



SILVERDAWN WOLVES

Auctioned
MATE

SURPRISE PREGNANCY SHIFTER ROMANCE

LAYLA SILVER

AUCTIONED MATE

Surprise Pregnancy Shifter Romance

Silverdawn Wolves book 6

Layla Silver

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Chapter 1 - Juriah

The bar was too loud to think. The crowd was a fine mixture of supernatural creatures, horned beings mingling with humans, liquid pleasure flowing from every cup. Earthly alcohol had no effect on my companions or me as Elderlings, so the copious golden liquid that the barkeep continuously handed us in mugs would have to suffice.

Magic danced in the deliciously tart liquid. The stuff was packed with it just to get us tipsy. Beside me, Galanthia and Izdor raised their mugs, clapping them together, spilling precious droplets of fluid on their perfect skin, enhancing their sparkling auras by a thousand star beams. Our arrival had been arranged by Izdor who had smoothed our landing into this realm.

It was nothing like Estaria. And not for the lack of magic, but for the burst of hedonism. Every corner of the world poured liquor and some kind of opiate. Drawers overflowed with sumptuous fabrics, some of them so synthetic that they would catch fire at the slightest heat. Pleasure ran rampant to the extent that it occasionally caused death.

Izdor in particular was fascinated by human culture, talking about how earthlings participated in the *hookup* culture that dominated the dating scene. These were things that baffled me and simultