mate to Mahlan, I’d become invested in her finding the answers to where she came from and what happened to her. It didn’t hurt that the disappearances plaguing shifters in our city seemed intricately tied to her origins.

The idea that we were about to talk to people who could possibly unravel everything, well...*whew*, it was intense.

It seemed like a few eons passed before they finally arrived, two old, wrinkled shifters and a middle-aged one. But as I stared at them, it was easy to pick out the features they all shared. Lyssa definitely had her grandfather’s eyes, but her grandmother’s frame. She and her aunt shared a nose, that was for certain, and their hair was quite similar.

Yeah, without a doubt, these shifters were Lyssa's family.

"You have our granddaughter?" the elderly woman said the moment she stepped into the door. "Is it true? She's alive?"

"Alive and well," Mahlan answered, his voice much sweeter and softer than it normally was.

The amount of emotion on the woman's face made my own heart squeeze in my chest. Goodness, the amount of pain and loss they must have experienced in the last fourteen years or so...

"How can we trust you? We don't know you from Adam and I don't see her here!" That was the aunt, who was eying us with plenty of suspicion. Not that I could blame her. After so many years and, no doubt, so many false hopes, it was fair for her to not just trust any Tom, Dick, or Harry that rolled through.

"We're keeping her safe at home as long as there's a threat to her safety," Mahlan replied again, as kind as ever. "But I assure you, she is happy and flourishing."

"Danger? Our granddaughter is in danger? What's wrong? Is it the same people who took her?" And that was the grandfather, who was looking very alarmed. Maybe we could work on how we presented news to family who had just learned their dead granddaughter was actually alive and kicking.

"We believe it might be," I answered, pulling up a couple of chairs so that the older couple could sit. They were going through enough without having to worry about their legs going out from under them.

"We have no reason to trust you," the aunt snapped, clearly still quite unconvinced.

"Actually, you do," Landon said, the first he'd spoken since his call. "Check his neck. That's her fated mate right there."

"Her..." The grandmother let out a half sob, and for a moment, I thought she was going to have a breakdown, but when she turned to her husband, a watery smile spread across her wrinkled features. "Our grandbaby is *mated!* She's alive, and with an alpha, and we could have *great-grandpups!*"

Oh.

I also hadn't thought about it that way, either. What it would mean to them that their granddaughter was happily mated, with someone who could provide whatever she wanted. Talk about a dream compared to all the horrible things their minds might have conjured. Perhaps I needed to work a bit on my empathy and putting myself into other people's shoes.

“If that’s true, why is *he* here?”

The aunt jabbed her thumb towards Sam, who held up his hands in a shocked expression. “I honestly can’t tell if you’re upset that I’m a witch or that I’m black.”

“W-w-what?” the woman sputtered, and I had to admit, the look of shock on her face was quite amusing. “It’s because you’re a witch, obviously! I’m not *racist*.”

“Nope, just xenophobic, gotcha.”

“I’m not—pfft, I, uh...” The woman looked at Landon. “Surely it’s not safe having him here!”

“Not every witch is out to get us, Lilibet. If he’s screened by Alpha Reese, we can trust him.”

The woman didn’t say anything for a long moment, seeming to compose herself and try to come to terms with exactly what was happening. And honestly, good on her. I liked to think that I was pretty capable when it came to adapting to different situations, but there was no preparing for what the woman was going through.

“I... alright. This is just a lot.”

“I understand,” Landon said, with the same genuine tone that Mahlan used when he was comforting one of the pack. Huh, maybe that was an alpha thing more than just my best friend thing. It made sense; as our leader, Mahlan needed to be able to soothe us and assure us of safety just as much as he needed to command us. “Why don’t you have a seat and I’ll have Dickie bring you a brew? You like those German lagers, right?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“And for you two? Glass of moscato wine and, hmmm...”

Lyssa’s grandfather chuckled. “I don’t drink, lad. But I wouldn’t mind a cup of coffee.”

“On it.”

Okay, I had to admit, I was impressed that Landon knew what two random members of his pack liked to drink. It really spoke of their close connection. If I became Mahlan’s beta, as was the plan, I wanted to strive to be like that.

Then again, it probably was a lot easier for Landon to do considering he had about fifty pack members as opposed to our several hundred.

“First of all,” Mahlan started once everyone was settled with their beverage of choice in front of them. “Thank you for meeting with us.”

“Of course. We couldn’t believe it when we first got the call,” the grandmother said, tears making soft rivulets down her face. “I suppose we’re still in a bit of shock.”

“I understand that. And please, if any of our questions are too much, or if you need time, just let me know, alright?”

“Sure, sure, but we’ll do whatever we can to help you. We...we can’t believe it. Our grandbaby is alive and thriving! We understand you need to protect her right now, so any way we help will get us closer to actually seeing her again.”

“Exactly,” Mahlan agreed. “So, I know this may be difficult, but I need you to tell me anything you know about the attack on your family.”

Lyssa’s grandmother drew in a shuddering breath. “It was very evident to us that there was magic involved in our children’s deaths. And—something that was not in the police reports—was that their blood was entirely drained.”

“They were completely exsanguinated?” I cut in, concern lancing through me. “That is...” There were a lot of words I could use, but none of them quite seemed to convey the importance. Ritualistic blood sacrifice or draining was almost always the sign of an incredibly powerful spell that probably shouldn’t happen, and certainly not on unwilling victims. “Why didn’t you inform the council?”

“What a strange thing to assume, lad,” the grandfather said. “We did. And multiple times at first.”

That didn’t sit right with me, and I locked it away into another part of my brain to evaluate later. Like if I just asked enough questions and collected enough tidbits, I would be able to put it all together as a puzzle.

“And their response?”

“They said it was most likely an isolated incident driven by revenge specific to our children, so there was no cause for concern of it being a widespread issue. But they also assigned one of their high priestesses to solve it so we could get justice.”

“The killings did stop,” the grandmother picked up. “But we don’t think that she really did anything to cause that. We think that somehow, our stolen moonstone just stopped finding them vulnerable members of our pack to pick off.”

“That aligns with what we’ve learned,” Mahlan said as I put yet another little puzzle piece away. When I got home, I was certainly going to physically map things out with Emma. I had no doubt her keen eye would help.

“Your granddaughter, Lyssa, was being surveilled by a witch for several years. And once she disappeared into our pack’s protection, that witch was used to try to hunt her down. It wasn’t until we found where the witch was hidden away that we were informed the same brothers who feuded with your children were also the brothers plaguing us.”

“Those bastards,” Lilibet spat. “They’re mad. Complete lunatics! They killed my brothers and sister in cold blood! Wasn’t that enough!”

“I wish it was,” I said, gesturing for the bartender to get her another lager. She shot me a grateful expression, her walls lowering little by little.

“I don’t understand how a set of humans have so many powerful, magical people at their beck and call,” Landon added, a stormy expression on his face. I had seen similar ones when Mahlan was particularly troubled. “Because they are just humans, right?”

It was the grandfather who answered that, his voice grave. “If there is one thing I’ve learned in my life, is that there’s no such thing as *just* humans. Think about it—they have no claws, no nails, no fire magic, or green magic. They cannot raise the dead, or summon spirits. And yet...they hold the power to destroy the world. They’ve developed weapons that can hurt pretty much any fae. They rule this world while we content ourselves with sticking to the shadows because we know that the fight isn’t worth it.”

I hadn’t thought about any of that, but what he said rang true. Sure, if every fae everywhere united, we could definitely take humans out. But the chances of that happening were less likely than the western pixies from releasing Elvis from their faerie realm. Fae had too many rivalries, enemies, and drama of their own.

Besides, worldwide politics were their own minefield that I certainly had no interest in, and I was sure that most shifters felt the same. Sometimes even interpack politics were too much for me and I just wanted to run with my inner wolf, grass beneath our paws and the cool night sky above our heads.

“I appreciate your wisdom,” Mahlan said. “And these brothers have proven to be quite the adversary. We are working to make sure they will never bother Lyssa or any other packs again. Please, continue your story. Every detail helps.”

And they did, with even the disgruntled aunt chiming in. The whole tale was heartbreaking, really, and while nothing else they said was as valuable as the bloodletting and the council information, it did help me begin to form a more complete picture in my head.

In the end, we were all exhausted, especially the grandparents, but Mahlan ended the session brilliantly. In a stroke of genius, he handed over his phone so they could look at pictures and videos of Lyssa. I assumed he must have a SFW folder if he was so comfortable with them thumbing through it at their own pace, especially considering that they burst into happy tears and not offended shouts.

Naturally, that cued a whole new round of crying, even from the aunt, and I might have gotten a little misty-eyed too. I was well-aware how people thought I was an ice king, but I was just a mortal man. Seeing three lonely souls who had lost pretty much their entire family be digitally reunited with the last of their kin was powerful stuff.

Thankfully, we all managed to get it together, then eventually see the trio to the aunt's car. After that, there was a bit more talking with Landon before we decided to head out.

I, for one, was plenty relieved. I'd never been one for a hasty retreat before, but I finally had someone to go home to.

And boy, was I anxious to see her.

EMMALINE

I chewed on my lip as I stood in the kitchen, staring at my only slightly dirty floor as I wrestled with the urge to call Theo. I knew he was busy on pack business so I shouldn't, and I also didn't want to come across as dependent.

And yet...I still wanted to call him.

Sick of chasing my thoughts in circles, I grabbed my broom and dustpan, compulsively cleaning while I debated with myself. Why did I care if anyone thought I was dependent? Couldn't I call my friend of decades to check that he was alright? Couldn't I worry about the investigation that was affecting my entire pack?

Besides, it wasn't like anyone would know I had called Theo. Only I would. So really, was I worried about thinking these things about myself? If so, I had some things I needed to address in my own mind, but because that wasn't very girl-wolf boss of me.

I had only just finished sweeping when my phone started buzzing insistently from where I'd left it on the kitchen counter. I snatched it up like it was on fire and clicked the answer button faster than I had in my entire life.

"Hello? Did something happen!?"

"What? Uh, no. Everything's alright," Theo's voice came over the line, sounding unpanicked but a bit surprised by my greeting. "We're on our way back, I just wanted to ask how your day was going."

Oh.

Well, I supposed that was a normal question to ask a mate. But then again, it wasn't like Theo and my relationship was normal by any sense.

“Uh, it’s been good. Surprisingly low-key. Finally settled on some hires.”

“Oh really? I know that’s been stressing you out.”

He did? I didn’t realize he’d been paying that much attention to the relatively trivial issues of my shop. While I loved my little boutique, it was kind of low on the scale of importance compared to the safety and longevity of our entire pack.

“Yeah. But Lyssa was a huge help and I think we narrowed it down to a couple of really good selections. But you know how it is, only time will tell.”

He let out a soft chuckle that somehow managed to sound nice even over my phone’s speaker. “That is how it works, isn’t it?”

“You betcha. But don’t worry, I’m gonna have Sam come in for a day and give them a full-spectrum magical once-over. No spy witches here.”

“Good plan. I trust that you’ve given them all a good scenting?”

“Yeah, nothing I could pick up. Their energies seemed good, too.” I sat down at my tiny kitchen island, spinning on my stool as I talked to my mate. “If these hires go well, I’m thinking of trying to find a professional photographer I can book twice a month.”

“Wow, really? But you do such a good job with all of your shoots.”

He thought that my photography was good? And he’d *noticed* that I did 90% of the photos for my site? I hadn’t realized he paid so much attention to what I did for work. Even Mahlan hadn’t really been aware I did all that until Lyssa and I set up a temporary studio in his guest room after the young shifter they rescued had been settled into a safer location with an older pack member who was taking care of her.

More and more, his comments about being interested in me for years were making sense. It was strange to think that while I’d been wasting time on Kaleb, who barely noticed me, he’d been gone on me, who barely noticed him outside of our friendship. Strange how things worked out that way. Sometimes...sometimes it seemed almost...

Fated.

I swallowed the lump that rose in my throat and tried to quickly reply to Theo. “I do, but between the shooting itself and the editing I do on my laptop, it would free up several hours every day. And allow me to catch up on the backlog I still have from taking two weeks off work. I’m gonna need to start preparing for the winter season soon.”

“Winter season? It’s not gonna be fall for another month.”

“Welcome to fashion, baby.”

Another chuckle, but it wasn't patronizing. I liked that he found me funny. My humor didn't always land with people outside of Lyssa and my brother.

"I know it seems like a lot, but I feel like I'm at a huge crossroads in my business. I can go casual and everything will stay steady for a long while, or I can really buckle down and expand my clientele, our online reach, and fully utilize my increased store space that will double my profits."

"Sounds ambitious. But if anyone can do it, it's you. You're one of the most unstoppable wolves I know."

My cheeks colored at that, a gentle warmth spreading through me. "Pshawww, you don't need to butter me up."

"Just being honest. Always have been."

That's true. Theo had always been honest to a fault, often bluntly so. But could he really think that way about me? The thought was flattering, that was for certain. Theo was discerning, intelligent, and logged away valuable information about people like a machine. While I'd never much cared what he thought about me before, it certainly seemed important now.

"You know, I worked with a couple of photographers on some pitches I did last year. I could send you their work, and if either of them clicks with your brand, I'll check if they're free?"

"Oh my God, would you really do that?" I wasn't a fool. I knew Theo's plate was overflowing with tasks, between Mahlan's surprise mating, his own surprise mating, and someone systematically hunting down our pack members on top of all his business obligations.

"Yeah, I don't mind. It wouldn't take very long and if it would help you, I'm all for it."

It would have been cheesy from anybody else, but I knew Theo so well that it just came across as wonderfully genuine. Which naturally made my toes curl within my shoes. While I'd known him plenty long enough to be able to read all his little tells that other people missed, I wasn't used to him being so open and talkative with me. It was nice, if I was being honest.

"Well, thank you. I hope you know that it's plenty appreciated."

"I do. You're not the type to take such things lightly." I cleared my throat, not sure what to say, but thankfully Theo kept on going. "Hey, there was something I've been meaning to mention for a while, but I kept getting distracted."

"Oh?" For some reason, I was nervous, like he was going to tell me that

we needed to go through the painful process of trying to break our bond, or that he'd discovered he was wrong about how he felt about me.

"Yeah. I know your boutique is centered around women, but I think you should have a few men's accessories and small items here." Oh no, was he about to go into some sort of men's rights equality thing? I couldn't imagine anything more boring. "You know, little gifts that women can buy for any males in their life. I think I read a while back that women are the most frequent gift givers and are especially prone to spontaneous purchases if they see something that reminds them of someone they love."

Oh.

Oh.

That was actually quite thoughtful.

"Huh. I'll need to talk to my supplier, but that's certainly an idea, Theo. You know, you have more of a head for fashion than I would have assumed."

"Considering the impeccably tailored suits I wear most business days, I think I'm insulted."

Now it was my turn to laugh. "Okay, I do admit to admiring several of your 'fits."

"Fits? What are you, Gen Z now?"

"Hey, just keeping up with the times. Don't hate me because you ain't me."

"Ah, I see. And now we're in the nineties."

We both shared another laugh and I was taken aback of just how *easy* it all was. I wasn't big on phone conversations, preferring in person or texting. But I didn't mind just spinning around on my stool while Theo and I chatted.

"The thing is, if I do this men's gifts thing, I'll need to hire a male model. Can't exactly do that myself."

"Well, I can offer the occasional weekend."

I froze mid-spin, although my center of gravity kept going. I had to swallow hard yet again as my mind easily pictured Theo and I modeling together, decked out in stylish outfits that I'd ordered, posing like a couple who wasn't forced together, but had chosen to be.

Goodness, that was certainly something to think about. And why were my cheeks coloring again? It wasn't like I was imagining something explicit. And yet, something seemed so *intimate* about it.

"That would be amazing," I said in what I hoped was a normal tone. Why did I feel like I was back in high school again? All twitterpated about a boy

and being seen together. Maybe I needed a change of pace. Quickly, I changed the subject.

“Hey, as fun as talking about my future business empire is, any updates on your end? Did you find Lyssa’s family?”

“What’s left of them,” Theo answered, his tone turning somewhat melancholy. My stomach dropped and I began to worry about Lyssa. She held it together well, but I knew she was anxious about her biological family.

“Okay, dish. If you can, that is.”

I almost expected him to say he couldn’t share anything yet and we’d have to have a whole argument, but thankfully he just went into a full explanation. I wasn’t sure what to think about that alpha or the aunt, but all in all, it wasn’t exactly the worst outcome.

“Isn’t it strange that the council knows but isn’t doing anything?”

“Well, they supposedly sent one of their most powerful priestesses,” Theo said. “But I’m with the grandparents on that.”

“As in, you’re not sure she actually did anything?”

“Yeah. The whole thing just seems...off. Like everything’s one step out of sync with each other.”

“Did Sam have any observations?”

“Sam’s on the same page that I am. Hold on, let me put him on. I have you on my earbuds.”

“Okay.”

A moment later, I heard the familiar, jovial tone of our resident green witch. “Hey there Emmie-femmie? Anything exciting going down around you?”

“Nope, just having a normal day. But please never call me that again.”

“Got it, Emma-Gemma.”

“Nope, not that, either.”

“Emily-Bemily?”

“Emma will do.”

“Boo, you’re no fun.”

“I’m incredibly fun to people with a sense of humor that passed high school,” I shot back, trying not to grin into the phone. Although the witch was younger than me, I did appreciate his energy. He seemed pretty earnest and he had Lyssa’s trust, so I didn’t see why I wouldn’t give him mine.

“Ouch, okay, see if I invite you to my next party.”

“You live in a studio in the city and every flat surface in your home is

covered in either plants or dried plants. You have no room for a party.”

“First of all, ouch. Second of all, damn, call me out, why don’t you. And thirdly, because Theo is glaring at me...about that priestess.”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t say one hundo percent for certain, but I couldn’t sense even the tiniest dregs of that kind of magical signature around the place. Like, it was over a decade ago, so there’s a chance it’s faded significantly. But like, not *that* significantly.”

“Hmm, what would you need to know for certain?”

“A week, some tuning forks, and a whole lot of caffeine.”

“Right, so not something immediate.”

“No, unfortunately. Maybe if I was older and wiser, but like I’ve repeatedly reminded y’all, I’m a self-taught, covenless green witch. Not exactly a savant when it comes to magical aptitude.”

“Hey, you’re plenty talented. And you’ve helped us plenty.”

“Well, the money helps. Anyway, your hubbo is glaring at me again so I’m gonna hand you over.”

There was the sound of shuffling, then Theo was back on the line again. “The whole thing is a clusterfuck, isn’t it?” he said with a sigh.

“Yeah, I’d say that’s a pretty apt way to describe it.” I chewed my lip, pondering the mess of it all. “Do you think they’re using the human brothers for a front?”

“Pardon?”

“The witches. What if they’re using these brothers as some sort of red herring to throw us off?”

“You think the revenge was part of some grand witch plot?”

“No, I think that was genuinely the brothers, but with one in a coma and one being, like, pretty old now, I think it’s a little unlikely that they’re running around commanding multiple witches, stealing moonstones, and cooking up some plot that involves kidnapping multiple shifters.”

“That’s a good point, but it’s the best lead we have right now. So far, everything, including Sarah, is pointing to them.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just something to keep in mind.”

“I most certainly will. I promise.” He let out a heady sigh that I couldn’t exactly blame him for. “But since, as far as we know, everything started with Lyssa’s family, that’s where we’re gonna focus. We’ll start pouring most of our energy into tracking those brothers and anyone else adjacent to them.”

“Makes sense to me,” I said, debating my next question. But I decided to be brave and just blurt it out. “So, when can I expect you to be home?”

I could tell his expression went smug even over the phone. Handsome bastard.

“Why? Do you miss me?”

“Stop trying to be cute and answer the question.”

“Oh, I’m cute, am I? I always thought of myself as more the devilishly handsome type, but I’ll take cute.”

“You’re the devil alright.”

“Aw, are you pouting, princess?”

That pet name shouldn’t have made my toes curl in my shoes, but it did, and an uncontrollable flush raced through my body. Whoa. New kink unlocked? Well, if it was, I could worry about it later.

“Theodore, if you don’t tell me when you’ll be home, I’ll lock all the doors and spread wolfsbane oil on all my windowsills.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me. I’m savage.”

“Yeah, I’m finding that out.”

“I dunno. We just left a bit ago, so late tonight, I think. Maybe early tomorrow depending on Sam’s ridiculously small bladder.”

“Don’t blame me, blame the iced coffee!” I heard the witch faintly call in the background.

“You are an adult and you chose to ingest that much sugary liquid,” Theo retorted calmly.

“Okay, *mom*.”

“Usually people call me daddy.”

Oh. Oh God. That flush increased ten-fold and I nearly fell off my stool. I’d never been so turned on by an offhand comment, and Theo didn’t even know.

But it was so easy to imagine us under the stars, him rutting into me in the center of a quiet forest, demanding that I be good for daddy. Oof, I was most definitely soaking my underwear. I was surprised that Theo couldn’t smell it even from where he was.

“Emma,” he murmured suddenly, and ooooooh, if the low timber of his voice wasn’t just right.

“Yeah?”

“Are you behaving yourself?”

He couldn't know, could he?

But then I remembered our bond, the mating gland on my neck throbbing with every word out of his honeyed mouth. "For now," I murmured, electricity crackling along my skin. "But maybe you're the one who should be worried, considering you're in a van with a bunch of other shifters who can smell you right now."

Theo cleared his throat, and I would have laughed if I didn't feel like I was at risk of turning to a gooey puddle on the floor. "Right. Well, we've got to stop to break into a human school, but I'll hurry back as fast as I can."

"Wait, you're breaking into a school? Why?"

"We figure it's the best way to find out more info about the brothers. You'd be amazed how far back those records go."

"Huh, you really think you'll find their family info or something? Or are you just checking their attendance record?"

"Pfft, yeah. Need to know if they were punctual, of course."

"Naturally, naturally," I agreed. "But back to the real world—the pack really didn't have any of that info about them?"

"Nope, couldn't even tell us their names or anything else."

"Yikes, who *are* these guys?"

"Hopefully we'll find out soon. And then..." his voice dropped low again. "I can come home and make sure you have company."

Why did I get the feeling that his *company* wasn't the kind I had after church with my parents? Although there might be a few cries out to God. My mind flashed to the first time we slept together, how sensual it had been. How *wanted* I'd felt.

Whew, I needed to stop getting distracted.

"Alright, but you're coming home right after the school then?"

"Well..."

"Well? Well what?"

"Depending on how we're feeling, we might go interview families of other shifters that went missing here."

"Right. Is there anything else you wanna add? Maybe a trip to the moon?"

"You know, now that you mention it..."

"Hah. You're hilarious. But if you guys don't do that now, are you planning on a return trip later?"

"Yeah, actually. Lyssa's family is pretty keen to meet her, and

considering they thought she was dead for over a decade, I don't think we should make them wait overly long."

"Okay, just be careful on that front. Lyssa is still real uncertain on how to feel about the lot of them, and I think that she's kinda sealed herself off emotionally for her own protection. You get it."

"Yeah, I do," Theo said with a heady sigh. Goodness, I didn't think I'd ever heard him do that so many times in one conversation. But we were dealing with some pretty heavy stuff. "But I think it'll do everyone well. Eventually."

"Yeah. Eventually."

"Alright, I really have to go now, but you be safe, alright?"

"I always am," I replied automatically.

"You and I both know that's a lie."

"Yeah, yeah we do."

"Goodbye, Emma. See you soon."

"Goodbye, Theo. And I'll hold you to that."

With that, he went to hang up, with only one last sentence drifting through the line before it disconnected.

"You know that's my sister, right?"

I couldn't help it, I burst into laughter at my brother's exhausted tone, filling my empty kitchen with loud, raucous peels. I knew I was probably going to be alone for a bit longer, but at least I had so much to look forward to.

THEO

The school ended up taking far longer than any of us expected. Not because their system was advanced or their security was great, but because the records from the era we were looking for were all filed on paper. Yes, literal physical *paper*, and filed away in cabinets like we were in another century. So all of us ended up spreading out and manually looking through folders as if that would tell us something.

It all turned out to be a pretty huge waste of time, and I resented that it kept me away from Emma for even longer. Although she'd sounded plenty assured on the phone, I hated that I wasn't there for her. And I would be lying if I said I wasn't pleased that she apparently missed me.

I'd long since come to terms with the fact that there would always be a certain inequality to our relationship. After all, I'd been in love with her for nearly twenty years while she'd been pining over someone else. That wasn't exactly the building blocks for a harmonious union. But when she was talking to me on the phone, it certainly *felt* more balanced. Especially when I felt the rush of attraction and desire flood through her bond.

God, I'd wanted her so badly. To be home and in her arms. To make love to her again like I had that first time. It killed me that there hadn't been a repeat performance yet, but my inner wolf was basically throwing himself at the walls, desperate to have another taste. Because Emma had been so gorgeous, so sweet, literal perfection across my tongue and under my body.

But there was so much *more* I wanted to do with her. Like bend her over every flat surface in her house. To kiss her lips swollen and leave love bites along her neck that her accelerated healing would clear far too soon. I wanted

to fill her up over and over again until my scent took to her and no one would ever doubt that we were a mated pair.

So yeah, I wanted a lot of things, and instead, I was waking up in a hotel suite with five other men. Not nearly the same.

“I brewed some coffee,” Parker said, walking in all smiles with a very full ice bucket in his hands.

“How are you up so early?” I grumbled. I liked to think of myself as an early riser, getting up around 6:30 each morning, but the clock beside the bed said it wasn’t even six. Parker was fully dressed and functional.

“Uh, I dunno. Slept well, I guess.”

Sam sat up with a truly egregious nod. “It was probably the cuddles. I don’t think I’ve slept that deep in like a year.”

Parker turned bright red at that and my eyebrows raised. Hmmm, was there romance brewing? Perhaps, but I didn’t really care without getting some caffeine into me. It turned out that my little morning ritual with Emma had created a very specific habit for me. Oh well. At least my inner wolf processed the stuff well.

“I got ice for your coffee,” Parker said, holding the bucket out. “F-for your coffee.”

Okay, even half-awake me could tell that was cute. Well, Sam better be on his best behavior. If he mistreated Parker, not only would he have me to deal with, but Kaleb would probably rip his throat out. Those two had been inseparable since birth, basically. It didn’t matter what kind of magic Sam had, pretty much nothing would stop Kaleb if someone was hurting Parker.

“Awww, aren’t you just a sweetie pie,” Sam cooed, sliding out of bed. None of us had brought a change of clothes, so we were all looking relatively rumpled, but Sam just snapped his fingers twice and his clothes sort of... arranged themselves.

“Handy trick,” I remarked, already on my way over to the coffee pot. It was probably going to taste like shit considering Emma wasn’t the one handing it to me, but at least it would remind me of her.

Huh, I was really gone, wasn’t I?

Oh well. I was in love with my mate. I could think of worse things in life. I’d spent years telling myself that we could never be, because she was both my alpha’s and my best friend’s sister, so I figured I was due a little internal celebration. Especially since Emma seemed to be warming up to the idea of our mating, to put it lightly.

“So, what are we doing for breakfast?” Sam asked as he went about preparing his own drink with far too much sugar.

“You don’t eat breakfast,” I pointed out. “You exist on the calories from your caffeine milkshake and other people’s misery.”

“*Normally*, yes. But this is a road trip! There are certain traditions!”

“This isn’t a road trip,” Mahlan said, sitting up in his bed in the master bedroom. “This is a fact-finding mission to try to save my mate and our pack.”

“Well, if you wanna be *literal*, sure. But excuse me for wanting to inject a little life into things.”

“We don’t need you to inject life. We need you to keep your magical senses on alert and tell us anything amiss you sense.”

Sam’s eyes went narrow, like whenever he was going to be extra sassy, but I shook my head borderline imperceptibly, praying he would notice. Mahlan was a generally good-natured man, but I could tell that his hackles were up. Clearly, the entire situation was getting to him. I didn’t know if it was from our failed school raiding, or the unknown of the brothers, or the reunions Lyssa was due in the future. But I sensed perhaps it wasn’t the time to ask.

Instead, I cleared my throat. “I saw a small diner when we came in. Why don’t we load up there, then set out on the interviews?”

Mahlan nodded. “Let’s. Hopefully they’ll have enough food for us.”

I looked over our group of five shifters and one liberally caffeinated green witch. “Yeah, let’s hope.”



WHILE BREAKFAST WAS both delicious and filling, with buttered grits, lots of extra bacon, fresh waffles, and loaded omelets, the interviews were far less satisfying. We started at the top of the list, calling ahead, and worked our way down, setting up appointment after appointment. Some were in public places, some were in homes, but all and all, their stories were much the same.

Sure, the details of who and how varied ever so slightly, but that was about it. No one had details, no one really saw anything. No one had leads, clues, or anything like that. Just so much sorrow.

Sometimes I felt like we were needlessly opening old wounds, making

people figuratively dig up their dead for no results. I learned very quickly that there was an incredibly specific type of pain that came with losing a family member and having no idea what happened to them, and if it was uncomfortable for me to witness it after years and years, I couldn't imagine how it was to live with that.

Except I could imagine it. My mind went to how I'd almost lost Emmaline that fateful day we'd been mated. What would have happened if I'd just been five minutes later? Would she be dead? Kidnapped? Would I be stuck desperately trying to find her, not knowing her fate? I was pretty sure I would go mad, which made me admire the people we talked to so much more.

Still, by the end of the day, their words, sad eyes, and weary souls echoed throughout my brain.

"It felt like we were being hunted."

"Nowhere was safe."

"I miss him. Sometimes I wake up and I think he's there next to me, but he hasn't been there in twelve years."

"I don't want to talk about that. No, I *can't* talk about it."

"She was so young. She had so much of her life ahead of her."

"I don't see why we have to do this."

"I don't want to remember."

"If you find out what happened, will you please tell us? Please?"

By the time we finished and got back into our car, I was worn out. Mahlan seemed even worse, his amiable demeanor completely depleted. He didn't quite seem defeated, but he was pretty close. We needed to get him back to Lyssa to remind him what he was fighting and investigating for. And I wasn't saying that just because I was borderline desperate to get to Emma.

"That was less productive than I hoped," Jacobian said as we piled in, getting behind the wheel. Normally, we'd have John drive for such a trip, but considering the length and how many of us there were to trade, we'd decided to just do it on our own.

"Did we find out anything?" Parker asked.

"We found pain," Mahlan answered, his voice low. Guttural. "So much pain."

I reached over from where I was sitting in the middle and squeezed my alpha's shoulder. "We're gonna figure this out. I promise."

"From your mouth to the council's ears," he said. And that was that. With

a silence coming over the car, we sank into reflection. But as we drove, I couldn't help but think of Emma's words.

If it wasn't the brothers, were we barking up the wrong tree? And if we were, how did we get into the right tree?

I didn't know, which infuriated me in that cold, inky way I got sometimes. As the likely beta for our whole pack, I was supposed to be the planner. The strategizer. The detail man who supported the alpha with everything he needed. And at the moment, I was failing. The puzzle pieces were slowly piling in front of me, but I was no closer to solving it than I was before our trip.

Which wasn't the worst thing. I hadn't gotten home yet, hadn't had a chance to physically map things out. But as much as the logical part of my brain told me that I just needed to be patient, some part of me, a more emotional half, was concerned with something else entirely.

I didn't want to acknowledge it. Didn't want to give it the words so it could actualize itself. But the longer we threw ourselves at the wall of who the brothers were and what was happening, the harder it became to deny it. It sat in the pit of my stomach, lingering in the echoes of my more productive thoughts, whispering its message over and over again in listless sighs.

We're running out of time.

EMMALINE

I woke up feeling dissatisfied, and it took me a couple of moments of listlessly rolling around in bed to figure out why. At first, I thought it was just that I was hungrier than usual, and then it was that my cycle was coming. But by the time I sat up I realized I was missing Theo's scent first thing in the morning. He always woke up before me, leaving his scent thick in the air as I went about my morning business.

It was disconcerting, to say the least, leaving me rather cranky as I went about my own morning routine. Grumbling to myself, I had to pause in the middle of making him his usual cup of morning coffee.

Huh.

Maybe I was more cut out for the whole mating thing than I thought. I'd felt trapped by it at first. And then like it was something I had to come to terms with, to endure. But clearly something had changed, because it didn't feel that way anymore.

Not that I knew *what* it felt like. Just that it was different. And maybe different wasn't such a bad thing.

But what was a bad thing was just how much I missed him. I wasn't used to having my heart tied to someone. I'd lived alone since I was nineteen and I loved my independence. Or at least I had. Now my house just felt kind of lonely. Empty.

Which was ridiculous because the only thing that was different was that I was down one sarcastic, dry, snarky, and occasionally-a-dick man who also happened to be my brother's best friend.

Oh well. I wasn't going to get anywhere pouting about it, so I put his mug

to the side and tried to focus on my morning routine. Since Sam was gone, I was going to have to risk doing the new hire's orientations without his input, but I figured he could always come by the next day and do some magical sleuthing.

Maybe I would be lucky and all the extra work would keep me occupied long after closing hours. Lyssa was going off to visit Ashlee, the girl she helped rescue, as soon as her shift was over. Besides, I got the feeling that she had a lot of homework to do as well. As much as I supported her academic career, it sure was inconvenient sometimes.

Somehow I managed to make it out of the door without being in a completely shit mood and made my way to work. Being around new people made me incredibly apprehensive, the back of my mind always wondering if they were a witch sent to hurt me or the ones I loved, but I would have to tough it out if I wanted to run a successful business.

First thing first, however, was my meeting with the tech guys to unify the separate security systems of both halves of my shop. Both worked, but they went through different systems that were in the back—not exactly conducive to keeping an eye on things. So they were going to do their thing over the next day and a half so everything could be viewed properly from my office.

Normally, I would be nervous about a bunch of strange men in my space while my alpha and mate were out of town, but they were all either from our pack, or nearby packs. And sure, it wasn't that long ago when we had been somewhat at each other's throats, but the current surge of missing shifters had the entire city's shifter population working more peaceably with each other.

Thankfully, my meeting with them went quickly and I was able to chat with Lyssa a bit, give her the tasks for the day, then get started on invoices before the new hires came in. I greeted them warmly and gave them a tour of the place sans the back, explaining that the space was currently occupied by tech. Besides, I figured if one of them was an evil witch, I wouldn't want her to know the complete ins and outs of everything.

Once paperwork and explaining our online system was done, we'd already eaten through a good chunk of the four hours I'd originally told them to come in for. And then payroll took nearly another hour. Naturally, I bought them lunch on their very first day, and we all sat or stood around the checkout counter.

"I'm really relieved you have chairs," one of them said. Oh goodness, I needed to check her paperwork. Was she... Stacy? Jessica? Ann? Stacy-Ann-

Jessica? “The last store I worked at always insisted if you had time to lean, you had time to clean.”

“Oh, gross,” I said as I chewed my second panini with double meat and double cheese. Maybe I was just hungry or maybe I was stress-eating from the thought of going home to my empty house, with who knew how many malicious entities watching my place. Sure, I still had plenty of security always lingering in the peripherals, but security wasn’t *Theo*. “Don’t get me wrong—if you want to sit around all day, you won’t last long here—but I also don’t believe you need to be occupied every moment. It’s okay to sit and recoup for a bit, or to ring out a customer while being comfortable. I’ll never understand the weird obsession with making workers be as uncomfortable as possible.”

“I think it comes from people’s need to feel better than service workers, or something,” Lyssa said around her own mouthful of food. I couldn’t help but notice that she had a small bag of extra cookies beside her. If Ashlee wasn’t spoiled already, she would be eventually. But with everything the young girl had been through, she probably deserved as many cookies as she wanted.

“There’s this perception that minimum wage workers deserve abuse for having a ‘low’ job. People will say that they’re meant to be entry-level jobs, but that’s not what they were created for.”

“They’re not?” the other new hire asked. Goodness, I had picked them out with Lyssa. How come I suddenly forgot everything about them I’d ever heard?

“Nah, it was made for a single, full-time worker to be able to have a home and provide for one spouse and two children while living comfortably.”

Stacy/Ann/Jessica let out a snort. “I worked two min wage jobs before here and I can hardly support *myself*.”

“Exactly! That’s why it’s all bupkis.” I had to admit, it was nice to see Lyssa so passionate about something. I’d been wealthy pretty my entire life, so I wasn’t aware of what it was like to struggle like she did, but I recognized that my position was mostly luck. It wasn’t like I’d strategized as a fetus on how to be born to loaded shifter parents. “Look, I’m a hard worker, but I don’t believe in senseless work. Everything should be productive, not just because.”

“Amen.”

It was nice to see all of us bonding, and I really hoped that one of them

wasn't secretly the enemy. I really didn't need that stress on top of everything else. Not to mention how stressful the hiring and payroll process was.

But as much fun as lunch was, after we all went back to our tasks, the feeling in the shop began to change. It started with another niggling feeling at the back of my neck, making my hair stand on end. But as time passed, it shifted into a bad pit in my stomach.

Ugh.

I tried to shake it off, but the anxiety was biting. When invoices weren't enough of a distraction, I pulled out my phone and quickly shot a text off to Theo, telling him that I missed him. Once more, I was tempted to call him, but unlike the previous time, my phone didn't magically begin to ring.

"Are you alright, Miss Reese?"

I didn't look up from the counter as Ricky did his daily afternoon walk-through. I was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to, being undercover and all, but I appreciated that he would stop in. It made the whole thing seem less strange and awkward.

"Yeah, just a little stressy."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No, not particularly," I said with a sigh. I couldn't imagine spilling my guts to the guy who spent hour after hour watching over me. I felt like I would sound so incredibly spoiled. "Just thinkin' about stuff."

"Sounds heavy."

"Oh, you know, getting that mental workout in," I said with a wink.

"Well, don't over-do it, ya know?"

"I'll try not to." I set my silent phone to the side and rubbed my eyes. "Hey, have you eaten? You want me to order you something?"

"You know you're not supposed to do that. We're trying to be incognito."

"Right, because nothing is more incognito than the same group of ten male shifters hanging around a clothing boutique."

"You...you may have a point there," he laughed. "Well, if you want to send something from that deli you're always going to, I won't complain."

"Sure, I'll have it delivered to the man in glasses who always sits at the east table at the cafe across the street," I shot back, giving him an angelic look that my brother always described as the total opposite.

"Oof, I suppose we should switch up our routine a little."

"Just maybe."

With a nod, he headed out, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Quickly, I

grabbed my phone again and checked if I had any new notifications. Sure enough, Theo had messaged me back, apologizing for his delay and promising that he would be home tomorrow.

Well, tomorrow was better than later, I supposed. But I couldn't lie that I was disappointed I would be going home to an empty house once again. And waking up that way, too. What a bummer.

Actually, it was more than a bummer. I felt my mood tanking, combining in a twisted slurry with the terrible feeling in my stomach. I tried to push it down, I did, and instead, focused on ordering every single guard their own loaded sub.

Sure, food couldn't fix everything, but it did help me feel better to feed people, especially people I was inconveniencing. While it was true that I would feel much better if I wasn't constantly being guarded, I understood that I needed them around. Even if I really, really hated it.

At least ordering took a good while, as did the hour wait for all of it to arrive. While I delivered Ricky's out to his table, I told him to send the others in one by one, desperately trying to ignore the trepidation that felt like it was slowly coating the inside of me.

He said he would and I hurried back inside, eager to make sure the girls were alright. With so much anxiety flowing through me, fear easily found its way into my brain, biting and scratching in that desperate way it had.

Thankfully, nothing seemed amiss when I entered, Lyssa dutifully showing the girls how to properly do reshops. I heaved a sigh of relief, then busied myself with updating payroll on the new hires. Less than ten minutes later, another one of my guards came in, grinning broadly.

"Ricky mentioned you got us some subs?"

"My good man," I cried in mock indignation. "These are not mere 'subs!' These are delicious grinders from a local delicatessen that has been a pillar of this community for generations!"

"Ah, forgive my blasphemy. Can I have this delectable, nay, rapturous gift from the heavens?"

"Why yes, you may," I said, bowing dramatically. "Go, and enjoy this divine providence!"

I barely got the sub out of the bag when that feeling in my stomach shot up to my chest and I froze in place, the entire world rushing by my ears.

"Miss Reese, are you okay?"

I couldn't answer. It was like my body was locked in shock and horror.

Except nothing was happening for it to react that way.

Until it did, of course.

A moment later, the doors opened and three bodies rushed in. I finally jerked, the spell over me breaking just in time for me to recognize one of the women in the ambush.

It was the *witch*.

Not just any with. *The* witch. The one that had attacked me, nearly killed me. Her face was burned into me the same way my parents were, except filled with fear and vileness instead of love.

“Attack!” I managed to scream out, dropping the sub.

It seemed like several dozen things happened at once. The three witches raised their hands and I could feel their energy crackle through the room. Lyssa let out a snarl and grabbed both of the human new hires by the neck, shoving them into my office and locking the door. I could hear them shout questions in confusion, but they barely registered as I was already shifting.

My body lurched forward, fur exploding out along my skin as my limbs elongated, snaps and pops sounding throughout my store. In the very back of my mind, I was aware that the shop I’d just had renovated was about to be destroyed again, but it registered as pretty unimportant compared to my instincts that I needed to tear apart my enemies.

These were the people who’d been hunting shifters. Who had hurt Lyssa and wanted to hurt her again. And that thought filled me with a fire so potent, I was surprised that I didn’t combust right then and there.

With one push of my hind legs, I closed the distance between me and the witch who’d caused Theo to have to mate me, teeth wide open for her throat. My inner wolf was nearly mad with thoughts of revenge, of protecting everyone who was close to me, but before I could close that final foot, a strange, frigid force slammed into me, knocking me back into the counter.

Well, there went that.

I let the energy roll me, not fighting it but moving with it so I could land on my feet. In my peripheral vision, I could see that the guard and Lyssa had both shifted, with each of them dealing with their own witch.

It was an even three-on-three with two humans locked in my office, but that was the thing with witches; it was never even. Their skills were varied and their spells often packed nasty punches. Punches like intestines filling with lava, or sudden blindness, or even losing the connection to an inner wolf entirely, like what had happened to Lyssa for years.

But I couldn't be afraid of that. I refused to. I may not have been the largest or strongest wolf in our pack, but I would defend my fellow pack members with my life.

Claws skittering across the floor, I finally managed to slow down enough to bound forward. The witch was already facing me, no doubt bracing herself for a frontal attack. At least that was one good thing about fighting witches: they chronically underestimated us shifters as dumb brutes.

But I could work with that.

I rushed her in a straight line, snarling the whole while, but at the last second, I dove to the side, sliding over the linoleum floor and jumping onto my closest clothes rack. It wasn't a move an actual wolf could pull off, but hey, I was so much more than that.

Twisting in the air, I barreled into her side. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting it, but also clearly, she knew her way around a battle, because she brought her free hand to my side, blasting me with a jet of fire.

Shit!

It burned, as fire was wont to do, and a pained yip shot out of my mouth. But it was muffled by her other arm being lodged in my mouth, my teeth baring down into the limb. Her blood welled up in my mouth, sending me into a frenzy that didn't care that she was shoving a fireball into my pelt. That was what accelerated healing was for, right?

"Come on, princess," the witch snarled with a surprising amount of tenacity, considering that I was trying to consume her main casting hand. "We both know your savior isn't here to help you."

Oh, so they had noticed that, had they? So we were right that they were continuing to surveille us. That was good to know.

"There's only three of you here. You know that's no match for us," the witch snarled again before the fire stopped coming from her hand. But I didn't have more than a beat of relief before it felt like two giant hands gripped me and *ripped* me away from her.

I was thrown through the air with a force that was entirely unnatural. I slammed into more of my shelving, but unfortunately, it was the glass set I liked to display jewelry on. I felt it shatter all around me as I flopped to the ground, my inner wolf momentarily cowed.

"So why don't you give up quietly?"

The pain was too much. I knew that I needed a moment, so I let my wolf form slowly slide away to leave me as a human. Battered. Bruised. But not

with an hole incinerated into my side.

“While it's true you've got the numbers right now,” I groaned, looking past her to see that Lyssa had been herded into a corner and the male witch was in a deadlock with the guard. “That's not gonna last long.”

“Wha-”

She didn't even get the word out before two of the front windows shattered, the rest of the guards, including Ricky erupting in. I would recognize his russet-toned wolf everywhere, the black streak down his back a dead giveaway.

Clearly, subtlety was out the window. There were two humans in the office who were witnessing everything and who knew how many people on the street. The council was going to be *furious*. But hopefully, killing three shifter hunters would sate their anger.

The witch in front of me cursed and her attention turned from me to face the new threats. While I was human, I decided to take advantage of having opposable thumbs. Crawling towards where I'd left my phone, I rooted around for it in the debris until I found it. Thankfully, while the screen was cracked, it wasn't shattered beyond use.

“Get back!”

A call from one of the witches drew my eyes to them, and I saw that they were standing together, a force field around them. One of the guards was unconscious at their feet, but Lyssa and the rest were circling them.

I wanted to join them. No, I *needed* to fight tooth and nail for my pack. But I had to do something else first.

Hitting the button to return call the last person I spoke to, I dialed up Theo. Heart thundering, I prayed that he would answer. I generally avoided answering machines, but getting one now would be just about the worst.

Thankfully, he answered on the second ring, voice laced with concern. “Emma, what's wrong? I can feel you panicking through our bond!”

“Witches are attacking the shop! And two of my human employees are here!”

“They *what*? And *who* is there!?”

“Three witches and two humans! Come home, we need you now!”

“We're on our way! Whatever you do, don't let those humans leave until one of our witches get there. We'll need to wipe their minds.”

“Don't worry, I won't!”

With that completed, I hung up and let my wolf take over again. She was

refreshed from her short rest. Not 100% of course, but there was no hole burned into her side. Yet another benefit of being a shifter.

I let out a howl and raced forward again at full speed. I hit the force field around the witches at full strength, muzzle first, my teeth tearing at it. And I got most of my muzzle in before a hail of icy spears came shooting out. I dodged them, but it forced me back with the rest of my pack, who were also snarling. Daring the witches to play as big a game as they talked.

“You’ve got the luck of a cat,” the witch that had first attacked me snarled, blood still dripping from her arm. I could still taste it on my tongue, acrid and just *wrong*. But I wanted more of it. I wanted it to spill across the floor until I could coat my entire pelt in it. So I could show every one of my enemies what happened when they dared to try to hurt those I loved. “But you can’t live every moment of your life protected.”

I let out a sharp bark, and even if she couldn’t hear the form of telepathy that shifters had in their animal forms, I could tell that she understood me plenty.

I have a pack. Of course I can.

“We need to retreat before more of these fleabags come in,” the male hissed, his face and leg bleeding where the guard had gotten a few good bites in.

“This is more than we prepared for, Ellan.”

The woman stared me down, her witch eyes glowing slightly. Our gazes locked, and I got the sense that I was officially meeting my mortal enemy. Well, that was fine. If she wanted to be my nemesis, I would show her just how sharp my teeth were. No matter what kind of shield they had.

“*Fine*. We’ll leave for now. But this isn’t over, mutt. This will never end.”

With one last glare, their forcefield filled with smoke, obscuring them from our vision. I lunged forward again, my teeth making it through their barrier but little else. I fought, I fought as hard as I could, me and my inner wolf pushing so hard that our muscles were straining. But I was determined. The specters that haunted my pack needed to *go*.

But just when I could feel my body begin to give out, the shield vanished entirely. I skidded through the smoke, prepared for an attack. But there wasn’t one. In fact, there wasn’t anything at all. The circle the three had crowded themselves into was empty, leaving only the vague taste of smoke in the air.

They vanished? I knew witches were powerful. but I didn't know they could do *that!*

“Hello?! What’s going on out there!? Are we being mugged?”

Stacy/Ann/Jessica’s voice drifted to my wolf ears and I realized that I had to act very quickly. There would be no respite from the furor of battle; I was going to have to hop into damage control right away.

Shifting back into my human form, I staggered for a moment. Flickering back and forth between my two selves so rapidly was plenty demanding on my body, but with my sudden healing on top of it, I was especially drained. But I only gave myself a moment's rest before rushing to my office door.

“It’s okay, it was just, uh...gang activity!”

“Gang activity? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, they ran off once they got our cashbox!”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry. But at least everyone is okay?”

“Yeah, everyone’s okay.”

“Well...could you let us out then?”

Right. I supposed that was a natural thing to ask. Alright then, I needed to stall. Because I definitely didn't need them coming out right away.

“Uh, hold on. They’ve knocked some stuff in front of the door. Let me and Lyssa clear it out.” Quickly, I grabbed the remnants of the counter and shoved it in front of the door. I’d never been so grateful that the entrance to my office swung outward into the main shop instead of inward.

“Please do! I really gotta pee!”

That wasn't the first I've heard of such an adrenaline response, but jeez, it sure was some inconvenient timing.

“Uhhhh, use the monstera pot in the corner?”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope, very much not. But I’m gonna call the police now, then Lyssa and I are gonna get you out.”

“Right. Well, hurry, please. I really don't want to have to pee in your houseplants on my first day at a new job.”

“Can't blame you there.”

I did indeed hurry off, but not to free my employee as she asked. Instead, I piled a few more things in front of the door. Yeah...I was a bad boss. But I was doing it out of the goodness of my heart, or something like that.

“Damage report,” I said, striding towards Ricky, my fury at the situation the only things fueling me. I felt like someone had scraped out my insides,

leaving me an exhausted mess.

“We’ve lost one of our men.”

I swallowed down the gasp that wanted to fight its way out of my throat. “Who died?”

His grim expression made my heart drop even further. “He’s not dead. He’s taken.”

Oh *no*, they did not. When I made the promise to myself that we weren’t going to lose another pack member, I meant it.

“You have to go after him!”

But the security didn’t go after them. Instead, Ricky just looked at me with a truly worn expression. “Ma’am, if we leave you now, they’ll just use the opportunity to round back and attack while you’re isolated. Both you and Miss Lyssa are amazing fighters, but you’re exhausted. And two weary shifters against three expert witches are not great odds.”

He was right. He was right, and I knew it, but I also hated it. My brain scrambled for some other option where we didn’t just abandon our fellow packmate to whatever it was the kidnappers were doing with our kind.

“Then send half of you! No wolf left behind!”

“There’s no trail, Miss Reese,” Ricky reminded me. God, I wanted to be so angry at him, but I could tell that he hated what he was saying as much as I hated hearing it. “Even if we did send out half of our number, they would need to stick together for safety. So, without some sort of trail to follow, the best they can do is run around and hope to stumble on three injured witches.”

Dammit.

Dammit.

It wasn’t fair. Any of it. My teeth again ached with the urge to rip that vile witch’s throat out, and I couldn’t help but be a little irritated at myself for letting her slip away again.

Still, the look of fear on her face when she and her friends had been forced to retreat into their little bubble was quite satisfying. I hoped to see it again when I got my proper vengeance.

“I got in touch with one of the Alma’s witches,” another guard said, jogging up with his phone pressed to his chest like someone was still on the line. There were four deep grooves along his cheek and left shoulder that I guessed were from the ice spikes, but they were already sluggishly closing up. “Our Alma says she will also come with to make sure everyone’s alright.”

Ricky nodded, and I couldn’t help the nerves that bubbled up in my gut.

“Are we sure they’re trustworthy? The witches, that is?” I asked, chewing on my lip as I did. I liked to think that I wasn’t prejudiced as a person, but with all the witches attacking us lately, it was hard not to feel apprehensive around them.

“If the Alma uses them as contacts, I would say they are.”

“Right, okay. That makes sense.”

But even if it did make a fair bit of sense, I was still nervous as we waited for the magical users to arrive, Savannah and her guard right behind them. I pointed to where the human employees were still trapped and the witch moved the barriers aside with a wave of her hand before entering. As for our Alma, she went around to each person, making sure we were alright.

“I can feel your energy waning,” she murmured as she finished up with me. I only had a few scratches so my examination was fairly short. Switching between forms multiple times could do that, but I was gonna pay for it with a very sore day when I woke up again.

“Yeah, that’s a good word for it.”

“Here, drink this. It’ll help you have a full night’s rest and ease the whiplash tomorrow.” She handed me a little vial of bluish liquid from her belt and I drank it down. I expected something vile and noxious, but mostly it tasted a bit like...really flowery and herbal Gatorade.

“That’s not bad,” I said, handing her back the empty vial.

Her face lit up in a way that always reminded me I needed to hang out with Savvy more. Ever since I’d stopped staying at her house, I’d gone to one dinner with her. She had to be lonely, and that just wasn’t right considering how much she did for us.

“You think so? It’s a new recipe!”

“Yeah, it kinda reminds me of a sports drink, but healthier and with less sugar.”

“Ah! That’s amazing, thank you. There’s some chamomile and dandelion in there for sweetness and the sleeping, but a bunch of other stuff I wasn’t sure on.”

“You did great.” I gave her a pat on the shoulder, and goodness, one would have thought I’d handed her a Nobel peace prize with how she beamed at me. “Lyssa will love it, too, I’m sure.”

“Well, that’s good, because she needs it.” With a determined nod, Savvy went over to the shifter in question, leaving me to sit there a moment and decompress.

In fact, I was still decompressing when the witch exited the office and my two human employees marched out after her, staring straight forward as they exited as if nothing was amiss.

“They’ll remember a gas leak and you sending them home safely,” the older woman said before bowing to Savvy and heading out. Well, at least that was taken care of.

Now I just had to wait for Theo to arrive. And really, it couldn’t be fast enough.

THEO

“**W**hat the hell is going on?” Mahlan asked from the driver’s seat. I could hear the fear and anger in his voice just as well as I could my own in my answer.

“There’s an attack on Emma’s shop. Three witches.”

“*What?*”

The van lurched forward as Mahlan hit the gas, and I didn’t stop him. The vehicle could go far faster than we could for a greater distance. The best thing to do would be to push it to its limits, then all pile out when we hit the edge of the city to shift. While we couldn’t beat out a vehicle on the highway, we certainly could in city traffic. Sure, it would be difficult for five wolves to move incognito, but at the moment, I didn’t particularly care about stealth.

Screw our vows of secrecy, screw the council’s mandate that subterfuge came above all else. Emma and Lyssa were in trouble; that was all that mattered.

“The guards are with her. I could pick up them fighting over the phone,” I said, pushing down the panic, the urge to throw myself against the side of the van as if that would make us go faster.

“Did she say if anyone was hurt?” Jacobian asked, already beginning to pull his long, dark hair back from his face as if preparing for battle. Which, I supposed, he was. Sure, he wasn’t going to have a ponytail in wolf form, but I noticed it was a thing he did when he wanted to clear his head.

“She didn’t. Just that she had two humans there as well. Her new hires.”

Parker let out a whistle. “Wow, that’s one hell of a first day.”

“You’re telling me,” Kaleb agreed.

“Just get ready for a fight, everyone. Hopefully, by the time we arrive, they’ll have already subdued or killed the witches, but we should be prepared for anything.”

“Exactly.”

“Should...should we call the council about this?” Parker asked quietly from the back. “I know we shouldn’t bother them with petty grievances, but this seems to be escalating.”

I didn’t answer that, anger lancing through me as I remembered the conversation Mahlan and I had behind closed doors the previous night.

I wanted to inform them, figuring we could use all the help we could get and that we should also see if other packs in other countries were suffering similar attacks. But Mahlan was completely against it in a way I just didn’t understand. He said we needed to figure it out on our own, which sure, I could kind of get with, but also...we *weren’t* figuring it out on our own. And if that weren’t enough, I wanted to see why the council had been so lackadaisical in their response to what had happened with Lyssa’s family. What if there was something else going on, but I would never find that puzzle piece because Mahlan was stubbornly insisting that we needed to solo our enemies?

Infuriating. As his best friend, I’d disagreed with Mahlan plenty of times, but never so vehemently about such an important issue. And since I would most likely end up being his beta, his right-hand man, I wasn’t going to rat him out to the rest of our circle.

But I also wasn’t going to lie for him.

So instead of answering, I pressed my lips together and gave Mahlan the metaphorical floor.

“Not yet,” he answered simply. “It’s not the right time yet.”

I wanted to snap at him, asking what would be the right time and what exactly we were waiting for, but I wasn’t going to confront him like that in front of our entire inner circle. Once we got back and took care of the attack on Emma’s shop, he and I were going to have a long, *long* talk.

But first we had to get there. And that couldn’t happen soon enough.

I kept looking down at my phone while Mahlan pushed the pedal to the metal. I was honestly surprised that we didn’t have any cops on our tail by the time we pulled off on the last exit before the city.

“Wait, what’s happening?” Sam asked as we pulled down a side road that was popular with hunters.

“We’re shifting to get there faster,” I answered frankly. “City traffic and speed limits will slow us down way too much.”

“But what about me?”

Mahlan responded by throwing him the keys, with Sam barely caught. “Ride’s all yours.”

“What?! I haven’t driven a car in like...ever!”

“Best time to start is now.”

“That’s absolutely not true at all! The best time would have been at least a week ago!”

Mahlan shrugged and I gave the green witch a pat on the shoulder. “You’ll kill it.”

“I don’t want to kill *anything* while driving!”

“You’ll be fine.”

Normally, I would like to think that I would stick around longer to assure and comfort the young man, but normally, my mate wasn’t fighting for her life with three witches. I could feel her adrenaline and occasional pain spiking through our bond, making me crave battle. Or was it a craving to protect her? I supposed it didn’t matter, because either way, I needed to get to her as quickly as possible.

Sam looked like he was going to say something, but I already was half turned around and exploding out of my skin. Rapid transformation was always more draining than more cautious shifts, but I wasn’t taking another second that I didn’t have to. I was aiming for speed, and everything else came second.

Because what if that extra second was when a witch was able to get the drop on Emma? Or run her through with some cursed spell of theirs? Or drag her away? I knew that she had security with her, but even with ten other shifters, bad things could always happen.

At least I would likely feel if she was grievously wounded through our bond. Although it wasn’t anything like the psychic link most shifters shared in our animal forms, it did allow strong occurrences like that to travel through our connection. And while I was feeling a lot of things from her, none of them were remotely close to lethal injury.

She was getting hurt, however. I could feel it squeezing my heart. I should be there. I should be *protecting* her, not running at a full sprint to try to make it before the worst could happen.

But what was done was done. We needed to travel to Lyssa’s family to

try to get all the info we could, and hopefully we'd found a couple of things that would help out once I could go through everything again and physically map it in connection to everything else.

The only thing we could do was run, and so we ran. And ran. And ran. We tried our best to stick to back alleys and places we wouldn't be spotted, but I wasn't willing to lose time by only sticking along abandoned routes. So yeah, maybe there would be a news story about a pack of wild, oversized wolves traveling through the city, but whatever.

We didn't slow until we were nearly to Emma's shop, and we only shifted back into our human form to cross the last street. We were all covered in sweat and ruffled, but that wasn't anything a shower couldn't fix. And if we were drawn into battle, we were going to end up a lot dirtier, I was sure.

Running across the street, I was disheartened to see that all the windows were shattered. Dammit. Emma had just finished setting up that half the shop. I knew how proud she was for her business and how hard she'd worked to make it viable in an increasingly difficult economy. It was bad enough that the witches were trying to hunt her down and hurt her pack, but why did they have to keep going after her baby, too?

I would do whatever she needed to get it cleaned up and fixed. It would be my third greatest priority after protecting her and figuring out the mystery that was plaguing our lives.

At least as we approached, I didn't hear the sounds of battle. Or even of humans crying. No...the whole place was strangely still.

I burst through the front door with Mahlan right behind me. I wasn't sure what to expect, but the sheer chaos in the store was definitely it. The surprise was Emma sitting on the only intact chair in the shop, crying quietly while the security busied themselves with cleaning up so they weren't just staring at Emma while she mourned.

"Emma?" I asked, crossing to her immediately. She moved much faster than I expected, leaping off the stool.

"Theo!" she cried, hugging me for all she was worth. Even without her inner wolf, Emma was quite a strong woman, making my ribs creak. But I appreciated the demi-pain and hugged her back. And maybe I subtly looked her over for wounds as well. I could smell what seemed to be a healing potion on her breath, which made me feel better that she had at least been treated, though I didn't see Savvy anywhere. "You're here!"

"Of course I am. But where's Lyssa? And the Alma?"

“Savannah treated everyone, then went back home for her own safety,” Emma answered wearily. “As for Lyssa, she went home and wanted to call Ashlee to make sure she was okay.” Mahlan drew in a sharp breath behind me and Emma leaned to the side to give him an understanding look. “Don’t worry, she has her own security detail. Ricky made sure to call some reinforcement, including some of our guys on the police force.”

“Thank you,” Mahlan breathed. “Are you alright?”

Emma let out a soft chuckle. “I’m fine. You don’t have to stick around if you want to go to her. I’m sure she’d be relieved to see you.”

“Thanks again,” Mahlan said, stepping forward to kiss the top of his sister’s head. I was glad we were in the pack where our alpha had healthy family relationships. Too many times, I’d seen packs torn apart by sibling rivalry or straight-up attrition. “We’ll talk tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

With a nod to me, Mahlan quickly hurried out. I didn’t blame him one iota, knowing I would do the same if Emma had gone home.

“The security feed is set up here, right?” Jacobian asked, stern face somehow even sterner. And people thought *I* was the icy one. Honestly, it was probably because I had a white wolf form and his was gray with umber streaks in his coat.

“Yeah, they finished it up yesterday,” Emma answered.

“I’m going to check that.”

Jacobian headed to the back while the rest of our circle spread out a bit, clearly not sure of what to do.

“Is Sam almost here?” Kaleb asked as he pulled a garbage bag out of the closest bin. “We should have him scan this place?”

“Oh, Sam!” Emma blurted, looking past me for the witch. “Where is he? You didn’t leave him in the backwaters, did you?”

“No, he’s driving our van here after we all bailed at the city limits. He should be here soon.”

Emma let out a breath as if *he* was the one who needed to be worried about and not her. Goodness, I just wanted to swaddle her in blankets, feed her blue-rare steak and venison, and rub her feet until she forgot about all the trauma the past weeks had brought.

But it couldn’t be that easy, could it? There were always details to wrap up and things to do to make sure everyone was safe and that no detail was lost in the rush of after-battle.

“Okay, that’s good.” She chewed her lip for a moment. I desperately wanted to stop her with a kiss, but I could sense that it wasn’t the time. “I have something to tell you. It’s not good.”

My mind went into a very sudden overdrive, thinking that somehow she had a missing limb under her clothes or had somehow been cursed in a way I couldn’t sense. But then she kept talking, saving me from giving myself a heart attack.

“We lost one of the guards,” she said, shame dripping from her every word. Once more. I wanted to embrace her, to shield her from all the evil in our situation, but I knew she cared far too much about our pack to ever accept that.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmured. “We’ll make sure his final arrangements—”

“No, he’s not dead. The witches took him.”

Oh. Well, that certainly wasn’t good. Understandable, but not good. “They had time to do that?”

“He was knocked unconscious earlier in the fight. We think they snagged his unconscious body on their way out.”

“How did they escape, by the way?”

“Some sort of teleportation spell. It was instantaneous. I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

My thoughts clouded at that. Violent, kidnapping witches who could teleport were not something that boded well for our pack. But it would explain why we had such issues tracking them and how they seemed to get in and out of places so quickly.

Emma’s expression brightened suddenly, making me feel whiplash from the conversation. “Wait, you’re all here! That means that there’s enough wolfpower to spare to try to find the missing guard!”

“I can help with that,” Parker said, Kaleb quickly hurrying to stand beside him. “I don’t think I’ll be of much use here.”

“Thank you,” I said. “And I’m going to escort Emma home. Ricky, if you want to delegate your men to go with Parker and Kaleb, I’ll take about half your men to Emma’s home. I also would like you to double the overnight shift that’s set to replace them.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get right on that.”

“Emma, I’m going to go talk to Jacobian since he’s the one who’s gonna be here when Sam arrives, then we can go home. Is there anything you want to bring?”

“Uh...my laptop.”

“Alright, you go get that and we’ll meet back here.”

“Yeah, okay. I can do that.”

I was loath to leave her, but I knew I needed to sort some details out so I wouldn’t be on the phone the entire evening. I was dead-set on getting her home and pampering her however she needed.

“Hey,” I said once I reached the back of the store where Jacobian was, already scrutinizing the security feed screen with furrowed brows.

“I heard you. Yeah, I’ll make sure I’m here until Sam arrives and have him scan for magical signatures.”

“Thanks. Do you need me to send anything else your way?”

“Uh, yeah. I could use Brayden and Philip to watch my back while I concentrate, and maybe some food from Del Mergio’s.”

“Alright, I’ll get all that set up for you. Do you want us to stick around until those two can show up?”

“No, just leave a single guard. That should suffice to make sure no one gets the drop on me. This security system is good, so all the files are pretty lengthy to download and archive.”

“Understood. I’ll make the calls before we leave, however.”

Jacobian nodded and that seemed to be the end of the conversation, but he called my name right before I could exit. “Theo?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re gonna make an excellent beta.”

“Oh, uh, thanks.”

He dismissed me with a nod, like that was the most normal thing to say. Oh well, I would take a genuine compliment when it was given, especially if it was from someone who thought about his words as much as Jacobian. Especially since I didn’t feel like I was doing a particularly great job. Especially not with another guard being spirited away.

But I didn’t let myself worry about it too much, instead hurrying back into the devastated part of the store. While there wasn’t much structural damage, most of the racks and displays were utterly destroyed. I didn’t know if the stock on them was salvageable or not, but I imagined at least a little was most likely going straight to shrink.

Jeez, it sucked. I was glad that Emma was okay, and that technically, our casualties were low, but I couldn’t help but feel a bit devastated and angry when I looked at the havoc wrought on Emma’s shop. She worked so hard for

it, and the witches repeatedly going for it seemed sort of needlessly cruel. Like they'd moved beyond being evil in the shadows to openly antagonizing her for daring to survive their first attempt.

"You ready?" I asked her, my body aching to hold her close. But if I did that now, we'd never get home and just end up standing in the mess of her ruined shop.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

I held out my hand to her and she took it, those delicate fingers of hers intertwining with mine. It was an innocent enough gesture, but it still made my heart jump in my chest. It never ceased to amaze me how her powerful wolf form came from such a tiny casing compared to mine. My own hand was nearly double the size of hers.

Wordlessly, we headed out to the street. I didn't exactly have a car considering I'd literally ran to her shop, but I'd called John to come pick us up. I knew he would likely already be on his way considering Mahlan had gone home ahead of us on foot. Or on paw, rather.

Sure enough, the older beta arrived about seven minutes later. As we slid into the car, Emma shifted and pulled her phone out. I noticed it was now cracked in several places and resolved to have that fixed immediately, too.

"Wow, how is it only six pm?" she murmured, looking so thoroughly exhausted. "It feels like...I dunno. Midnight or something."

"Battle can do that to you," I answered. I knew she was well-aware of that, but I felt like I should respond.

"Yeah, I'd say so." She shook her head. "I can't believe it. It's like my normal closing time."

"It doesn't feel like it to me, either."

She nodded, still staring at her phone before shifting so that she was leaning against my side. She did it so nonchalantly, like it was the most natural thing to do, and I cautiously rested my arm over her shoulders.

But even if I didn't react overtly, my heart soared at the contact. It meant so much to me that she trusted me to comfort her. That she would directly seek solace with my presence. Sure, our mating journey hadn't started off great, but I couldn't help but be hopeful about where it was going.

We were quiet the rest of the ride, but it wasn't an uncomfortable sort of quiet. I did probe our bond occasionally, worried that there was something I was missing, but mostly came up empty. It was probably just my paranoia, but I felt like we all got off too easily. Well, not the guard who was missing,

but everyone else.

I wasn't going to share that qualm with Emma, however. It was obvious that she was dealing with a lot and needed help. And that was the least I could do for her.

Once we arrived, I carried her bag in and herded her towards the kitchen. "How about some Gatorade and a sandwich? I feel like a protein boost would do you good."

She nodded dully, half-melting onto one of her kitchen stools. "Could you make me one of Mahlan's breakfast shakes? I've got the vitamin powder in the cabinet left of the sink."

"Yeah, of course."

I hurried through making all that for her, trying to keep her in my peripheral vision while also not seem like I was staring at her uncomfortably. I didn't want her to feel like she was being creepily watched or babysat. I was just...worried.

I set the shake, a Gatorade, and a truly loaded ham and cheese sandwich in front of her. I was quite grateful when she ate it without protest. I'd been through plenty of battles myself and while some had left me ravenous, some had turned my stomach so much that the thought of food was nauseating.

Thankfully, she didn't have any trouble, making short work of the snack and both drinks.

"Do you want more?" I asked, trying to make my voice as gentle as possible. It wasn't hard. Something about Emma always made me want to be soft, to be the kindest and best man I could possibly be.

"No, I think I'm good for now."

"Alright then." I busied myself with putting the plate and smoothie cup into the dishwasher.

"I was wrong."

I stood up and turned, her concern almost like a bullhorn to me. "Pardon?"

"About being the bait. I was wrong. It's...it's awful."

My heart squeezed so hard in my chest, I was surprised I wasn't forced into a shift. I could hear just how much she was broken up about it, and I hated it. Basically, she was telling me that I was right, but I didn't *care* that I was right. What I cared about was her health and happiness.

"Hey, hey, It's okay." I quickly rounded the counter and drew her into my arms. "You didn't do anything wrong. We're all in this mystery together, and

we're all just trying our best."

She turned fully into my chest, wrapping her arms around my shoulder and pressing her face into me. She wasn't quite crying, but I could feel her pain pouring through our bond. My poor beloved. She deserved so much more, and I was failing at protecting her as a good mate should.

"I just...I know I killed Sarah, but it was because I needed to. When it comes to this other witch, it's not just that, you know? It's not just the need to survive. I want to *hurt* her. I want her to bleed out while I stand over her corpse, and I want her to know that it was me."

Her voice shook terribly. I felt deeply for her. While Emma was a capable fighter, it was true that she'd never had much bloodlust. She hunted and killed out of necessity, not for joy or glory or status. It made sense that the sudden murderous drive in her would scare her.

But it *also* made sense why she would want to tear that witch apart. The woman had wreaked total havoc on Emma's life, taken away her personal freedom for her future, and had hurt countless people in our pack. And not to mention her best friend, Lyssa.

"Hey, it's okay to feel whatever you feel. And it's okay to be overwhelmed by it, too. This whole situation is more than should be asked of anyone, and you're handling it as best you can."

"You really think that?" Emma asked, looking up at me with those beautiful eyes of hers. Even red-rimmed and teary, she was breathtaking to me. I was pretty sure I could go my whole life without ever meeting a woman as strong, resilient, and empathetic as her. Mahlan and Lyssa talked a lot about being fated mates, but I couldn't help but feel that way about Emma.

I knew that technically we weren't, considering that she was in love with someone else and I'd been the one pining over her for decades. And because our mating bond hadn't been nearly as volatile as Lyssa and Mahlan's had been.

But to me, not being fated made our relationship that much better. We were both choosing to make it work despite the fraught circumstances. And I treasured that. Sure, we weren't head over heels, sappy romantics spending our days sipping wine at fancy restaurants, but I knew she cared deeply for me. And it was okay that she wasn't as in love with me as I was with her. I didn't need that. I just needed her to be happy and safe.

"I do, without a doubt."

"Thank you." But she just pressed her face harder into my chest and I

knew there was something else that she wanted to say.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I...I wish you were there. I know I handled it, but I really, *really* wish you were there.”

And there went my heart again, squeezing tightly with guilt and worry. “I’m sorry. And I promise I’ll never leave you again.”

“That’s not realistic.”

“I don’t care. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen.”

She chuckled gently against my shirt. While I felt good that I helped improve her mood at least a little, I couldn’t help but feel like something else was wrong. Something I was missing.

But what?

I didn’t know, so I just held Emma. Held her and poured as much comfort as I could into our bond.

“I promise I’ll keep you as safe as possible, and I’m sorry today happened. It never should have.”

“You couldn’t have prevented that,” Emma murmured, her voice muffled by my tear-soaked shirt.

“We don’t know that. I’m sure the witches knew we weren’t here and took advantage of the situation.”

“Yeah, but you can’t babysit me forever. I’d smother under the attention.” Emma pulled away from me and wiped her face. “But thank you. I appreciate that you care enough to make that promise.”

“Of course I do.” I gently stroked her face, and she brought her own hand up to rest against the back of mine. It was a sweet moment between us. I just wished that it wasn’t borne out of someone attacking my mate.

We stood like that for a bit before Emma cleared her throat. “I’m gonna hit the bathroom, okay? My adrenaline is wearing off and my body’s suddenly reminding me that I am, in fact, mortal.”

“Ha, alright then.”

I took a step away so that she could slide off the stool, but as she dropped her hand, I noticed something strange.

“What’s that?” I asked, catching her wrist and pulling it into the light underneath the kitchen island.

“What’s what?”

I bent over, taking a closer look at what was absolutely a ring around her pack brand. “This,” I said, trying not to sound shocked. But my mind was

already shooting through a thousand and one different things that it could be. The most obvious was that it was a spell by the witches. The question was, what was it supposed to *do*?

“Oh my God, what *is* that?!” Emma cried, leaning over as well. “Did I get cursed?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly, phone already halfway out of my pocket. “I’ll call Savannah and Mahlan to meet us here.”

“Ask if Lyssa can come, too!”

“Of course.” Emma could ask for me to get Santa to drop by and I would do my best to make that happen.

I dialed up Savvy first as I figured she would take longer to arrive. Thankfully, she answered as quickly as she usually did.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Theo. I need you to come look over Emma.”

“Oh, did something happen since I last saw her? I looked her over and she seemed alright. No harmful magical signatures lingering in her or anything.”

“She’s got a strange mark around her pack brand and we don’t know what it is, but I get a bad feeling.”

“A mark? What’s it shaped like?”

“A circle.”

“Huh, alright. I’ll be there asap and I’ll bring my full kit.”

“Thanks. Mahlan and Lyssa will be here, too.”

“That’s good. It’ll give me a chance to reexamine Lyssa and make sure I didn’t miss anything on her, either.”

“Sounds good.”

I called Mahlan and the call was equally efficient. After just a few moments, I returned to Emma, drawing her into my arms yet again.

“Hey, it’s gonna be okay. Savvy, Mahlan, and Lyssa are on their way.”

She nodded and I could feel the panic leaking through our bond. I felt like I was sensing way more than I ever had before, and I couldn’t help but wonder if we were growing stronger in our mating or if Emma was just becoming truly overwhelmed with her emotional load.

“Okay. What about Sam? Should we have him look me over too? He’s a green witch, right? Isn’t most of their focus on healing, growing, and breaking curses?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll call him, too. He’s probably at the shop by now.”

“Thank you,” Emma breathed, clinging to me even more tightly for a moment before releasing me to make the call.

Which I did expediently, taking only a step away to bring my phone up to my ear. For once, Sam answered on the second ring. Maybe Savvy was wearing off on him.

“Sam?”

“In the flesh. Just finished up scanning the store, logged everything in my notepad. I’m gonna head home and sleep in my own bed if you don’t mind.”

“Actually, something’s up with Emma and we want you to come look at her?”

At that, Sam’s easy nature dropped. “Something wrong? Like what? Is she okay? Have you called your Alma lady?”

“We have. She’s alright for the moment, but we would really appreciate you being here.”

“Well, I guess I can drive this van a bit more since I made it to the shop in one piece. I’ll let Jacobian know that I’m going and be right there.”

“Thank you, Sam. I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just remember it on my birthday.”

“Will do.”

He hung up and I returned to my mate. “It’s gonna be alright, okay?” I comforted her, running my hand through her hair. And yet again, I was pleased when she pressed into the touch.

“From your words to God’s ears.”

I couldn’t agree more.

EMMALINE

I was so incredibly grateful that Theo was home.

While I had handled myself relatively fine in battle, and I'd already been healed by Savvy, I was so incredibly happy to see him again. Comfort, relief, happiness—all the emotions hit me when we hugged, which served as a sharp counterpoint to the grief and anger that was racing through me.

“Can you tell me exactly what happened in the battle?” Theo asked, his voice so tender, so sweet as he stroked my face again. I never thought I was a particularly sappy person, but goodness, that simple touch made me want to melt and forget about the murderous witches trying to...well, do whatever it was that they were trying to do.

“Um, well, I got thrown around a bit with a couple of magical blasts. Got a fireball shoved into my side. It didn't make it through all my layers of skin, but it did quite a bit of damage. I shifted back into a human, called you, then shifted back into my wolf form to continue the fight.” Saying it out loud made it feel so simple, like not much had happened, but the battle had felt like it lasted forever at the time. “They sent out some ice spikes, but I dodged all of those, then they hid in their stupid shield bubble.”

“And you weren't able to get through that at all?”

I felt a tiny bit of pride flicker in my gut. “I almost did a couple of times. Managed to get my muzzle in, but couldn't progress much farther than that.”

“Alright. Make sure to tell Savvy all this. If she couldn't sense this earlier, it's probably not a big deal.” I appreciated Theo trying to downplay things, but he forgot that I could sense as much through our bond as he could.

I could feel him freaking out honestly a bit more than I was.

Maybe that should have made me panic, but it didn't. Instead, it filled me with a certain sort of warmth at being so cared for. Really and truly cared for. "Yeah, it's probably not a big deal," I agreed, hoping and praying he was right.

"Hey, why don't we go rest on the couch while we wait for the others to get here?" Theo suggested, his voice so incredibly sweet.

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

He led me into the living room and sat first, patting the couch next to me in encouragement to lie down. I did, resting my head in his lap as he ran his fingers through my hair.

Oh, that was nice. It really was. It was the quiet of the moment that did it for me, and the simplicity of it all. It wasn't some extravagant date with surprises, flash mobs, and thousand-dollar bottles of wine. It was just me and him, and the affection we had for each other.

Yeah, I was pretty sure there was no denying it—I was falling in love with Theo. And it was more real, more visceral than I ever thought it could be. I felt silly wasting so much time on the shallow, almost schoolgirl sort of crush I'd had with Kaleb when I very much could have had the real thing with Theo.

Then again, maybe we'd needed that time apart to become the mature people we were. Well, relatively mature. If we'd gotten together in our late teenage years or college, we might have become exes, losing out on all the potential stretching out before us.

And I did indeed see potential. So much potential. I could imagine myself in the very same position on my couch, but stomach distended with pups. I could see myself tending to his wounds after a fight. I could see us arguing about which Christmas lights were best and whose taste in beer was worse.

And it was just so lovely. Instead of being terrified of domesticity, I was excited about it. Maybe because it represented a future where I didn't have the stress of a mysterious sect hunting down those I loved, or maybe I was learning and growing as well.

Who knew. At the moment, I wasn't concerned with solving that particular rhythm. I had plenty else to do. Even if that something else was lying contentedly on my couch, trying not to think about the strange circle surrounding my pack mark.

Theo and I didn't talk much while we waited for others to arrive, and

despite everything, I found my eyelids fluttering as I fought sleep. Thankfully, Mahlan arrived before I completely passed out, and I sat up as Theo hurried to let him in.

“Are you alright?” Lyssa blurted before she was even fully in the door, rushing over to me and throwing her arms around my shoulders. “My God, I was so worried about you!”

“I’m fine so far,” I said, hugging her right back. It felt good to embrace my friend. I probably should have right after battle, but we’d both been somewhat out of it. Adrenaline and anger could do that to a person.

“You’re not in any pain? You don’t feel weird?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m worn out from the fight, kinda jaggy, but otherwise alright, all things considered.”

“Well that’s good at least.” She settled herself beside me, leaning on my shoulder. As for my brother, he approached and sat on my other side, setting his broad arm across my shoulder.

“You don’t have to pretend for us if you’re hurting,” he said with that oh-so-serious voice of his that he used whenever he was trying to be grown up. I appreciated it, though, as much as I liked to tease him about it.

“I promise, I’m not. That’s the best way to help the witches get the jump on us. But right now, I don’t feel drained, cursed, tethered, or anything like that.”

“That’s good,” he said with a nod. “You’ve always been a bit sensitive to energies. If anyone would sense they were being cursed, it would be you.”

“Why, thank you. And to think you used to call me a drama queen when we were teens.”

“You *were* a drama queen. You’re just a drama queen with a strong perception of malevolent forces.”

I huffed a laugh. “Okay, fair.”

The mood lifted a bit with that, especially when Theo joined us on the cushy couch. Some people might find it weird for four adults to lounge together on a single, overstuffed piece of furniture, but most wolves enjoyed close physical contact with their pack mates. It wasn’t anything sexual, or at least it didn’t *have* to be sexual. It was a comfort and socialization thing, filling our bodies with all sorts of warm and fuzzy bonding chemicals that made us better fighters, protectors, and family members.

Savannah arrived not too much later, dressed in scrubs, which was definitely a different outfit than when I’d last seen her. That was when I

realized that she'd shown up to my shop in her pajamas, not an actual outfit. Right, I'd forgotten just how early it had been considering that our Alma usually stayed up all night for emergencies. Huh, she really was doing an excellent job. I should get her like...a gift basket or something. Was that an appropriate gift for an Alma? Maybe I should ask my parents.

"How is she?" Savvy asked, her guards posting themselves outside as Theo shut the door behind her.

"I'm fine," I answered, holding out my arm. "This is just the limb in question."

"Huh," was her simple reply as she crossed over to me, pulling the ottoman close so she could plop down right in front of me and take my wrist in hand. She turned it this way and that, examining it while the rest of us waited with bated breath. "I'm not getting any feeling from it. Let me see if it reacts with anything."

Reaching into the bag she'd set on the ground beside her, she started rifling through it. Finally, she pulled out three small vials filled with different powders.

"Okay, this first one is going to sting."

I nodded, watching as she took out a tiny metal pole almost like a chopstick, but the very end of it was flat. She scooped a tiny amount of the purple powder out and spread it over a part of the circle.

"Ow!" I hissed, clenching my fist. She wasn't kidding about the sting. It *hurt*. It felt like I'd dumped boiling grease on just that tiny section of my skin.

"I know, I know. Just hold on. It'll only be a couple more minutes."

I waited, my leg bouncing, and after nearly half a minute, she finally wiped it away with a damp cloth. And goodness, that felt like *heaven* as it swept across my skin.

"Sorry about that, but you did excellently."

"Thanks," I gasped. "Hopefully that was the worst of it?"

"Yeah, I wanted to get the worst part out of the way."

"I get that logic."

The next two powders indeed went a lot easier, with only one of them itching a bit. But when she was done with that, she pulled out a small jar of sticky goo and spread it over my bonding brand. It was gross, frankly, but it didn't hurt, so I didn't complain. I just let her bow her head and rest her hand over it, chanting something in a language I didn't understand.

I supposed I didn't quite *get* Almas. I knew what they were in a literal sense, but I didn't exactly know or understand how they came to be. They couldn't shift, but they were usually born of shifters. They had magic, but they weren't witches. All their magic seemed specifically geared towards helping wolf shifters. There had to be a story to how all that started. Maybe one day, I would ask her. When I wasn't possibly cursed by an untraceable magic, however.

Maybe fifteen minutes passed, maybe twenty, before Savvy sat back with a huff. "I'm sorry, I'm not sensing anything out of it. Not even a magical signature. If I didn't know better, I would say this is an old scar."

"Well, it definitely isn't," I said, deflating. Strangely enough, hearing that it was nothing made everything so much worse. Because it obviously wasn't *nothing*, so it was yet another mystery to add on top of the stack of mysteries plaguing my life.

Great.

"I know. But I'm certain you'll need a witch to figure out whatever this is."

I looked to Theo. "Did Sam give an ETA?"

"No, but he should be here any minute. Your shop isn't that far away."

"I hope something didn't happen to him..." Lyssa said, chewing on her fingernails. I didn't quite have the full story on the two of them, but I knew that Sam was one of the few good things that happened to her right after her family had abandoned her, and that losing him again would not go well for her.

"I'm sure he's fine," I urged, patting her shoulder with my free hand. "He probably stopped for coffee."

"At this hour?"

As if fate herself was listening, there was a knock on the door before it opened. Theo jumped up, but I wasn't worried. With the number of guards we had outside, there was no way someone was going to just knock and waltz in unless they were an ally.

"Someone ordered a green witch?" Sam said, doing a dramatic spin before taking a long sip of his comically oversized iced coffee.

"Told ya so," I said, sticking my tongue out at Lyssa. She just rolled my eyes, but she laughed. I did like making her laugh.

"Told her what?" Sam said, striding over to me.

"That you were taking a while because you were probably getting

coffee.”

Sam sent Lyssa a mock-affronted look. “You truly doubted my coffee addiction? And I thought we were friends.”

“Sam, it’s past seven pm.”

He just batted his ridiculously long lashes. Why did guys always have the thickest, fullest lashes without a drop of mascara? It was entirely unfair, and when the whole witch business was done, maybe I would see if there was a spell for making mine naturally like that. “And your point is?”

“Right. How silly of me.”

“Word to the wise, Missy Lissy, never bet against iced coffee.”

I could tell that his frivolous mood was getting to Theo, but I enjoyed it. It made the whole situation seem far less serious.

“So, where’s this mark I’m supposed to see.”

I lifted my arm that was still in Savvy’s lap. Although she was wiping it between each round, it was still vaguely shiny and sticky. Not exactly the best sensation. “Tada.”

“Alright, if you don’t mind handing over the reins, I’ll check this out.”

Savvy got up, allowing Sam to take her place, and he gingerly held my arm in one of his large, capable hands. I felt safe with him, too, which was about the last thing I expected to feel about a witch at the moment. Goodness, I was going to need some therapy once everything was said and done, and I could trust that my therapist wasn’t going to secretly try to gank me to get to my pack. Or traffic me. Or whatever it was they were doing.

“Hmmm,” Sam murmured, bending over so his face was right over it.

“You know, that’s the same thing I said,” Savvy joked nervously. I liked that she was trying to lighten the mood along with every else, but I couldn’t help but feel that she was a bit worried that she failed me. I was definitely going to need to take some time later to assure her that she was fine. But first, I had to let Sam do whatever it was he needed to do.

“So I’m gonna push some of my magic into this,” he said after a few minutes. “It’ll probably feel a little uncomfortable, but it should only last a moment or two.”

“Thanks for warning me.”

He gave me a soft smile before I felt something seep into me. It was almost like cold, oily vines crawling over my skin and melting into it, but also entirely invisible. It was creepy, and if it were anybody other than Sam, I would probably sock them in the face and demand that Savvy get whatever it

was out of me.

The vines went deeper. Not painful, but certainly not pleasant, either. It was just entirely alien, and I did my best to ignore it. Thankfully, it didn't last overly long, with only a thin line of sweat beading my forehead. But the serious expression on Sam's face certainly didn't make me feel better.

"Is it bad?" I asked, dread filling me as my throat tightened.

"Not bad per se," he answered, and I could tell he was choosing his words carefully, which did *not* make me feel better. "But I know what it is."

"You do?" Theo asked, leaning forward so much, I was surprised he didn't topple off the couch.

"Yeah, it's a tracker."

"A tracker?" I echoed. "Like a GPS?"

"Sorta. It's similar to what they were using on the moonstones to pick off pack members who were on their own and vulnerable."

"Why would they do that to me?" I asked, staring at my wrist in horror. Of all the things I had been imagining, that might have been the worst. If only because I was potentially endangering every single member of my pack.

"I imagine they're desperate after we stole our moonstone back and they haven't been able to reclaim them." He shook his head. His demeanor certainly wasn't making me feel better about the situation. "This is bad. Really bad. I can't remove it."

"What do you mean you can't remove it?" Mahlan snapped, suddenly on his feet.

"Didn't know that needed an explanation, but I mean I can't remove it. Magic of this level needs someone far more skilled than me, or the caster themselves. Or to cut Emma's entire arm off."

Wait, *what?! Not my arm!* I needed that! And while I had incredible regenerative abilities, I wasn't a *lizard* shifter. I wouldn't regenerate a whole limb, even hopped up on Savvy's healing.

"We're not cutting your arm off," Theo assured me before a very particular iciness seeped into his tone. "Sam, are you sure you can't break it? Or sort of...jam the signal?"

"It isn't a radio, my wolf man. It's a complicated spell tying that witch's magic to the magic of Emma's inner wolf. There's no jamming it, or confusing it, or anything like that."

Dozens upon dozens of terrible situations popped in my head, and I wanted to cry. Somehow, I managed to keep myself together enough to get

my words out. “Do...do I need to be exiled? Or, uh, or...” I drew in a shuddering breath. “Do we need to kill me?”

“*WHAT?!*” That was Theo, and I didn’t think I’d ever heard him sound so alarmed. Mahlan was just a step behind him while Lyssa just let out a soft gasp.

“No, nobody is dying,” Theo snapped, getting up to pace back and forth. That sinking feeling in my stomach only grew. What kind of mess had I gotten myself into?

“We’re not going to execute or exile you,” Mahlan said, giving me a comforting squeeze. “You’re my sister, Emma, and a loved member of our pack.”

“Besides...” Lyssa murmured, her voice sounding thick with stress. “The thing is, they’ve been watching you already and know your schedule fairly well. So really, can’t we just double your guard and make sure you stay away from other pack functions for a while? I know you being tracked isn’t ideal, but it’s not the end of the world.”

That seemed to calm Theo and Mahlan down. I supposed that she had a point. They seemed to be able to track me pretty well without magic so...was it even a big deal? Maybe I didn’t need to panic so hard.

“Actually,” Lyssa continued. “Since it’s the witch’s unique magic tied to Emma’s, couldn’t you kinda use it to track her like we hunted down Sarah?” I still heard her voice crack slightly when she mentioned her friend who had betrayed her. I’d do it again to save Lyssa’s life, but I remembered in the moment that she would be angry at me for ripping out the throat of her friend. I would always be immensely grateful that she seemed to understand, even if it was quite traumatic for her to watch her friend bleed out in her kitchen.

“That’s...that’s actually an idea,” Sam answered. “Don’t get me wrong—I need to do a lot of prep and cast one hell of a protection spell *and* a cloaking spell—but that bitch might have unintentionally handed us the keys to the kingdom!”

I heaved a sigh of relief that *something* could come out of all the chaos.

“Then get right on that,” Theo said, as determined as ever. I admired that about him, but it was pretty clear that nothing would be solved in one night. “The sooner we strike, the better.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, my furry friend. I can’t just pull this shit out of my back pocket. I need to prepare, gather ingredients, and most importantly, *rest*. I’ve been on the road with you for way longer than I should, and I can tell my

plants at home are feeling it.”

“What do you plants at home have to do with anything?”

Sam narrowed his gaze at Theo in a reproachful look. “Apparently I need to remind you that I am a *green witch*. I need to be around plants to refuel myself and grow my magic. And that bonus works even better with plants I have bonds with. So yeah, if you want me to cast two complicated spells right on top of each other *and* track a homicidal kidnapping witch from a homicidal kidnapping witch circle possibly led by two maniac brothers, I need to go home and spend some time with my foliage crew.”

Theo grumbled, but Mahlan just reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, handing a couple hundred over to Sam.

“Do whatever it is you need to do.”

“I most certainly will,” Sam said with a wink, taking the money. But as he stood to leave, he paused. “Hey, I know I joke around a lot, but I want all of you to know I’m taking this seriously. I won’t let anything happen to Lyssa, Emma, or any of you, really.”

“I know,” I answered, standing to hug him. It wasn’t the best news, but goodness, I was relieved that maybe, just maybe, my cloud could have a silver lining. “Thank you, for everything.”

“Of course. Y’all are basically family now, so you’re stuck with me.”

He left, but Theo was still pacing. I could feel his anxiety and anger spilling through our bond. I wished I could comfort him, but I wasn’t sure if he was ready for that yet.

“Mahlan, can you call in the emergency reserves for tonight? Tomorrow I’ll rearrange the shifts to accommodate for a double guard. I also recommend adding two more to Savannah’s home.”

“I would appreciate that,” Savvy said, also standing. “I know that Almas are generally off limits, but considering that these brothers killed Lyssa’s mother outright, I am worried they might try to use me to get to the rest of you.”

I nodded. That made sense considering that Savvy’s position tied her personal magic to each of us. Powerful stuff. It was easy to imagine them being able to somehow use her blood or her spirit to channel whatever they had been using the moonstone for.

There was a little more arranging before goodbyes were had, with Lyssa hugging me for a solid five minutes at the door before letting Mahlan escort her out. When everyone was gone and our guards posted outside, I shut the

door. And yeah, maybe I slid all five locks closed. Would they stop a determined witch? No. But they made me feel better.

“You’re gonna wear a hole in the floor,” I tried to joke with Theo. But when he turned to me, I only saw pain written across his features.

“I’ve failed you,” was all he said.

Oh *no*, that would not do.

“That’s not true,” I said, rushing to him and pulling him into a tight embrace. “We’re all doing the best we can. These are unprecedented times.”

He held to me just as tightly, and despite everything that was happening, I still felt so incredibly safe in his embrace.

“It doesn’t feel that way to me. I’m supposed to be protecting you, but I let you come to harm again.”

“There was nothing you could have done. You needed to go with my brother to Lyssa’s family. There’s more at play than just me, and you can’t be everywhere at once.”

He looked at me, and goodness, the expression in his eyes took my breath away. “For you, I would.”

I knew that the day had been long, and I was completely emotionally fried, but I was swept away in all of my fondness, my sheer affection for my mate. I pushed onto my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his.

It was just a simple kiss at first, but all of my passion quickly poured into it. I felt it ricochet around the bond I had with Theo, ramping up my own emotions. I was entirely prepared for him to push me away and tell me it wasn’t the right time, but he didn’t. Not at all. Instead, he held me to him like he was afraid I would vanish into smoke right in front of him, his mouth dominating mine.

If I was breathless before, I was nearly combusting as our mouths moved against each other. All the frustration, all the exhaustion, fear, battle lust, and everything else combined inside me, then was funneled through a lens of passion, leaving me filled to the brim with desire. With want.

When we eventually broke apart, both of us were breathing hard. Theo’s pupils were so blown out, his eyes might have been black. I loved the hungry way he looked at me. Like he wanted to sink his teeth into me and taste everything I had to offer.

But hey, I was willing to give it.

“Come with me,” I murmured, sliding my hand into his.

He didn’t say anything, but he followed me up the stairs and into my

room. There was a feral sort of energy to him that crackled behind my back the entire time, but I loved it. It made every emotion zinging through me that much more intense.

When we reached my room, I maneuvered him in front of the bed, then kissed him again, nipping at his bottom lip. He responded by gripping my waist tighter. If I was a human, I would have bruises there tomorrow. But as a shifter, I would have to cherish them for whatever short time they were there before my body erased them.

The kiss was wild, our hands roving over each other, my blood rushing in my veins. I was getting drunk on my own arousal, but it was a welcome change from all the negative feelings I'd been swamped with. I let myself drink it in, drown in it, and it wasn't until I was nearly dizzy with our combined heat that I finally pulled away.

"You don't have to," Theo breathed, because of course he did. He was always looking out for me. While some guys would take what I was offering up without asking a single question, the first thing he wanted to know was that I was okay. That I was doing everything of my own free will and not out of some strange compulsion or obligation.

And that was one of the many reasons why I was pretty sure I was in love with him.

"I want to," I answered simply before pressing on his chest. He let me, falling backward into a sitting position. Every nerve in my body was lit up with delight, my mouth practically salivating at what I was about to do.

He affixed me with the slightest smirk that absolutely drenched my panties. If he wasn't careful, I was going to need a rubber mat and a mop.

"As you wish."

THEO

I'd seen many beautiful sunsets and sunrises, beautiful landscapes and world wonders that left me speechless. But none of them, and I meant absolutely none of them, compared to the sight of Emma on her knees in front of me.

Her face was flushed with the pink of desire, bringing out the already attractive planes of her visage. I wished I had a camera on me so I could capture the moment, but I would just have to burn the beauty of it into my memory.

I'd fantasized about such things since I was a teen, but it was happening in real time. Her hands were on my belt, opening it before going to my zipper. Already, I was hard as a rock, my dick straining for her through my pants.

Perhaps it was strange to go from fearing for Emma's life and snapping at Sam, to being so deep in arousal that I didn't think I would ever come up again. But I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Or in this case, a surprise BJ.

I watched, enraptured by every detail of Emma as she pulled me from my pants and gave me a couple of strokes. I could smell her perfume, her body wash, and all the other cosmetics she used. But there was something else there, too. A deep, rich, and earthy scent that could only be her pheromones. They wrapped around me, tickling my nose before delving through my head.

It probably should have been distracting, but it wasn't. It was...it was...it was *incredible*. It enhanced every sensation, every bit of data I was absorbing. It lent itself to making everything seem too good to be true, but

hey, if I was dreaming, then I was more than happy to stay snoozing until dream-Emma was done with me.

But then she stroked me again with that velvety soft hand of hers, and I realized I never wanted her to be done with me. I could stay locked in that moment, edged for all of eternity, and I would be happy with that.

I certainly didn't complain as she increased the speed and pressure of her movement, drawing deep groans out of my throat until I was hard and dripping. When she paused, I didn't know whether to sigh in relief or beg for more. She had me halfway out of my mind, and I was loving it.

Fortunately, she didn't make me have to choose what to do. Instead, she looked up at me with a truly wicked expression before licking a long stripe along the underside of my length.

"Holy *shit*, Emma," I gasped, nearly doubling over above her head. I'd never been a hair-trigger sort of guy, but she had me feeling like I could explode at any moment.

Except I wasn't going to allow myself to do that. I wanted to enjoy whatever she gave me as much as possible. No way would I ever forgive myself if things ended after a minute because of a little premature explosion.

"If you're reacting that strongly already," Emma said, her tongue tracing the outline of her lips. Fuck, if she wasn't already occupied, I would kiss her senseless. "You might want to hold onto the bedsheets."

"Hey, nobody likes a brag—"

That was all I got out before she swallowed me down, welcoming me into the warm, wet slide of her mouth.

"*Shit!!!*"

Not exactly my most eloquent moment, but it was all my fried brain could think of. Almost immediately, Emma started working me over, her tongue curling this way and that while she bobbed up and down along my length.

My toes were curling in my shoes, sweat was beginning to drip down my forehead, and my soul was leaving my body. I had no idea that Emma was so skilled, but really, I should have known. She attacked everything with tenacity and dedication, so of course she'd be just as an attentive lover as she was a pack member, sister, and business owner.

Part of me felt like I didn't deserve her, didn't deserve her on her knees in front of me, giving me pleasure I never thought was imaginable. Despite her kind words, I still felt like I'd failed her. I needed to do better as her mate. I needed to find those witches who had tried to hurt her twice, kill them all,

then return home to her and eat her out until she couldn't walk the next day.

Yeah, that was a good plan if there ever was one.

But at the moment, I was going to let Emma do whatever she wanted with me, even if I thought that maybe I wasn't good enough for it. Because there was no way in hell I was going to stop her when her tongue was swirling around my sensitive head just so.

"Not bad," she remarked as she pulled off with a pop, her lips cherry red and swollen from her activities. Did I mention that I wanted to kiss her? Because I really, really, *really* wanted to kiss her.

So I did.

It was impossible to describe the movements I made, they all happened so fast. One moment, she was on her knees in front of me, the next, I'd picked her up and had her in my lap, those wonderfully soft yet muscular thighs of hers straddling me. It made me want to fuck up into her, to make her moan and cry out until both of our laps were soaked, but she had a few layers of clothes in the way.

I needed to do something about that.

She let out a breathless gasp and I took advantage of her open mouth to kiss her exactly as hard as I wanted to. I held nothing back, demanding of her, celebrating her. *Worshipping her.*

It was giddy. It was unhinged. But most of all, it was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. Kissing Emma. Kissing my *mate* with no walls between us was an epiphany to my soul, and my already tenuous patience snapped.

I could feel my nails grow and my teeth sharpened as I ripped into her clothes. They were probably expensive but whatever, I would replace them. Nothing like a designer mattered when it came to Emma and I being skin to skin.

She seemed to have the same sentiment because she ripped my shirt open, scattering buttons across the floor. Those would be annoying to vacuum later, but that was an issue for future Theo, not about-to-have-the-ride-of-his-life Theo.

Priorities.

It took a little bit of maneuvering, but finally, she was bare enough that I could feel her soaked entrance hovering above my straining manhood. As tempting as it was to just thrust up into her, to be enveloped in that tight, wet heat that had nearly driven me insane the first time, I couldn't be a selfish

lover. Not after Emma had been so attentive in her own ministrations.

And even if she hadn't, I wouldn't want to skip on the foreplay anyway. Making my mate orgasm only once wasn't enough. I needed her on my fingers, on my mouth, and then on my cock.

I slid my hand down her perfectly soft stomach. The feel of her skin against my palm made my heart flutter in my chest, and that effect nearly doubled once my fingers reached her folds.

She was already so slick for me, practically dripping into my palm. I simply traced along her at first, mapping out the landscape, as it were. And perhaps I got a little lost in it, because after a few minutes, Emma's nails found my mating bond, pressing in so little shocks zinged up my neck.

"Come on, stop teasing me."

She said it so prettily, her eyes locking with mine, that I had no choice but to acquiesce. Not that I would want to refuse her anyway. As far as I was concerned, Emma deserved everything and anything that she wanted.

Capturing her lips in mine yet again, I slid my fingers into her, curling them just so. The sound that came out of her mouth was like pure rapture with my wolf senses, and I methodically pumped my digits into her.

It would be easy to lose control. To sate myself in her body and think of nothing else. But I wanted more than that. I wanted to satisfy her, except it was more than that. Really, I wanted to write myself over every cell in her body until we truly were two halves on one whole.

So I worked her over, listening to every clue she gave until she was coming all over my fingers.

"My God, Theo," she breathed in my ear, voice thoroughly debauched. I loved how fucked-out she looked, considering I'd just gotten started. When I was done, I hoped that her hair was soaked and her legs were wobbly. No, trembling. No, *shaking*—I was getting distracted.

I brought my fingers to my mouth, inhaling the scent of her before licking them completely clean. Emma stared at me the entire time, her breathing heavy and her eyes half-lidded.

"Do you have any idea how hot that is?" she slurred, leaning in so her mouth was only a breath away from mine.

"If it's half as good as you taste, pretty damn hot."

She tilted her head back in a heady laugh and I was pretty sure I could get intoxicated on such a sound. She really was truly beautiful, in every way.

"If you don't get inside of me, I'm pretty sure my lower half is going to

stage a formal protest.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

Taking myself in hand, I lined myself up with her center and pushed my hips upward, sliding into her with a hiss escaping between my teeth.

“God, Emma, you’re so fucking hot,” I gasped. Not exactly the most suave dirty talk, but it was the truth. She was gripping me like a vise, the hot, slick velvet of her walls massaging me with every move.

Again, I found myself close to losing it, pleasure dripping through every individual cell in my body. Mentally, I clamped down on my own sensation and put everything into driving up into Emma.

“Oh, Theo, *Theo!*”

Her soft yet wicked whines got me over the hump, but even with a momentary reprieve, I knew I wouldn’t be lasting long. Slipping my hand between our bodies, two of my fingers found that sensitive little button of hers. Her body jolted when I glanced over it, and I made sure to work my way up to direct pressure on it. After all, it wasn’t a joystick to be rough with. I’d thankfully learned that much when I was young.

As an added benefit, concentrating on every sign I could get from her allowed me to hover on my own edge, biding my time until her cries escalated and I felt her clamp down on me.

“Fuck Theo! Oh my God, *oh my God!*”

Her body squeezed me so hard that my own eyes almost rolled up into the back of my head. Gripping her hips, I held on for dear life as I pistoned up into her, swept away in the ecstasy of our coupling.

Somehow I managed to last through her entire orgasm, letting her ride me for all I was worth. And when I finally let myself topple over that delectable edge, it ripped the air right out of my body.

But I’d never been so happy to suffocate. I gave myself over to the pleasure, the rapture, the revelation of the two of us joining together in ways that only true mates could.

We stayed like that for a good moment, our pants filling the room. I wanted to stay inside of Emma forever, but eventually her body pushed me out. Wrapping my arms around her, I pulled the two of us back onto her mattress, arranging her so that she was the little spoon and I could wrap around her. Protect her, like I always should.

“That was amazing,” Emma breathed, sounded truly contented.

“It was,” I agreed, gently kissing the back of her neck. But just being

close to her was making my body respond, my blood quickening in my body.

“Whoa, easy there tiger,” Emma said, no doubt feeling my lower half begin to stir. “Maybe we should take a shower first.”

I squeezed her gently, burying my face in the crook of her shoulder. She smelled so good. Like her, like me, like pure sex. “We don’t *have* to take a shower.”

“We’re not beasts full-time,” she chided teasingly, snuggling closer with me. “We’ll snuggle for thirty minutes, then get cleaned up.”

I yawned, letting my eyelids flutter closed. “Sure, whatever you say.”

THEO

Things changed a bit after that. I wasn't presumptuous enough to think that Emma was fully in love with me as I was with her, but there was no denying that she felt some sort of affection for me. I'd had sex plenty of times in my life, but none of them had ever been on the level of what I experienced with Emma. It was transcendent. Perfect. More than I could ever ask for, and yet I had it. And it seemed to me that our coupling wasn't a one-time event. No, I was pretty sure that I could expect more opportunities to learn her body. I wasn't going to waste a single one.

So yeah, maybe we became a bit inseparable. Maybe I followed her around even with her security, accompanying her to work and anywhere else she went. At first, I was worried that I would upset her, as that was the last thing I wanted to do, and in the beginning of our impromptu relationship, it definitely had. But Emma didn't seem to mind at all, either holding my hand when we were close or occasionally looking over her shoulder until she found me if I wandered a bit too far.

Thankfully, if anyone thought anything of it, they didn't say. And even Mahlan started working more hours at the office to accommodate for my absence. I still had my laptop on me and took calls so it was somewhat like I was working from home, but none of us were naive enough to think I could be as productive while being Emma's shadow.

Despite all our apprehensions, the witches didn't come back. Not even with the spell on Emma's wrist staying in place. There was a chance that we had intimidated them with the last fight, but I felt like they were just biding their time for us to drop our guard. So yeah, maybe I bugged Sam once or

twice a day to see if he had everything he needed to track the witches, and maybe by the fourth day, he would just answer the phone with a long string of swears. But as much as I knew I was annoying him, he never threatened to stop or purposefully slow down. He just told me he needed more time and that I was being a dick.

I could live with being a dick if it meant that Emma was safe.

My phone rang as Emma helped a gaggle of customers check out. I answered, not bothering to check who it was.

“Theo.” It was Mahlan. His tone was serious, so I sat right up.

“Yes, Alpha?”

“I’m sorry, I know you don’t really want to leave Emma’s side, but Ricky’s wife has gone into labor. I need you to take lead on his part of the perimeter for just tonight.”

I swallowed hard, my anxiety sky-rocketing at the thought of being far away from Emma. “Is there anyone else who can do it?”

“I could get Parker on it, but he’s recovering from a double he pulled yesterday. I was going to have Kaleb guard it tomorrow, Jacobian after that, then me. By then Cyprus’s pack said they’d be able to send us two warriors to fill in the gap.”

I wanted to say no. That selfish, biting part of me wanted to say it wasn’t my problem. Except it was. As the future beta of our pack, I needed to make sure that our perimeter was intact so everyone was protected, not just Emma.

“Okay, yeah. I can do that. What time do you need me there?”

“Eight pm should do it.”

“Alright. And is the baby okay?” I didn’t know Ricky well, but I was aware that it was his first child and he was quite excited for it. It was a shame that all the mystery around the packs and kidnapping had overshadowed the last couple months of his wife’s pregnancy.

“As far as we know, yes. Savvy will help deliver the baby, considering she works there, and I’m sending the biggest welcome baby basket I could find online.”

“I’ll have to send something once they’re home,” I said. “It’s the first birth in a while, yeah?”

“In this whole year. People just haven’t felt safe enough to bring pups into the world.”

“Yeah, I suppose I can’t blame them for that.” I sighed. “Alright, I gotta go tell Emma.”

“Good luck with that.”

I sighed again as I hung up. Yeah, I would definitely need as much luck as I could get.



“YOU WHAT?!”

I waited until Emma closed her shop to tell her the news. I was aware that she wasn't going to be happy about it, so I figured I didn't want to stress her out any more than I had to while she was on the clock.

“Look, we both get that it's not ideal, but I won't be far. And Ricky has been putting so much work in for this entire month. He deserves to see his child's birth.”

“I know, I know,” Emma said, pacing back and forth for a moment while she got her breathing under control. “And it's not a big deal. It's just one night, and I know you'll be barely a run away. But...”

“But it still feels bad?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Real bad.”

“It does for me, too, if that makes you feel a little better.”

“Well, maybe a little bit, but that probably doesn't bode well for me.”

I pulled her close and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Hey, misery loves company and I love you, so the idea computes.”

She paused for a moment and I saw her cheeks flush at my words. Interesting, as my saying I loved her had never made her blush before. I noted that to think about that later, when I didn't have so much worry about the shift I was taking over.

“Pfft, yeah, I guess. What's that, the transitive property?”

“If you're asking me to remember high-school-level math, I am not your guy.”

She turned fully to me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “I dunno, I think you're exactly my guy.”

Well, that certainly wasn't expected. I let my hands rest on her waist and kissed her again, this time on the lips. It was a dangerous gamble, making me especially loath to part from her, but somehow I managed.

“How about you finish closing up and I'll take you home. I don't have to report until eight so we can take some time to...*occupy* ourselves.”

“As much as I love all this romance,” Lyssa said, leaving Emma’s office with a slight color to her cheeks, “I’m gonna head home as well. Mahlan is out front waiting for me.”

“See you tomorrow!” Emma called as her friend hurried out.

“We probably scarred her for life,” I muttered, although I couldn’t exactly hide my smile.

“Pffft, Lyssa is a grown woman who gets dicked down on the regular by our Alpha. She’ll be just fine. She probably just felt like she was eavesdropping.”

“Ha, you have a point.”

Somehow I managed to pull away from her, even if it was physically painful. But I still offered her my hand.

“Shall we go home?”

“Yeah,” she said, smiling at me so softly, so saccharinely sweet that it made my teeth ache. “Let’s.”



THE NIGHT AIR was cool on my back. After so long guarding Emma when she wanted space, it was almost like an old habit. The only difference was that I was in my human form for the moment, walking around the edge of a suburban area before I hit the more remote parts of my circuit.

If it weren’t for the witches, I might have even been able to enjoy myself. Unfortunately, they were an inescapable part of our reality. Not exactly something to get away from, but hopefully soon. If Sam could just work out his reverse tracking spell.

My phone rang, shrill in the night, and I practically jumped out of my skin. I thought that I’d set it to vibrate. Scrambling to pull it out of my pocket, I saw that it was Emmaline.

“Is something wrong?” I asked as soon as I was on the line.

“Just checking in that everything’s alright.”

“I just got here,” I admitted, feeling her panic dripping through our bond. “But there’s nothing alarming as far as I know.”

“That’s good.”

As much as I loved hearing her voice, I knew I needed to be serious about my shift. “I appreciate you checking in, but you know that you can’t call

again unless it's urgent, right?"

"Yeah, I know. That's why I called right at the start. Figured I would get it out of my system until you're back."

"Alright. I won't be until dawn. Are you gonna be alright?"

"I will be as long as you come back to me."

Her words weren't grand or particularly poetic, but they filled me with a sort of energy that rejuvenated me entirely. "I promise I will."

"Thanks. I guess goodbye?"

"For now. And only for now."

She let out a soft, happy sigh and exited the call, leaving me feeling... well, a lot better than I probably should.

Committing myself to my shift, I did my best to widen my senses and be the best guard I could be, crossing paths with the other guards right on time whenever I was supposed to. Surprisingly, despite the anxiety I could feel in my chest, the night went by quickly without a hint or hair of someone who wanted to murder anyone. Just a surprisingly low number of raccoons, considering how deep in the city we were.

But trash pandas or not, I made it through the entire shift and ran back home on all fours. True to what I'd thought before, the news had indeed reported about an elevation in wolf sightings, but I wasn't going to let that cow me into taking extra time to reach Emmaline.

Sure enough, she was waiting in the door as I arrived, her arms out.

"Thank God you're here," she breathed, pulling me into a hug I didn't fight in the least. "I know it's silly, but I was so damned scared."

"It's not silly," I soothed, stroking her back. "You've been through a lot lately and your guard is up."

"It's not just my guard, it's everything. I'm worried about you and if our being bonded is going to make whatever curse I'm under spread to you. Or if maybe they'll even target you next. I'm worried about the pack. I...I dunno. It all just feels kind of helpless right now, but at least when you're with me, I know you're safe. That I'm safe."

Her words moved me, really and truly. After feeling like I'd failed her for so long, her saying that I made her feel safe was exactly what I needed to hear.

Goodness, I really loved the woman in front of me. I truly was one of the luckiest wolves in existence, and I was willing to fight for that title.

"You are safe as long as you're with me. I promise that."

“It’s crazy, but I believe you.”

We held each other for a long moment before I eventually shut the door and led her into the kitchen. There, I made breakfast for her, then put her to bed. It was the weekend, so she wasn’t going into work, and I was happy that she was taking a bit of a break.

But while she was asleep, I couldn’t quite settle. As much as I loved being there for her, I could sense that the situation was untenable. We were all being stretched too thin, trying to balance everything on our own.

So I headed down to the kitchen and made myself a shake, putting double the amount of vitamins I usually did into it. Once that was set, I went to the kitchen island and called up Mahlan.

“Hey, good to hear from you. I assume the shift went alright since you didn’t call me before now?”

“Yep, quiet as a church on a Friday night. How’s Ricky and his wife? Jamie, right? Did their kid come out?”

“Nah, she’s still in labor apparently.”

I let out a pained huff. “Have I ever mentioned that I’m very glad I don’t have a uterus?”

“Um, I don’t think that’s a normal topic of discussion for us, so no.”

“Well, let it be stated that I am very glad I don’t have a uterus. I don’t think I would survive a literal living shifter shoving its way out of me.”

“Theo, you literally have a giant wolf regularly explode from your body.”

“And so do you. Are *you* telling me you’re willing to get pregnant and carry some pups to term?”

“No.”

“See? Exactly.”

“You’re right, I am glad I don’t have a uterus. Now, did you call to discuss our reproductive organs or is there an actual purpose to you touching base?”

Oh right. I suppose the lack of sleep was making me a bit more distracted than usual. “While I wish we lived in simpler times where that kind of joking around was the norm, no. I actually had something pretty serious I wanted to discuss with you.”

“Ah, let me step into my office then.” I heard what had to be a smooch and guessed that he was kissing the top of Lyssa’s head, then after a couple of beats, a door closing. “Alright, shoot.”

“I think we should come clean with our pack about everything. They

know that members are going missing, but not why, or who, or what exactly to be on the lookout for. They're just adhering to curfew and living in fear for weeks at a time."

Mahlan didn't answer right away, but I could tell by his breathing that he was still there.

"Is there a reason why now seems important?"

"It's something that Emma mentioned. She's scared, but she says she feels better when I'm there and she *knows* I'm safe. Right now, our pack members don't know anything. All they have are ghosts and worst nightmares. And sure, while the truth isn't good, not at all, I think it's better to have the facts rather than not."

Again, Mahlan didn't say anything. The silence stretched between the two of us for several beats before he sighed.

"You know what? You're right. Let's call a meeting for tomorrow night with the entire pack in the running fields. It's for the best."

For some reason, I was a bit surprised that he'd listened to me right off the bat. Maybe it was just from our arguing about the Council, but I'd expected more pushback. "Thank you, Mahlan. I'm glad you approve of my suggestion."

"I do. I know you have to be tired, so why don't you head to bed and I'll make sure the word gets spread."

"Thank you, Alpha. I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"As long as nothing unforeseen happens."

"Hey, don't tempt fate."

A low chuckle floated over the line. "You're right. I've probably done that enough in finding Lyssa."

"Yeah, I would certainly say so."

"Alright, well, good night—er, good morning, Theo."

"Good morning to you, too."

Hanging up, I looked out the window. While I couldn't see anyone outside, I could still scent the wolves that were there. Protecting us. If I wanted to keep my strength and be able to throw down in a witch fight at any moment, I needed to get myself to sleep.

Draining the rest of my shake, I headed back to Emma's room. While I had been exiled to my own space for a good part of my stay there, ever since the second attack, we'd been sleeping together every night. Cuddled up against one another, usually with my arms around her. Despite the fraught

situation, it was possibly the best way I could spend my nights. Who would have ever thought that eventually I would find happiness in the arms of my best friend's sister? My *alpha's* sister? Certainly not I.

But I was eternally grateful that there was at least something between us. Even if it hadn't started in the best way, I would fight with tooth, nail, and all of my soul to protect our bond. To protect *her*.



I STOOD BESIDE MAHLAN, my arm wrapped around Emma's waist as our alpha stepped forward to address our pack. While we were still three hundred in number, it was far too easy for me to imagine our pack dwindling in number bit by bit until we were like Lyssa's old pack. The thought made me nauseous, making me surer than ever that opening our communication to our members was the right way to go.

"Silent Ridge Pack, I come to you as your alpha. I know that we have already experienced many hardships, with the passing of our previous alpha, Sawyer, the abduction of our moonstone, and the disappearance of several of our members."

There was a murmur of agreement, which further bolstered my resolve.

"We have asked a lot of you, and I cannot express enough gratitude to all of you who have banded together to protect each other. The amount of disappearances has lessened, if only because we've given the people hunting us less opportunities to find easy prey."

There was another, much more shocked sound rippled through the pack. Maybe a human couldn't hear it, but every shifter certainly could.

"And yes, as much as it pains me to admit, we *are* being hunted. We don't know the exact perpetrators, or their plan, or how many of them there are. I realize that is not comforting news, but what we do know is that these witches seem to have set their sights on my sister. They've attacked her store twice, and I regret to admit that they've managed to curse her as well as make off with Julien, one of her security detail."

I could smell the pack starting to get riled up, some reacting with anger while others were scenting both shock and horror. It was an acrid mix that burned my nose, but I was aware that it was entirely necessary. Telling the truth meant airing out all the parts, not just the convenient ones.

“We have methods in the works, methods we believe will lead us to our enemy, but I felt that we were keeping all of you in the dark for far too long. So I ask that you still maintain your curfews and stay ever-vigilant, but I also want to assure you that we will deal with and defeat this enemy the same as we have every other one that dared raise their hand against the Silent Ridge Pack!”

A small but sincere cheer rose at that. Well, that wasn't the worst way it could have turned out. I had expected more shouts of anger or enraged demands. But no, it seemed that Mahlan had proven himself well as a leader.

I couldn't help but be proud of him. I knew since we were young that he would one day be an amazing alpha, but I was impressed nonetheless.

“Normally, this would be where I dismiss all of you and encourage us to run together, but that's not enough. I'm opening the floor now to any questions you might have. While I can't answer everything, I will be as truthful with you as possible.”

Huh, I hadn't anticipated that, but it was the right move. Plenty of people raised their hands, and one by one, Mahlan indeed did his best to answer. While it took a long while, I knew we were on the correct path.

By the time everyone seemed satisfied, it was pretty close to curfew and we all headed back into the city to our respective homes. But as Emma and I settled in for the night, I couldn't help but feel watched.

Well, if they were watching, the witches still had no idea what was coming to them. Once Sam was ready, we were going on the offense. And if I had my way, they wouldn't stand a chance.

EMMALINE

I couldn't believe that Theo's men had managed to repair pretty much all my windows and shelves in less than a week. When I returned to work on Monday, I could finally enjoy both united sides of my shop.

"Look at all this extra retail space!" I said, stretching my arms out and spinning around. "We're gonna be stocking and arranging for ages now!"

It was probably silly to be so happy about something like a boutique when I had a curse witches were trying to use to kidnap my fellow pack members, but I was. It was a hint of normalcy that I was desperate for. A slight promise that maybe my whole life didn't have to be fear and battle.

"Are you sure that you and Lyssa will be able to keep up with that and your online orders?" Theo asked, flattering me again that he understood so much of my work.

"Honestly, we normally wouldn't, but I have some new hires coming in who can help with a lot of general work."

"New hires? What happened to the humans?"

I felt my cheeks color at that. "You see...apparently when the witch helped erase the incident from their minds, she also maybe, sort of, erased the fact that they'd been hired here at all."

"What, really?" Theo asked, looking at me like he wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or be horrified.

"Yeah. They were supposed to think there was a gas leak or something, but either that witch was juiced or they were just super-susceptible to her spell, because neither of them remember being hired here.

"I did call them to check in, and both couldn't remember who I was or the

store, so I just took it as a win. I don't think I should have human employees right now. But I felt unfair that they weren't paid so I anonymously sent them both some gift baskets with a week's worth of pay in them."

"That's very generous of you," Theo said, kissing the top of my head. But I didn't think it was generous at all. I had put their lives in danger, then locked them in my office while lying to them. I probably should have given them a year's salary or something like that, but I figured that would have been far too suspicious. "But speaking of work-related things, I actually have a lot of Zoom calls and meetings, so do you mind if I take over the office on the other side that you're not using?"

"Oh sure, that's a good idea. I prefer my original office anyway."

"Great. I'll get on that right now. You don't mind if I have one of my tech guys setting up an encrypted router so I have my own network to hop on, do you?"

I just waved my hand. "Do whatever you gotta do. If it helps you get the job done, I'm happy."

"Thanks. I appreciate you."

Another kiss to the top of my head, then he was off. As for myself, I prepped myself to onboard my new *new* hires. They weren't humans; I realized that I'd made a mistake with that before. No, they were both shifters, one from our pack and one from Cyprus's pack, both of them around my age and excellent fighters.

I did feel slightly guilty bringing them into danger's path, but since they were both shifters, I figured they were already at risk. And hey, considering that it was getting more and more expensive to live in the city, I was pretty happy about giving a livable wage to fellow shifters.

I probably should have gone to that solution right off the bat, and I wasn't quite sure why I didn't. But at least I was going to have more backup. If the witches decided to attack again, they'd have to deal with me, Lyssa, my guards, and two women who were very anxious to get their own kind of revenge.

I was happy when both arrived on time, but before I could even start their walk around, someone unfamiliar stepped into the door. I was instantly on high alert, as were the two shifters in front of me; however, I recognized his wolf scent quickly.

"Are you Theo's tech guy?"

"Yep," he said, lifting the bag at his side. "I've got his router here that he

wanted set up.”

“Oh great. Let me walk you to his office.” I sent my two new employees a bashful expression. “I apologize for the interruption. I’ll be right back.”

“That’s alright. You don’t worry about us, we’ll just look around on our own,” one of them aid.

“I’ve always wanted to be in here, but I could never afford it,” the other chimed in.

What? Her words surprised me, and for a moment, I forgot all about the tech guy. “You know I have extra stock left over from my photoshoots, right? I’m more than happy to give away anything you might like.”

“Wait, really? That’s a thing?”

“Yeah! It always has been!”

Guilt lanced through me. I had assumed that most of the shifters in our pack just weren’t into my clothing. I didn’t know they were unaware that I would just give my own pack members stuff. Within reason, of course. I would need to do a better job of getting the word out there.

“Alright, I’ll have both of you leaving with full bags today, but for the moment, I have to handle this.”

Shaking my head, I led the guy back to Theo, who greeted him with a familiar tone. With that handled, I returned to my new employees.

The tour took, well, about twice as long as it did before when we were in a smaller shop, but both women responded positively. From there, I took them to my old office and started up the paperwork.

However, I didn’t so much as get their IDs before Theo opened the door and waltzed in.

“I’m about to go out to get coffee, you lot want anything?”

Oh, well I supposed that interruption was worth it. “Uh sure, I’d take a matcha rappuccino.”

“I wouldn’t mind a caramel macchiato!”

“I’d love a strawberry milk tea.”

“Alright then. I’ll go ask Lyssa, then order delivery.”

I shot him a grateful smile. “Thanks, Theo. I appreciate it.”

“Of course.”

He ducked out and I got on with one of my least favorite things: paperwork. I found I did the best when I just got it all done in one fell swoop. However, that was hard to do when Theo popped right back in about a half hour later, handing out drinks and even chit-chatting a little.

I'd never seen him be so sociable, and I had to admit that I certainly appreciated the view. But even his chiseled chin and intense eyes weren't enough to distract me for more than a couple of minutes. Okay, five minutes.

Maybe ten.

Eventually, however, enough was enough and I cleaned my throat. "Hey, we just gotta finish this up, okay?"

"Oh yeah, of course, of course. I'll go check on our tech guy."

I'd never seen Theo be so open with so many people, and while it was nice, it was a bit confusing, too. Maybe it was just the effect I had on him, but that could just be my ego talking.

Fortunately, I was pleased when we were able to finish up the paperwork without any other interruptions and I was able to release them to Lyssa to show how our stocking worked. The internet was a bit complicated, so I resolved to show them that maybe on their third day or so. Provided that there were no witch attacks, of course.

While they were occupied, I turned myself over to our invoices, which once again had stacked up with everything that was happening. Major sigh. One step forward, two steps back.

"Whatcha doing?" Theo asked, popping back in and nearly startling me out of my skin. I couldn't believe I'd been concentrating so hard that I hadn't noticed his approach at all.

"Holy shit, Theo. I was just doing invoices."

"Ah, are they bad?"

"Well, it's not great. Not as bad as after the first attack, but definitely not great."

"Can I help with anything?" he asked.

"No, that's okay. Do you have a Zoom meeting soon?"

"In ten minutes or so. Just wanted to check in on you."

"Aw, well thank you. I'm good though. Are...are you alright?"

He shot me a quizzical sort of look. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"I dunno, you just seem a bit antsy."

"Now that you mention it, I suppose I'm pretty anxious after that meeting we had with the pack. I'm trying not to hassle Sam, but it's much more difficult than I ever thought it would be."

Well, now *that* made sense. "Good on you trying to hold back. I could tell he was getting pretty irritated the last time you were on the phone with him," I said honestly as I swiveled around in my chair to face him.

“And the time before that, and the time before that...” Theo let out a huff. “I just never thought this would take this long. When he said he needed to prepare, I thought a couple of days. A week tops.”

“That’s why we’re shifters and he’s the witch. I’m sure the spells he has to do aren’t easy. Remember how drained he was after he led you to Sarah? I imagine this has got to be worse.”

“You think so?”

I nodded. “The spell that Sarah was under with the moonstones was pretty old, and I think the witch we’re dealing with is quite powerful.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

“Alright then.” I stood and kissed his cheek. I didn’t realize it until I was sitting back down again, but we were kissing a whole lot more lately. And not just torrid makeout sessions, but simple kisses and gentle touches. Things that were wonderfully casual in their domesticity.

Huh, that was certainly something to think about.

“Thank you for stopping by, but I gotta get to work, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s perfectly fine. Tech guy is almost done anyways. See you at lunch?”

“Yep! See you at lunch.”

Boy, I indeed saw him at lunch. And an hour later when he interrupted. And then another hour later. When he barged back into my office at three pm when I was wrapping up my break, I had enough.

Grabbing his hand, I marched out with him behind me.

“Emma? Is everything okay?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I said, sending him a knowing chuckle.

“Why does it sound like there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

“Because there is one. I like you having a makeshift office here, *but*—” I reached the door to his new personal space and herded him in, “only if you actually spend time in your office instead of interrupting me in mine every hour.”

He chuckled lightly, which wasn’t exactly the reaction I’d expected, but I wasn’t unhappy about it. “I suppose that I was being a little overbearing. Sorry about that.”

“Naaaah, don’t worry about it. It’s kind of cute.”

“Is it now? So you like being mother-henned?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it *that* way.”

He shut his office door and took a step closer to me, filling me with a

certain type of thrill that I wasn't opposed to. "What way would you put it then?" he murmured, voice low and sending goosebumps rising along my skin.

I swallowed hard, and no witty banter filled my head. "Oh, you know..." I trailed off, my words failing me, but Theo seemed to have mercy on me.

"What I do know is that I could see myself having a permanent sort of office here. You know, split time here between our main building and here."

Old Emma wouldn't have liked that. In fact, she probably would have objected entirely. But the thought of Theo being close by every single day was quite comforting. Maybe even a little exciting.

Sure, we'd only had sex twice, but already, I was feeling electricity crackle between us. I'd never had sex at any sort of work environment before, but suddenly, I was quite interested in the idea. Theo really brought out my adventurous, less responsible side, it appeared. Which was actually quite amusing, considering how straight-laced most people considered Theo to be.

"I wouldn't be opposed to that," I said breathlessly, standing stock-still and letting him continue to approach me. I felt like I was being hunted, stalked, but in an alluring way rather than the dogged awfulness of the witches.

"Even though that would put us in each other's path again and again? Every. Single. Day?"

By the time he finished, we were chest to chest, and I could feel his heart beating against mine. "That should be fine as long as we behave ourselves." I breathed, surprised I could even speak.

"Behave ourselves?" he whispered right back, the chills along my limbs growing with every passing word. "That doesn't sound like any fun."

His hands slid down and gripped my rear before physically lifting me up and planting me right onto his desk. My legs went wide on instinct, and Theo stepped right between them, crowding me, but in a way that I very much liked.

"Well, a little fun wouldn't be completely remiss."

"That's my girl."

He gave me a kiss, but wow, the word "kiss" didn't seem enough to describe it. It was like we were connected by our souls, not our lips, and I could feel every single drop of passion from him like it was on a direct IV drip.

It was so electrifying, sensations zinging left and right through my brain,

I almost didn't catch what he said when he pulled slightly away.

"You know, I don't think lunch quite filled me up."

I blinked at him a moment, because we had ordered quite a bit from the deli, but then he started to push me further back so that I was lying across his desk, my legs hanging off the side of it, and *then* I got it.

Oh.

I liked to think I was fairly adept at sex. I was confident and knew what I was doing. But something about the raw, completely unveiled way Theo hungered for me made me want to blush. I could feel my cheeks burn with color as he knelt between my legs and draped one of my knees over his shoulder and then the other.

God, that was hot. Did he know that he was practically rewriting my brain to always crave him? He had to. There was no way he was this good and knew how to push all my buttons without being intentional.

Not that I was complaining. No, I was far busier making entirely different sounds when his mouth found me over my underwear, applying the slightest of pressure. While it thrilled me with the promise of so much more, it also wasn't nearly enough, and I whined as I tried to push myself up into his mouth.

"Patience is a virtue," Theo practically growled, and I could feel the rumble of his voice across my folds. It shouldn't have been that physically stimulating, and yet it was, my brain lighting up in pleasure and anticipation.

"I don't think I would be in this position if I was all that virtuous," I panted, gripping the desk for dear life.

"Oh, I disagree on that." He pressed another tender, gentle kiss against me and I groaned. "I think you're one of the most virtuous women I know."

"You don't mean that."

"I don't say things that I don't mean."

Finally my brain came back online enough for me to get at least of little of my normal sass back. Never in a million years would I ever have dreamed that another wolf could have affected me so much.

"Then put your mouth where your money is," I purred, sitting up just enough to look over my body into his eyes. His gaze met mine, and the fire in them made me gasp.

"As you wish."

Finally, *finally*, he pulled my panties to the side and licked a long stripe up my center. I was wound up so tightly, I practically jackknifed off the desk

and I had to clap a hand over my mouth. Sure, we may have been in the far office, but there were three shifters outside and fourteen shifters in various spots outside. Not exactly conducive to screaming and shouting about the not-exactly-office-appropriate fun I was having.

“Shit, *Theo...*” And that was about the last sensible thing I said before he really dedicated himself to it. There was something voracious about my mate’s pursuit of my pleasure. Like he would pull every single drop of it he could out of me until I was addicted to his touch. And while I’d always been an independent woman, I found myself more than happy with the idea.

Apparently he’d learned quite well from our very first romp, because he went straight for all the things I liked, warming me up before ever going near my apex. My clit had always been sensitive, and I usually couldn’t stand direct pressure on it right off the bat, but he gave me all the time and stimulation I needed before ever going for it, which I certainly appreciated.

And by appreciated, I meant was quickly losing my mind as my body responded more and more strongly.

“Theo, I’m close,” I managed to ground out despite the pleasant cacophony filling my brain to capacity.

“That’s my good girl,” was all he said, and he went back to what he was doing. His words slid like honey down my soul, coating me in a delicious sort of sweetness that felt oh-so-sinful to indulge in. But I couldn’t resist. His praise was an ambrosia I didn’t know I needed. One that made my cheeks color and my pride sing in response.

I didn’t think I’d ever had a lover who was so intent on making sure I climaxed at least twice in our interactions. Normally, most were proud with one. And while I didn’t think it was healthy to always equate sex with orgasms, I certainly applauded Theo in his efforts. What was that old phrase about encouraging positive behavior?

I couldn’t think of it before two of his fingers slid into me, a counterpoint of sensation compared to his lips over that engorged bundle of nerves. The next thing I knew, my entire body was clamping down before releasing, sending me awash in a chemical cocktail of ecstasy.

“Oh my *God*,” I breathed when I was capable of human speech again. Which might have been just a minute or five years later, I wasn’t sure. As for Theo, he was humming contentedly as he still gave me little kitten licks. “That was *amazing*.” Amazing didn’t actually do it justice. It was revelatory. Mind-blowing. I’d never had sex that made me want to grab a thesaurus, but I

was beginning to want to download one as an app.

“I’m glad you approve,” he said, grinning up at me and licking his lips. “Why don’t we try for number two then?”

“Huh?” An eloquent response, for sure, but I didn’t get a chance to clarify what I meant before Theo buried his face right in my center, licking while his fingers curled perfectly within me, hitting what had to be my g-spot.

“Oh, oh, *oh!*” I gasped, caught between the discomfort of overstimulation and the promise of pleasure beckoning me to hold out. It was a delicious place to be, making my toes curl and my fingers cling even harder to the desk.

Never, *never*, in a million years did I ever think I would be eaten out by my mate at my job, and certainly not the point of insanity. Because that’s where I had to be headed, considering how my brain was drowning in happiness, excitement, pleasure, and a litany of other sensations that some people paid a lot of money to inject into themselves.

Was this what making love to a mate was supposed to be like? Man, I’d really been cheating myself my whole life. I’d thought I had a great sex life, but they were all preliminaries compared to what I had with Theo. Tutorial levels to ready me for the true reckoning that was coming.

I gripped his hair and could only take, take, *take* as he gave me his all. When I came again, it wasn’t so much a thunderous wave washing over me as it was a warm, welcoming pond, enveloping me in its embrace and letting me sink into the wonderful sensations.

It floated in the bliss for who knew how long, but eventually I was brought back to reality by Theo continuing to tease me, his fingers changing their angle.

“Again?” I gasped, feeling like I was dripping with sweat.

“Why not?” Theo responded, this time not even looking up.

And he was true to his word. Again. And again. And *again*.

By the time he finally stood up, wiping his mouth, I was little more than a pile of goo on his desk.

“Y-y-you’re definitely gonna need to sanitize this,” I gasped, my chest heaving. I didn’t know if I was numb or electrified from the waist down, but either way, I wasn’t likely to forget what happened anytime soon.

“Here, let me help you up.”

Theo’s strong arm slid under me, guiding me into a sitting position. Once he was sure I was steady, he pulled a bottle of cold water from his mini-

fridge—*where did he get that?*—and held it to my mouth. I thankfully slurped it down, realizing that my mouth was dryer than the Sahara.

“What about you?” I asked blearily once I was done, feeling fuck-drunk and blissed out.

“What about me?”

“Don’t you want, you know, your turn?”

But he just tenderly kissed me, and tasting myself on his lips made my heart skip a beat. “Don’t worry about me. We can work that out once we’re home?”

Ooooh, well, that gave me something to look forward to.

“You’re something else, you know that?”

“I’m fine with that as long as I’m your something else.”

I flushed from head to toe with that, my words failing me. But Theo just kissed the tip of my nose, then my forehead before helping me onto my feet. I arranged my clothing, then drained the second bottle he handed me.

“Ready for the rest of your day?” he asked, smirking at me. “I’ll be a good boy and stay in my office as much as possible.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, still feeling a bit of hormonal whiplash. Like my brain was being forced to return from a long vacation that it absolutely didn’t want to leave. “I’ll see you at close then?”

“I’ll see you then.”

I hobbled out, trying not to look like I’d had enough orgasms to fill a punch card, and I couldn’t help but smile to myself. Yeah, my life may have not been going perfectly, but some parts of it, I could get used to.

As a wolf, I’d never liked that phrase about silver linings, but hey, maybe I could get behind it. With Theo at my side, it felt like anything was possible.



“AY, did you make sure your staff knew to add extra to your draft order this month?” Jacobian asked across the table to Parker, who was deep in conversation with Sam. Personally, I was surprised the witch had even come out. Ever since he’d started working on the spell, he’d pretty much become a social recluse.

“Of course I did. I take family dinners very seriously, just so you know,” Parker replied primly.

“Oooh, we love a man with responsibility,” Sam said, a definite note of teasing in his voice. “Yaaaas, king.”

“Shush you.”

Those two were cute together, I noted that much, but I was distracted when Theo pushed a glass of moscato into my hand.

“Hey, I thought you might like this.”

It was just a glass of wine, but I found myself smiling dopily at him. Something had certainly shifted between us. I’d gone from resenting him, to being happy he was around, to longing for his company. And it wasn’t just because he was handy with orgasms, although those were nice, too. He just made me feel so seen. And also realize that maybe, just maybe, I had dedicated a bit too much of my life to work.

Hiring on Lyssa had been the start of me realizing that working five days a week, ten hours a day, plus photoshoots wasn’t really sustainable. I still loved work and I was still dedicated to improving my business, but I wanted more time to go home and have dinner with Theo, or to run with other members of my pack. I wanted to *live* and experience all the things that witches wanted to steal from me.

“Oh, what’s this, tableside service?” Kaleb teased, his chin resting in his hand. I didn’t know what it was, but it seemed that ever since Theo and I had been mated, Kaleb had started to talk to me more. Maybe it was just my imagination, or maybe he’d known I’d had a crush on him and had tried his best to ignore me. Huh, if that was the case, I wish he would have just turned me down. Would have saved me from wasting a whole lot of years and effort.

Or maybe he was just oblivious and shy, and it took me being attacked twice for him to realize that tomorrow was never guaranteed. Either way, it was nice to converse with him as a friend and only a friend, not some conquest I was pining after.

“Not for you,” Theo retorted smoothly, sitting down beside me.

“What’s this? The great Theodore waiting on hand and foot on someone besides Mahlan?” Jacobian poked. I liked the guy alright. He was whip-smart and had a great sense of humor, but I noticed whenever he was stressed his jokes could get a bit...mean.

“I do that plenty,” Theo replied. “You’re just never looking up from your computer screen long enough to notice.”

Hannah snorted from across the table and Jacobian shot her a glare. I remembered her words at our last girls dinner, and I wondered if she would

wither under his stare like so many others did. But no, Hannah just locked eyes with him, smiled brightly, then slowly drank her beer, never even blinking.

Whhheew, the balls on her. She had tenacity, that was for sure.

“Hey now,” Mahlan cut in, his own smirk telling me that he was about to escalate the ribbing rather than tone it down. “It’s not gentlemanly to point out that a brother’s getting a bit soft.”

There was a cackle from several of the inner circle, and I felt a bit miffed at it. Theo had always been an open person, but I felt like people always joking about him being an ice prince or closed off had caused him to build walls.

So I decided to butt in, and of course, in the worse way possible for my brother.

“Trust me, nothing about Theo is soft where it matters.”

Dead silence. I batted my eyes at my brother, my grin not too different from Hannah’s. When nothing happened for a solid couple of seconds, both Hannah and Savvy broke out into full-on cackles, unrestrained, unhinged, and utterly perfect. I didn’t join in, if only because I wanted to maintain eye contact with my brother.

When he finally spoke, he sounded truly pained, which was amazing, by the way. “Why do you do this to me?”

“If you can’t handle the heat, stay out of the kitchen,” I shot back before turning and kissing Theo’s cheek.

“You see,” my mate said, also grinning broadly. “All of you think that I’m the one you have to watch out for, but Emma is far crueler than I could ever be.”

“I’m a savage,” I added in a complete deadpan tone. And that was about all I could handle before I joined the girls in their laughter. After another uncertain pause, my brother and the rest joined in.

It was strange to have so much happiness after weeks of fear and danger. And while the danger wasn’t over, I felt more equipped to handle it than I ever had.

Yes, the witches were dangerous. And yes, I still had their tracking mark on me. But we were making it work and soon would turn it against them. And then, when the mystery was solved and everyone was safe, I could finally enjoy the new life I was so looking forward to.

Just a little longer.

EMMALINE

Another few days passed and we were approaching our second weekend since the attack. I was trying to be as patient as possible with Sam's efforts, but even I was getting a bit aggro at the delay.

Theo must have noticed it, because he noticed everything. I could tell he was trying to do more around the house for me, and stay out of my way at work while also ordering me and the rest of the staff lunch every day. I wasn't complaining, not in the slightest, but it did make me worry I was being way too harsh.

The whole thing came to ahead at our next family dinner at Mahlan's new house. I thought Mahlan was going to make a whole huge surprise with the whole inner circle, showing Lyssa the house like some sort of giant present. But it turned out the two of them had enjoyed that special moment on their own.

Which of course they would. They didn't owe any of us that particular moment, but I would be lying if I didn't admit that I had been looking forward to it.

Oh well, I still went to the family dinner at their new place, intent on having a good time. And it certainly helped that Lyssa seemed to be having the time of her life as she gave us the full tour.

The house was largely still empty, considering they'd only started moving in right before the attack, but I could see plenty of touches that were very obviously hers. I was sure once things calmed down she'd have the place decked out plenty nice.

Funny, I was always contented with my smaller house, but as I walked

through the lakehouse property, I began to think it would be nice to have something similar.

“And what’s great,” Lyssa said as she led us into the kitchen, “is that since it’s not just a condo, we can set up our own security systems! We’ve had Savvy’s witch contacts ward the entire place, and set up cameras and alarms everywhere. Next week, there are two more security crews who are setting up a couple of other systems that were recommended to Mahlan.”

“Oh, I didn’t even think about that,” I murmured, turning about in a full circle to take everything in. “So do you have less guards here then?”

“About the same guards as we did at the apartment, but they’re much more spread out,” Mahlan answered, entering the kitchen as well. “The added systems plus this remote location, and the lake being blessed as moon water makes it less likely for any witch to successfully attack us right here.”

“Really?”

I couldn’t help it, my mind zoomed off at light speed, imagining Theo and I in a house similar to Lyssa’s, my stomach swollen with child. Although he was a beta and didn’t necessarily have the drive to reproduce, it didn’t mean that he *couldn’t*. Just that it was more of a conscious choice rather than an instinctual drive.

I could picture it vividly in my mind’s eye. Theo coming home from work, taking off his tie, and lifting our son above his head, swinging him around before crossing to me and giving me a kiss. He would set our kid down to run off and do whatever it was pups did, then lovingly put his hand over my belly. There were no witches. There were no kidnappings. Just us living our lives together under the blessed moon.

Suddenly, I very much didn’t want to be alone in my thoughts. But I was certain Theo didn’t feel the same. He was going to be Mahlan’s beta and had never expressed the desire for children. And hell, I hadn’t even told him I’d loved him yet. As far as he knew, I was just tolerating him because we were stuck mated together.

I should definitely fix that.

“Hey Theo?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you imagine us in a house like this?”

A strange expression crossed his face. For a moment, I was worried that I’d just put him on the spot and he was about to shoot me down in front of everyone. I hadn’t *meant* to, I’d just wanted him to daydream with me, but

suddenly, I was second-guessing my whole choice to even come out to Lyssa and my brother's.

Mahlan and Theo exchanged a look with each other and my paranoia went on high alert. I was about to be humiliated, wasn't I?

Except that wasn't what came out of Theo's mouth at all. Instead, his cheeks started to color ever so slightly as he spoke.

"Actually...I, uh, I already bought us the house next door."

"Wait, *what?!*" I stared at him with eyes so wide, I was surprised they didn't pop right out of my skull.

"It was a while ago, before we were mated. I just figured that, as a beta, I should live somewhat close to my alpha." I couldn't believe it when Theo flushed even more. "I put a bid in on every house around this lake in case our whole circle wanted to move here."

"You *what?!*" That came from everyone who was present, and I felt a bit justified by my outburst seconds earlier.

But Theo just shrugged, giving me a look that was far sappier than I ever expected. "What do you say, Emma? Think you can see us building our own Fort Knox together?" I was sure that plenty of people wouldn't catch the change in his tone, but I could. I could hear the longing in his voice, the saccharine sweetness of his sincerity. "I know this really isn't the time or place to spring this on you, but I dunno, I guessed I always hoped that one day it would be filled with kids, and a mate who was happy to be there with me."

I couldn't believe he'd just out and asked me. It was so incredibly vulnerable, and the fact that he was willing to be that way in front of his closest friends was swoon-worthy, seriously swoon-worthy. It made my heart flutter in my chest, and for a moment, I had no answer because words sincerely did not seem like enough.

I could sense that everyone was looking at me, the news about their own houses momentarily forgotten. I was pretty sure that none of them had ever seen Theo and me be that romantic with each other. And that was a real shame. I knew that the witches had made it so we really didn't go out that often, and a whole month's worth of family dinners had been skipped, but I hadn't realized how little anyone saw us interact outside of Lyssa. Yet another thing that I couldn't wait to change once we weren't being hunted anymore.

"Yes," I breathed, crossing the distance between us and throwing my

arms around his shoulders. “I’d love that.”

It was the closest I’d come to telling Theo that I loved *him*, but it wasn’t quite the same. I wanted to say it, I did, but it wasn’t the right time yet. And I wanted that moment to be just for us.

“We’ll look at it later?” he said, smiling at me like I was his whole world. And for a moment, I felt like it.

“Yeah, absolutely.”

Lyssa was practically glowing as we finished up the tour, and that just made everything better. We really were a family, all of us. I could feel my happily ever after coming closer than it ever had in my own life.

We just had to hope those brothers didn’t mess it up.



LIFE TOOK on a semi-comfortable sort of rhythm as we adapted to me having my tracking mark and waiting for Sam to get everything he needed. Sadly, I couldn’t spent much time at the lake, as we didn’t want to lead the witches there, but I got to see lots of pictures.

And every morning when I woke up, the bed still warm from Theo’s spot at my side, I wanted to tell him that I loved him. And that I was sorry it had taken me so long to get there, and to be sure of my feelings, but that I was certain beyond any doubt. But by the time I brewed his coffee and took it out to him after his morning run, I’d always chicken out.

But that was okay. There wasn’t a rush, after all. I could just enjoy each moment as it happened and be happy that we were together. I’d grown to really liking him having his makeshift office at my shop, and not just because he carried all the heaviest boxes.

Most of the time, I could forget about the invisible sand dial hanging above my head, steadily running out of seconds bit by bit. It was intimidating, sure, but it wouldn’t do me any good to dwell in it. So instead, I did my best to live in the moment.

And apparently, it turned out that living in the moment was cuddling with Theo on the couch while eating a dessert of chia seed pudding. I felt more content than I had in ages, and I couldn’t imagine a single thing interrupting the comfortable peace saturating the air around us.

RIIIIIING!

Well, except that.

Theo picked his phone up from the coffee table and his eyes went wide. “It’s Sam!”

“Sam?! This is the first time he’s called you instead of you calling him, right?”

Theo nodded, his thumb sliding over the answer button.

“Hey, I’m putting you on speaker,” he said immediately.

“You’re a wolf hanging out with other wolves. Do you really need speakerphone?”

“No, but it’s polite to say we’re using it so you know other people will hear you.”

“While I appreciate you being polite, I honestly don’t care. I’ve finally got everything I need, guys. Starting tomorrow morning, we’re finally gonna track these sonsabitches.”

My heart thundered in my chest like it wanted to break free from my ribcage. Could it really be happening? While so much of me had been ready for revenge for so long, suddenly I found myself interested in other things. Like living comfortably with Theo. But I wouldn’t get that as long as these shifter-hunting people were allowed to menace our population.

“What time do we need to be ready?” Theo asked, his tone completely serious.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but around ten am. I’ll be right there with an iced coffee and everything else we need to kick ass.”

“Alright, we’ll be ready.”

“I know you will. Now, if you don’t mind, I need to get a good night’s sleep.”

With that, Sam hung up, leaving Theo and I facing each other, an incredulous expression on both of our faces.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” I breathed, hardly able to speak.

“I’m grateful it’s finally happening.”

“Me too,” I said, standing up and hugging myself. “I...I don’t think I’m gonna be able to sleep tonight.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you.” Theo ran a hand through his hair and stood along with me. “Wanna take a nice hot shower, then eat raw brownie batter in bed?”

I grinned broadly at him, ever so glad that he was with me. I offered him my hand, and he took it instantly. “It’s like you can read my mind.”



“ARE YOU READY?” Sam asked from where I was sitting in the middle of a circle he’d drawn on my living room floor. I didn’t know what he’d used to make the marks, but it smelled of dried herbs and mint.

I nodded, feeling the gazes of my packmates around me. Our entire inner circle was arranged in a circle around me, holding hands.

“As ready as I think I’ll ever be,” I answered honestly, even if it was a predictable answer.

“Alright. Well, I need all of you to concentrate on a place you went as a child that you loved. Except you, Emma. You listen to me as we go.”

“Why somewhere we liked as a kid?” Mahlan asked.

“Because this tracking spell has a pretty strong cloaking mechanism on it, which I’ve found out how to crack, but we want to make sure we cloak ourselves so the witch doesn’t instantly know we’re on her trail. ‘Cause if she does get the hint that something’s up, she’ll just sever the connection and run, which means we’ll lose our chance to blindside her and the rest of her friends.”

“And us thinking about childhood memories will do that?”

Sam nodded. “There’s an inherent magic to the joy that only happy childhood memories have. It’s innocent, novelty, and wonder all mixed together. Nothing else like it.”

Huh, I’d never thought of it that way, but I supposed it made a certain kind of sense.

“And what do I need to do?”

“Right now, I need you to close your eyes and breathe in deeply. I’m going to burn some things around you, then I’m going to chant some spells. When I need you to say or do something, I’ll tell you.”

“What should I think about?”

“Focus your energy inwards. Think only about what you’re sensing or feeling. Be as wrapped up in your own body as you can.”

I nodded. “I can do that.”

Closing my eyes, I did my best not to think of my mate, my best friend, my brother, or anybody else sitting around me. I tried not to think about my shop or my future. I focused only on the sound of my breathing. In and out. In and out.

It wasn’t long before I heard Sam move around, and sure enough, the

pungent smell of burning herbs filled my nose. It wasn't exactly subtle, but it wasn't painful, either. Just...strong.

But that was alright. I put my mind into concentrating on the scent and how it felt as it filled my lungs, pulling me further and further into my own body. I sank deeper. Then deeper. So deep that when Sam began to chant, it was more like a soothing background noise than anything else.

It was after the first verse that I started to feel something within me, something alien. Unbelonging. When Sam finished the second verse, that feeling grew stronger, glowing brighter and brighter in my mind's eye until it was a vibrant purple.

That was incredible. How had I not noticed that within me before? It seemed impossible, and yet hadn't Sam mentioned something about the tracking spell on my wrist being cloaked?

He began chanting again and the purple glow solidified into a tether. I could feel the tug of it going off into the distance, far beyond where I could see. Mentally, I reached inward to get it, only to freeze when Sam sharply barked my name.

"Emma, *don't!*" I froze, almost losing my inward concentration entirely. "You can't touch or pull on that. Then she'll know we're up to something."

Oh. Good thing he said something in time. I'd nearly just yanked back on it as a reflex.

"Okay, what I want you to do is reach your hands out." I did, keeping my eyes closed. "When I take your hands, I want you to guide me to whatever it is you're seeing or feeling, okay? But you have to *want* to let me in, like we're talking fully open invite, okay? Otherwise, it won't work."

"Right," I murmured, waiting for his touch. "I'll do my best."

It came a moment later, his fingers surprisingly cool compared to my skin. Granted, most shifters ran hotter naturally. I let myself get lost in the sensation of our different temperatures, keeping all barriers between us as low as I could.

I wasn't exactly used to inviting people into my mind, or my spirit, or wherever the hell I was letting Sam into, but I pictured the house that Theo had been showing me. I imagined it full to the brim with our stuff and chosen decor, a nursery on the top floor and a swing set out in the yard.

I imagined Sam coming right up to my front door and inviting him in for tea. It was a vivid scene, but instead of being alarming, it comforted me. Sam was a welcome guest. I could trust him in the deeper parts of me.

“There we go,” Sam whispered, sounding proud of me. And I had to admit, my ego did glow at the praise. “Now, I’m about to do the cloaking spell. It’s gonna feel weird, I’m not gonna lie.”

“Okay,” I murmured, trying not to worry. Worry would do nothing, especially since we had no choice but to perform the ritual. It was the only way.

“It shouldn’t hurt, though, if that offers any comfort.”

“It does.”

“Alright then, get ready.”

I braced myself as best I could, hand in hand with Sam and my pack surrounding us. And he was right, it did indeed feel *weird* as an inky, oily blackness began sliding down the walls of my mind. It felt slippery yet cloying. Unnatural and gross in all the worst ways. But before I could fear that perhaps Sam was tricking me, or even poisoning my soul, the thick, onyx liquid pooled onto the floor before slowly but steadily making its way to the purple tether.

Like shavings drawn to a magnet, the liquid bubbled up, one orb at a time, until the beam was completely coated, its light barely more than a whisper through its thin veil. Eventually, it reached my wrist where the tether stopped, and once more, I was struck by the thought that I had no idea what was going to happen. I wished Sam was a little better at explaining things beforehand.

But even if he had explained, I might not have believed him. Because what happened was that the viscous liquid surrounded my wrist. Then grew. And grew. And *grew* until I was staring at a liquid version of myself.

“Alright, now pull away.”

I did, and the inky Emma’s form rippled until she turned into a nearly perfect doppelganger of me, complete with the purple tether around her wrist.

Oh my God! I gasped without talking at all. I still wasn’t clear how much of what I was experiencing was metaphysical and how much was literally happening within me. Magic was weird.

“Neat, huh?” I heard Sam’s very real voice answer. “Now that the tether’s attached to that, it should allow you to move more freely.”

And you can track her?

“No. That’s the last part. It’s, uh, it’s gonna be difficult, so there’s something I’ll need you to do for me.”

What’s that?

“This witch is powerful, so I had to hunt down a tracking spell that could get through her own cloaking and wards. Chances are, it’ll take over most of my instincts, real similar to what happened with Sarah. As soon as I finish it, I’m gonna go silent, and I might even try to leave.”

That certainly sounded dangerous.

“I have an iron bracelet in my bag beside me with an inscription carved into it. I need you to grab it and put it on me. Only you, within this circle, can do it. Anyone else tries, and it could possibly break the spell entirely instead of just putting it on pause.”

Oh, uh...okay.

No pressure then.

“Alright, here goes nothing.”

Sam let go of my hands in the real world, and yet somehow I could still feel him there. Focusing as hard as I could, his chants filled my head again as another herb began to burn. Then he was rubbing something across my forehead that felt like might be ash.

It was strange, but not entirely uncomfortable. Until he finished his chanting, that was. Suddenly, it was like someone had rung a gong in my head, power reverberating through my entire form.

It legitimately felt like I was in an earthquake, everything shaking violently. But it only lasted for a few moments before everything cut off and I felt like I was practically thrown out of my own mind.

“Emma! The bracelet!”

Lyssa’s voice cut through the fog, and I blinked rapidly to realize that Sam was sitting in front of me, his eyes whited over and his face pale. He was unmoving other than those full lips of his, which were moving silently.

Uh-oh.

Quickly, I reached for his bag, pulling out a bangle that looked more like a bangle from the eighties than actual fashionable jewelry. But I quickly clamped it around his wrist, heaving a sigh of relief when his eyes went back to normal and his posture relaxed.

“*Whew!* That was something, wasn’t it?” he asked.

I nodded, pretty drawn out myself. “It sure was.”

But our moment was interrupted by Mahlan, and the urgency in his voice reminded me of the forces that we were playing with. “But did it work? Were you able to track her?”

“Yep, definitely can. I can only vaguely feel her now, but I can take off

the bracelet and I'll know exactly how to lead you to her."

"Then we should go now!" Theo said, jumping to his feet. But while I appreciated his passion, even I could tell that wasn't the best idea. "Kill her and anyone else in her coven before they have a chance to strike again!"

"As much as I'd like that," Jacobian began, his voice low and somewhat ragged. I was pretty sure that out of all of us, he hated magic the most. He was never comfortable around Sam, no matter how much the witch proved himself. Maybe it was something we could work on when there wasn't an evil coven afoot exacerbating tensions. "We shouldn't be the ones in the tracking party. Considering how much we're being surveilled, we'll tip the witches off if we all move as one unit."

Drat. He had a point. I had wanted to insist that I come along, too, but it was clear this wasn't a situation where we could go in with metaphorical guns blazing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was Sam who had a solution. "Hey, I can't be the only fae you know who's willing to work for a little green. Why not hire some trustworthy peeps to work the tracking and scouting with me? I'll head the team, we'll gather all the intel we can, then y'all can go in and do what you do best."

"Defeat our enemies?" Parker suggested hopefully.

"I was more alluding to all the ripping and tearing you wolves seem to do, but yeah, we'll go with yours."

"At this rate, we should probably give you a raise," Mahlan said with a chuckle, and I couldn't help but agree. I had no idea where our pack would be without Sam. He'd seriously saved our hides time and again. We really were lucky that Lyssa inspired that kind of loyalty in people, even a handful of years later.

"In order to get a raise, I need a salary," Sam said, batting his eyes at our alpha not too differently from how I did when I was being cheeky. I didn't know if I was rubbing off on him, if he was rubbing off on me, or if Lyssa was involved, too. Whatever the reason was, it made me awfully fond of the young witch.

"You really should be," I said, more than willing to throw my hat into the ring. I was aware from my brother that we'd paid Sam some hefty wages, but they weren't steady and I knew he didn't have insurance. Granted, I wasn't sure how often a green witch with a focus on healing actually needed insurance, but that was beside the point. "You've been working with us on so

many projects now, you're basically a part of the company. Part of the pack, even."

"Oh, hell no on that last part. I like y'all, alright, but I'm not really one for commitment."

"Fair enough." Despite his protests, I knew better. Sam had a lot of similar traumas that Lyssa did when it came to trusting people, and I could tell that he liked us. It was just that everything he'd learned in order to survive told him it was dangerous to ever lower his guard. But that was alright. Once we weren't fighting for his life, I would prove to him how much we all appreciated him. "So it's a plan then. We set up the team, gather all the info we can, then we end this. Once and for all."

At that, Theo grabbed my wrist, pulling me into his side. Once more, I was aware that the others were watching us, surprised by our public display of affection, but I also didn't care. All of my attention was on him and him alone.

"You're incredible," he said, resting his head atop mine. I could hear him gently scenting me and my toes curled in my shoes, pleased at the affection. He really was so good for me. It was crazy to think that if it weren't for the bitch that had attacked me, we might have never gotten together.

Oh well, while I was happy how our fates had worked out so far, I wasn't about to show her any mercy.

"Hey, I forgot to mention," Sam began as he stood up, his knees groaning in their own chorus.

"You are far too young for your body to be making those sounds," I chided.

"It's the magic. It really takes it out of you," he said with a chuckle before growing serious. "But I was able to sense the name of the witch while I was all glowy-eyed for a moment."

"You did?" Hannah asked, also getting to her feet. "What is it? Maybe I can start doing some research and help your team so you're not blindsided by anything."

"With witches these powerful, I certainly wouldn't turn down any help," Sam said with a nod. "But her name is Ellan Sanders. She's the one who cursed you."

"Ellan Sanders, huh?" I rolled the name this way and that in my mouth. Not exactly a moniker that struck fear into my heart, but that was alright. She would be dead soon enough if I had anything to say about it.

“Yep. That’s it. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m gonna go pass out in my apartment while you guys handle hiring whoever it is you need to hire. Good day!”

He gave a little salute, then gathered up his things and left. As he headed out to his moped, I couldn’t help but muse how he kept going above and beyond for us.

“You know, we’re going to have to name our firstborn after him if this keep us,” I mused to Theo, who instantly stiffened beside me.

“Not a chance in hell.”

“What? Why not?” I asked indignantly, rounding on him and pressing a finger to his chest. I knew that Sam sometimes got on Theo’s nerves, but that was no reason to be *rude*.

“Because our beautiful children, who will no doubt take after their gorgeous and fearless mother, will have names of their own. They’ll carve their own destinies, not have their legacy named after a crabby-ass witch with a caffeine addiction.”

He said it so bluntly, so frankly, that I couldn’t help but burst into laughter. That was my mate alright. Through thick or thin, I knew we would do just fine by each other.



I WOULD HAVE LIKED to have woken up the next morning feeling fresh and full of hope, but that wasn’t what happened. No, instead as I opened my eyes from sleep, I was swamped with an awful feeling. Nothing specific, but one that whispered *bad* so loudly that I couldn’t help but groan.

“Is everything alright?”

“I’m fine,” I answered, although I certainly didn’t feel that way.

“Did you have a nightmare?”

I shook my head, grabbing my phone and checking the time. It was only thirty minutes before my alarm, so it wasn’t the *strangest* time to wake up. But it was a bit strange for Theo to still be in bed with me. “No. Just a bad feeling.”

“It’s probably just some anxiety over us finally having answers? I’m a bit on edge myself.”

That wasn’t it, but I didn’t exactly have a solid argument, so I just

shrugged. "I'm...I'm gonna go get ready for work."

"Alright. It's my turn to drive, isn't it?"

"Yup," I answered dully, already heading towards the kitchen. Once I was there and had the coffee started, I sent off a text to Sam.

Hey, idk if you're awake, but do you think you could swing by the shop?

I was pretty sure that he was stone-cold asleep and wouldn't answer until well after noon. But to my great surprise, I got a message back a few moments later.

What's up?

JUST A BAD FEELING. Would be nice if you could be there.

SURE. I have things to discuss with Mr. Wolf Charming anyway.

THANKS! <3

Npnpnp

WITH THAT HANDLED, I slid my phone back into my pocket and heaved a long breath. I was sure that everything would be fine. We had the witches on the ropes. All we had to do was make it to tomorrow.

Easy, right?

THEO

I tapped at the steering wheel as we drove along, my mind elsewhere. Thankfully, traffic wasn't that bad, allowing my thoughts to drift.

I couldn't believe it. After what felt like solid months, Sam finally had everything he needed for the spells. The whole ritual had gone surprisingly well, without a drop of blood being shed, and I was happier than ever. We were yet another massive step closer to defeating the witches and hopefully cracking the case of the brothers, the shifter kidnappers, and everything else going on.

But Emma's uncertain mood that morning was getting to me, I had to admit. She wasn't generally an anxious person, but she was perceptive, and if she was feeling off, I couldn't help but wonder if there was something I was missing. Lord knew it wouldn't be the first time.

"Hey Emma, do you think—"

That was all I got out before the entire world seemed to explode.

It was like a thousand things happened at once. Thunder sounded within our car as we were thrown violently to the side. Glass shattered all around us, its little teeth biting into us as we seemed to literally take flight.

I was aware of pain, aware of Emma's screaming, but there was nothing I could do as the world spun once. Twice. Three times before we slammed into something so hard, I was surprised that my skeleton didn't rattle right out of my own body.

What...

What *happened*?

My head was spinning when we finally came to a stop, pain swamping

my body. Strange little clinks reached my ears, and I couldn't place them until I looked down at my rearview mirror and realized it was my skin pushing pieces of glass out as it stitched itself back together.

Wait, *down*?

Blinking again, I realized that it was indeed below me because we were actually upside down. All the blood was rushing to my head, which made it incredibly hard to think or figure out what happened. One minute, everything had been fine, and now nothing was.

"Emma?" I asked, trying to crane my neck to the side.

"I'm okay," she groaned, sounding absolutely not okay. "I, uh, did we just get into a car accident?"

Oh, that was what happened, was it?

All of a sudden, it was like my brain came back online and I realized exactly what that could mean. Jolting, I ripped my seatbelt apart and kicked my crumpled door off its hinges, I pulled myself out of the car.

I was fearing the worst, my blood pumping through my veins as it readied for a fight. There was a chance that our accident could just have been a stereotypical case of a car hitting a car, but if I had to put my money on anything, it was that witches were afoot.

Hustling over to Emma, I ignored how my leg throbbed. I was pretty sure that something was out of place in my ankle, but it would pop right back soon enough.

"Thanks," Emma said as I ripped off her door and freed her from her belt. There was blood down her forehead, but she seemed otherwise alright, which was a huge relief to me. "How's the other dri—"

She was interrupted too as I felt energy crackle behind my back. Functioning on instinct alone, I grabbed her arm and dove to the side with her just as a firebolt hit the side of our crumpled car and sent it flying back into the street.

Witches!

I rolled to my feet, already shifting, and I heard more cars skidding to a stop. That had to be our guards, and my suspicions were confirmed as I heard the sound of human footfalls quickly changing into canine paw pads.

"Theo!" That was Emma's voice behind me, although the last syllable became garbled, telling me that she, too, was on all fours.

I was racing for the witch who had fireballed my car, my teeth bared. I was fully prepared for more of his partners to emerge from nowhere since

apparently they could fucking *teleport*, but what I didn't expect was a wolf to tackle right into my side.

The two of us went tumbling, and when I managed to get away, I let out a vicious snarl. I lunged forward, ready to tear into his hide, but I froze when I recognized exactly who he was.

It was the missing guard, Julien.

Hey! Hey, we've been looking for you!

But it was like he didn't even hear me, baring his own teeth and leaping at me. I raced under him, sliding onto my side and popping back to my feet behind him so I had his back.

Listen to me! I don't want to hurt you!

I caught his tail in my mouth, something that I knew from experience would hurt something fierce but wasn't anywhere near lethal. However, the twelve piercing talons burst out of the ground to try to impale me.

I let go of the guard's tail, leaping backwards as obsidian spears sliced through the air where I had just been. They almost reminded me of tentacles, except made of black stone and glowing with crimson malevolence.

But I didn't have time to round on the witch because *another* creature emerged out of nowhere. I jumped back yet again, only to have a full-on grizzly bear barrel past where I had been standing.

That was two lucky calls in a short span. I was pretty sure that I wouldn't have another. But I was very much distracted by the fact that the witches had a literal *bear shifter* with them. While there were plenty of werewolves on the continental United States, bear shifters were pretty much contained to the Adirondacks. With their low reproduction rates and disappearing countryside, I didn't think there were more than a couple thousand of them in existence.

But what I did know was that I stood no chance between a fellow pack member who had apparently gone evil, a bear shifter, and a witch.

Thankfully, I wasn't alone, a fact I was reminded of when Emma went sailing over my head, barreling into the male witch and her teeth burying themselves into his shoulder.

The man fell to the ground with a cry and I could tell the two other shifters were rounding to help defend him. That wouldn't do at all.

I lunged for the guard, going for Julien's leg. I wanted to incapacitate him, not kill him. I would if I had to, but I figured that would be playing into the witches' hands. They wanted to see me kill one of our own, I could tell. It was a sick sort of power play, one that people who kidnapped innocent

shifters loved to pull off.

But the bear was out of my range, and for a moment, I feared the worst. But I should have known better because several more howls sounded around us before three more of our pack descended to fight him off.

It seemed like a good balance, at least for a moment, but a crackle in the air told me that more had joined the fray.

It was turning into a real mid-street blitz. And in the middle of a dense city street in the middle of the twenty first century, there was a non-zero chance that someone was snapping pics and filming video. Clearly it didn't matter what Mahlan thought about the council knowing what happened, because they were definitely going to find out one way or another. At this point I would be surprised if TMZ themselves didn't run a story about a zoo breakout.

But that was an issue we could all worry about if we survived. And considering that I was pretty sure at least two other witches arrived, that wasn't exactly guaranteed. But I was going to give them one hell of a fight. We all were.

Another crackle ripped its way through the air and I let go of the brainwashed Julien's leg to roll under the closest car. And just in time, as several strikes of lightning stuck down, illuminating the street. Thankfully they weren't as strong as actual lightning, or at least I assumed as much considering that I wasn't fried under the car. Probably shouldn't have hid under a giant hunk of metal.

I didn't let the moment go to waste, however, and rolled back out of the car to rush at the closest witch. It wasn't Ellan, and it wasn't the male witch either, as I was pretty sure that I was smelling his blood spilling across the ground. But that was alright. At the moment, I was satisfied with attacking any witch as long as I tasted their blood on my teeth.

The witch saw me coming, however, and I saw her preparing herself. So I adjusted my angle to sail over her head, going over the shield that she had no doubt conjured. I landed behind her, but I was pretty sure that I wouldn't have time to turn around and catch her leg in my jaw. So instead I kicked back with both of my rear legs, catching her in the middle of her back and sending her stumbling forward.

It was just the extra seconds I needed. With her trying to recover, this time I *did* whirl, lunging for her with my teeth bared.

Unfortunately the girl clearly had some battle experience, because instead

of continuing to try to stand, she instead threw herself forward. So instead of my teeth sinking into her thigh and perhaps catching her femoral artery, they caught around her foot.

Oh well, a limb was a limb. I bit into it as hard as I could, and the witch let out a shrill scream.

“Let me go, you bastard!”

Bastard? *I* was the bastard? She was part of a group that was systematically hunting down me and my people!

I dug in harder, trying to jerk her back towards me, but the woman sat up and faced her palm towards me.

I may not have done many rodeos one on one with witches, but I knew that a palm out was the equivalent of someone pointing a rocket launcher at me, if that rocket launcher was set to random damage. I let go of her and leapt to the side, dropping to my belly.

Not low enough, however, because the wave of energy that shot out of her ripped along the ridge of my back, leaving a few small bald spots in it's place. Not a flattering look, for certain, but I had other things to worry about.

Besides, it would grow back.

I rolled, my long limbs tucking in, but before I could get my own feet under me, something else lifted me up and threw me down the street.

And boy, did I go *sailing*.

I braced for impact, hoping that maybe I would land against something soft. But it seemed luck was not on my side. I went past a tall partition and apparently crashed into what had to be a construction yard, cinderblocks and debris flying everywhere.

I hit hard, the breath being driven from my body as everything seemed to crack. I gasped, and I could feel my inner wolf starting to slip away from me. But I gripped it with all I had, encouraging it to come back to the front. After so much time waiting for me to navigate the corporate and espionage parts of our plan, it was time for the wolf to take the lead.

Thankfully, it cooperated, still wanting the blood of its enemies. I could tell he was also worried about Emma. Last we both saw her, she was massacring the shoulder of one of our enemies, but that was at least a minute in the past, and in a battle with witches, that might as well be a few year's time.

I tried to get up, I did, but a sharp spike of pain drove the air from me yet again. Squirming, I craned my head to look at my side and realized there was

a twisted piece of rebar sticking out of it.

Well, that wasn't good.

I tried to push myself off of it, but it was with the way I was caught on it, my paws could only barely scrape the floor. I could shift back into human and try to get off it that way, but with how it was impaling me, there was no guarantee that it wouldn't mess with my human organs in a lethal way.

Did I risk it, or did I keep fighting and risk bleeding out anyway? While my healing ability was impressive, we weren't immortal. Shifters could die just like any other fae.

So what was my choice?

Theo!?

Emma's voice came to me, although, I couldn't see her anywhere. I did my best to answer nonetheless, calling out in our shifter's voice.

I'm here. I'm trapped, pinned by some rebar.

I'm on my way!

Part of me wanted to tell her not to come, but realized she wouldn't listen anyway and it would be better to save my breath. Except speaking as shifters didn't require any breath so... yeah.

But it was only a moment or so later when Emma jumped the wall, blood sprayed across her russet fur. Like something out of a movie, a spray of fire, and a hail of swarming insects arched across the street behind her. Those witches really weren't pulling any punches.

Oh my God. I've got you, I've got you.

Rushing to me, Emma began to shift, nearly human by the time she reached the slab of concrete I was attached to. But she stopped there, retaining her sharp claws, elongated ears, teeth that didn't quite fit into her half-candid snout, and her brilliant golden eyes. Smart, considering we were in the middle of a fight. She could shift more quickly into her wolf body or fight on the fly if she needed.

"This is gonna hurt, but I have to be careful, alright?"

I know. I'm ready.

Her broadened palms gripped me on either side of the wound and carefully but consistently pulled me off of it. It hurt, *oh* how it hurt, and I couldn't help the howl that escaped me. But Emma persisted, laying me down on the ground as blood bubbled out of my wound.

I felt cold, and a little bit like I was going to pass out, but I could also sense my body starting to heal itself. A bit slowly, considering it was a

through and through wound, but enough that I wasn't worried about dying. At least not yet.

"Are you alright?" Emma asked, stroking the top of my head lovingly.

As much as I can expect to be. The real question is if I'm gonna be up on my feet before anyone finds us here.

The answer to that particular riddle came as part of the wall in front of me was blown away, a figure stepping into the yard I had been knocked into. But it wasn't the witch who sent me there, no, it was none other than Ellan herself.

"You've been far more of a hassle than you're worth," she said, slowly approaching me. But her speed wasn't because she was scared, but rather because she was so confident that she had me. And given the situation, maybe she did. "I think it's time we dealt with both of you so I can move on with my fucking life."

She approached, both of her hands raised, but I wanted to know where she got the gall to complain about *her* life! She was the one terrorizing us.

Clearly the irony was lost on her, because she flew forward far faster than any human could move, like it was the wind itself that was pushing her. My eyes went wide as there was no way that I would be able to heal in time and get out of the way.

Turns out I didn't have to worry, because Emma whirled around at the last second, her clawed hand shooting out towards Ellan's middle. The witch noticed just in time, so while she killed her speed so she wouldn't be impaled, Emma still was able to dig her claws into our attacker's middle.

"I'm so fucking sick of you," Emma hissed through her massive teeth, whipping her skull forward to headbutt the witch.

Ellan stumbled back, cursing as blood streamed from her nose, but Emma pressed further, slashing the witch across her face. While I could sense that my body was knitting itself back together, it wasn't quite ready for me to begin fighting just yet.

But Emma seemed to have the witch on the ropes. The woman kept trying to bring up spells, but Emma was too close and dealing too much damage.

Or at least she was until three more witches flew up over the wall, spells at the ready.

Emma! I cried, finally fighting to my feet. Thankfully, my love was paying attention and she jumped backwards, shifting midleap so she was once again fully a wolf.

This isn't good, she said, her claws digging into the ground. *Hey, we could use some assistance over here!*

I knew she was calling to the guards, but I was pretty sure they were busy considering there were still debris flying through the air along with fire, plumes of water, and... and was that a tentacle?

Emma and I were boned. Even at our best, we weren't about to be able to take on three fully powered witches on our own. Even though Ellan had taken some serious damage, witches were wiley like that.

"Did I hear someone ask for some help?"

My head jerked in the direction of the voice just in time to see Sam rise over the wall as well, but man, his entrance was so much more than any of the other witches.

I was familiar with his level of power and how he usually felt in my presence, but something was entirely different about him. I could feel a pulsing, dizzying power emanating from him, making the fur of my thick pelt stand on end.

"Who the hell is that?" One of the witches gasped.

"That's him! That's the bastard that's been siphoning from me all day!"

"That's right," Sam said, grinning as he floated in the air. That was right about when I noticed that his eyes were glowing a villainous sort of green and... and were those leaves moving around his arms!? "And you're not getting it back!"

I glanced to Emma and she nodded minutely, letting me know we were both on the same page. Using Sam's quite good distraction, we lept at the two closest witches, our teeth locking around their necks.

Was it honorable? Probably not. But nothing about what the witches were doing to us was honorable and I was disinclined to take the high ground. Not when it came to them.

Both of the witches went down, gasping and choking as Emma and I didn't relent. Their blood spilled across the floor and into our mouths, heady with the kind of powers only witches had. Emma and I would probably be hopped up for quite a while, and not just with the relief of finally having some damn peace.

And that left only Ellan.

"Call the rest of your witches off," Sam growled, his voice taking on an echo to it that I wasn't used to. It felt entirely unnatural, almost like a siren's call, beckoning us closer. Granted, Emma and I knew better, keeping our

teeth in the necks of the other two witches until they grew cold.

“Or what, you’ll kill me?”

“Oh no,” Sam said, slowly setting down in front of the bleeding woman. “You’re going to die either way. The only variable is how much of your coven dies with you.”

“You get a little hint of true power and suddenly you think that you’re unstoppable?”

I tensed, not sure what to do. Part of me wondered if I should let go of my pray and rush Ellan, but Sam just laughed.

“You know, I always thought I was a small fry who could never be on the level of someone like you. But it turns out that you’re no better than me.” He lifted his head and I swore that there was a sparking ball of green light in it. “You’re just hooked up to a better battery.”

There was a lot of ways that the next moment could have gone, but never, *never* in a thousand years did I expect hundreds of man-sized tentacles to burst from the ground, covered in thorns and whipping this way and that, reaching desperately for anything around them.

For a moment I was sure that Emma and I would be collateral damage, both of us letting go of the dead witches and stepping back. But the vines ignored us entirely, some of them choosing to drag the bodies underground while the rest surrounded Ellan, tying her up in a writhing mass and hanging her upside down.

Had... had we done it?

Shocked with plenty of surrealness, Emma and I both shifted back to humans, cautiously walking to Sam.

“Are you really doing that?” Emma asked.

“Yeah,” he answered, his brow beginning to shine with sweat. “But I am starting to run low. Whatever questions you got for this lady, I suggest you ask them now.”

“What’s a matter, green witch? Your so called *battery* running low?”

Sam just rolled his eyes. “You know, you’re not really in the position to be snark at anyone.”

“Why? What have I got to lose?”

“...you know, it’s annoying how glib witches are when it’s not me.”

If I let them keep going, the two would keep bantering until Ellan got free or passed out from blood rushing to her head.

“Why were you all hunting Emma!?”

The witch's head snapped towards us and she cackled. "Really!? You finally got me all to your grubby little paws and all you want to know is why we went after your little girlfriend?"

Her lips curled back on that last part, showing her fangs, and I'd never wanted to slap a woman so hard in my life. "Answer the question!"

"Because my superiors are *idiots*, that's why!" Ellan snarled with a surprising amount of heat. "They ordered me to curse her so we could use her oath to your alpha to track members of your pack! But you know what!?"

Emma and I both stared at her. I had to admit, I was confused by both her rage and her levity, her laugh breaking out between strings of spiteful words. "You don't even have an oath to your alpha, just to your stupid wolf hubby there, because we stole your moonstone before any of you could swear in!

"And our scrying told us that your pack had all taken a blood oath, which should have made tracing them even easier! But apparently *you* didn't take it, you bitch! Making you useless, utterly *useless!*"

I glanced to Emma, actually fairly surprised by it all. "Wait, you didn't do that, did you?"

"Yeah, there was only time and supplies for someone from each bloodline to do it, and Mahlan was that for mine. We didn't even think about needing me to do it."

"Are you kidding me?" Ellan asked between truly unchecked peals of mirth. But it wasn't a happy sound. No, it was bitter and tinged with the kind of madness only someone drunk on dark magic could have. "It wasn't even purposeful? You guys just *accidentally* stumbled into subverting all of our plans?"

"Looks like it," I answered with a shrug.

Maybe it was petty, but it was ever so satisfying to irritate the witch.

"Guys, I realize that you're probably enjoying some karmic justice," Sam said, his teeth gritted. "But I can feel her fighting me while she's talking to you."

Right. Better get a move on then.

"Why are you kidnapping so many of our kind? And how are you controlling our packmate? Or that bear shifter!?"

"Questions, questions," the woman said, still giggling. "If you really cared about that, you should have asked that first."

Suddenly her entire arm phased through the vines holding her, partially transparent like she was some kind of ghost. Sam let out of a shout and the

plants surged to contain her, but more of her started to just phase through the mass.

But it turned out that neither the witch or Sam's vines were as fast as Emma. My mate leapt into the air, grabbing the witch on either side of her head, and twisting sharply as Emma flipped off of her.

The cracking sound filled the construction yard we were in, and all of the witch's intangible limbs suddenly went solid. Limp, the vines let her body drop to the ground, where it crumpled.

"Is she-"

I was cut off as her body continued to crack and stiffen. I took a step back, wondering what the hell was happening, before she turned to ash and completely floated away on the wind.

"Witches don't normally do that, do they?" I asked, looking with concern to Sam.

"Sorry, that's probably because I drained her pretty thoroughly. Not a great way for witches to go."

"Oh."

I felt like far too much had happened in too few seconds, my brain scrambling to keep up. After everything we'd gone through, all the dead ends and high stress, one of our biggest enemies was dead.

Well, one of the biggest enemies that we knew about, that was.

"Theo!"

Suddenly Emma's arms were around me, but it was a welcome surprise compared to the rest of the day. I knew once we got home we would both be battered and bruised, but that didn't matter at the moment. Because, for the moment at least, we were *safe*.

Emma kissed me silly, her lips all over my face, happy sounds escaping her throat.

"Ellan! Their numbers are overwhelming us!"

Our happy moment paused when another witch came running in, one I'd never seen before. He was a younger man, his head shaved and an interesting tattoo going down the side of his face. Was that... was that his coven mark?

"Oh."

It was a moment of comedy as his eyes went wide, his feet skittering to a stop as he saw his three dead comrades littered around us. Well, what was left of his comrades. The vines had done a gruesome job with the bodies.

"You've killed her!" he cried before his eyes landed on Sam. "You!"

Traitor!”

“Traitor?” Sam shot back. “You’re betraying all the tenants of good magic and hurting innocent people! You’re the traitors!”

The man looked like he wanted to say something, but instead he just cursed and fled. Maybe we would have laughed at the timing of it all if we weren’t so damn exhausted. But as it were, I was just relieved that finally, *finally* it was over. Or at least this little section of our mystery was over.

“How’s your side?” Emma asked, returning to kissing all over my face.

“Sore, but fine,” I said, interrupting her kisses by nearly crushing her in my own hug. But it was a good crush, one that actually did make her laugh. “You were amazing out there.”

“So were you,” she whispered, looking at me like I was the center of her world. I didn’t think she’d ever glanced at me like that. “Theo, I need to tell you something.”

What? Was she grievously wounded!? Had she been cursed again while I was knocked out of the battle? What new and horrible thing had happened to us?

“Yeah?” I asked, knowing my voice sounded strained and unable to do anything about it.

“I love you.”

...what?

I stared at her, eyes wider than they had been the whole battle. Had she just- no, she couldn’t have! But... but I swore she did!

“I love you so much, Theo, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know our circumstances weren’t ideal, but you know what? I’m okay with them because they brought us together. And honestly, I think we were meant to be in a way I was too stubborn to ever realize.”

My heart pounded so hard in my chest that I knew she could hear it, and likely all the other wolves that were in our guard. My blood was rushing in my ears, making it impossible to hear, and yet I clung to every word that she said, knowing I would treasure it for the rest of my life.

Emma loved me? Emma *loved* me!?

It was more than I could ever hope for, more than I’d ever dared to dream of. I’d been pining for Emma for years and I’d assumed she’d always be out of touch. Even in the insane circumstances with which we were mated, I’d come to terms with her never truly loving me and just settling with what happened.

But no, Emma was in front of me, looking at me with genuine care and affection, confessing her love for me.

“I want to move into that giant lake house with you. I want to have kids. I want to run under the full moon with you, argue with you, make up with you, *live* my life with you! You complete me in a way I never knew I needed, and I’m sorry it took me so long to tell you.”

I couldn’t resist any longer. I kissed her for all that I was worth, hoping she could feel every ounce of passion and adoration I had for her. Because I was in love too. Deeper and truer than I had ever been in my entire life.

“Are you certain?” I asked breathlessly when our lips broke away from each other for just a moment.

“Without a doubt,” she said, smiling up at me with that gorgeous grin of hers. Naturally, I had to kiss her again. And maybe a third time too. Pretty much I just held onto her, wanting to cry from both happiness and shock, until Sam cleared his throat yet again.

“Hey, I hate to breakup a happily ever after, but perhaps we should check on the others, yeah?”

Emma and I parted, but she still held onto my hand. It was hard for my mind not to slip into imagining our future together. Once we were safe at our home, I was going to let my mind go on whatever daydream bender it wanted.

“Yeah, we should.”

The three of us walked out of the construction yard, me limping slightly and Sam swaying a bit. I eyed him, but he just made a shrugging motion. Me and him were going to need to have a conversation about his sudden influx of powers and apparent draining of Ellan, but that could come later. Maybe after like a week of sleep.

The street was an absolute mess. Cars were upturned and destroyed everywhere, there were puddles of unknown liquid, fire damage, and who knew what else. It was like the apocalypse happened on the block and I knew that we would once again be making the news.

Unless the council stepped in, that was. Which I couldn’t imagine them not doing considering the mess we made. Oh well, if any punishment came down, it would ultimately fall on Mahlan’s shoulders for not contacting them in the first place. Not that I wanted my best friend to get in trouble, but maybe a little ‘I told you so’ would do him well.

Theo! I recognized Ricky’s wolf as he trotted up to me, blood all around

his muzzle. *The three witches out here suddenly fled. Did that have anything to do with you?*

I nodded. "Ellan was likely their leader and when she died, they felt the shift in battle. You lot should get out of here before the news crews rush in."

Of course, sir. Will our guys on the force take care of the bodies?

"They should. Anything I should tell them?"

The large wolf shook his head. *No. But sir...*

"Yes?"

The shifters ran with them. We couldn't get through to either of them.

There was a pang in my chest at that, but I wasn't entirely surprised. "Thank you for telling me. I'm sure we'll be seeing them again."

I hope so, sir. I know that looked like our guy, but there was something wrong with him. It was like he wasn't even there. I know he didn't recognize me.

"I got the same impression. But we'll worry about it later. For now, let's go home and lick our wounds."

Yes sir!

Ricky howled to the rest of the guards and they ran off, disappearing through different allies. As for Emma and I, we both looked to Sam, who winked at us.

"So, need a lift?"

We shared a chuckle and he led us to a car that was surprisingly not a moped. I didn't know how he'd gotten another vehicle, but I wasn't really in the mood to ask.

Life grew somewhat surreal as we both slid into his car and he started to drive us home. Like I was dreaming and I would wake up with everything still being up in the air. But before I could feel too untethered, Emma took my hand.

"We did it," she whispered, looking so incredibly proud of me.

"We did." I agreed.

"I'm so thankful that you're my mate. I hope you know that. And now that we've mostly dealt with the people trying to murder me, you're stuck with me forever."

I leaned over and kissed her for maybe the dozenth time that day, as soft and sweet as I could. "I've loved you for so long, and ya know, I'm beginning to think that forever may not be enough."

She grinned up at me, those beautiful eyes of hers framed by her thick

lashes. I could stare into her gaze for ages and not grow bored. “We’ll do our best then.”

“For you? Always.”

We leaned against each other, fully in the moment, until Sam called back to us. “Hey, did your wrist clear up?”

“Oh! I completely forgot!”

Emma pulled her arm from where it was wedged between the two of us and looked at her wrist, which was indeed bare of that awful circle that had been weighing us down for the past few weeks.

“It’s gone!”

“Thank God!” I said, bending down and kissing her pack brand as well. And once we got her home, I was probably gonna kiss her everywhere else too. “We really are rid of them.”

“For now,” she said, heaving a sigh of relief.

“Yeah, for now.”

EMMALINE

I let stepped off the final rung of the ladder and looked at what would soon be our completely redone kitchen, sighing with contented satisfaction.

“You know, we could have hired contractors,” Theo said, rounding the corner from our main hall with two smoothies. I took the yellow one from him, knowing it was my favorite mix of passionfruit, coconut, and pineapple, and gulped down a large sip.

“Yeah, but then we’d miss out on all of this!” I made a gesture to the walls that I’d painted a gentle periwinkle, which I thought would be a great contrast to much of our deep brown trim. Sure, maybe I was decorating our house a little eccentrically, but it was *our* house. I could do what I wanted! Well, do what I wanted as long as Theo and I could come to an agreement on everything. Which we usually managed pretty darn well.

“You mean all of this manual labor!”

“I mean all the *experience*.” I gently ribbed him with my elbow. “Come on, I know you’re having fun completely kitting out your office so that you can work from home half the time.”

At that his serious expression cracked into a grin. “Alright, yeah. That is pretty cool.” He took his own long gulp from his smoothie, which I knew was going to be kale, apple, and melon. Not bad, but not nearly as exciting as he made mine. But that was alright. Everyone had flaws. “Between my actual office, my office in your shop, and this office, I might finally have all the space I need to never get burnt out.”

“That doesn’t mean that you can become a workaholic again,” I said accusingly, turning to face him and giving him one of my *looks*.

“Hello pot,” he shot right back. “I’m kettle. Nice to meet you.”

I couldn’t help but cackle at that. Theo had always been witty and sarcastic, but lately he always seemed to tickle my funnybone just right. I didn’t know if he got funnier or I was just a total sap, but either way I loved how much of my days were always spent laughing.

“Fair enough, fair enough. We’ll just both have to hold each other accountable.”

“As long as I get to hold you.”

Theo wrapped his arm around my waist and I rested my hands on his chest. I could feel the tension ramping up between us and I was tempted to ask if he wanted to christen one of the rooms in our house before I was set to go to dinner with Savvy. We’d been hanging out much more lately and I didn’t really want to cancel on her, so any mate boinking would have to take place before or after. But I didn’t quite get the indecent proposal out before his phone rang.

“Give me one good reason not to throw that into the lake,” I growled.

“It’s your brother.”

“Oh, that’s a good reason.”

Theo answered quickly, although he did keep his arm wrapped around my middle. “Yes, alpha?”

Like usual, I could hear my brother clearly on the other line. He sounded stressed, which had the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It hadn’t been exactly smooth sailing since we’d killed Ellan and discovered her failed plot, but it had been much less harrowing. Our guard team especially was finally getting a break and the other shifters that had been leant from other packs had finally gone home.

“I think there’s something wrong with the council. Something... something’s just not making sense.”

Theo and I looked at each other, both of our expressions clearly shocked by the accusation.

“Well shit.”

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Shifters from his pack are being hunted down and I've been brought into his elite tech team. Now I'm risking my life to conduct corporate espionage and gather intelligence.

But impressing Jacobian is proving way harder than I thought. When one of the employees I'm spying on starts showing interest in me, Jacobian forbids me from putting myself at further risk.

I know I'm only an intern, but I don't appreciate being micromanaged, and I plan to show him exactly what I'm capable of.

I'll do anything for my career, except the determined look in Jacobian's eyes tells me there's another reason behind all the special attention he's giving me. And surely one little love bite can't hurt...

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STEALING THE ALPHA'S HEART

SILENT RIDGE PACK: BOOK 1

Skye Wilson

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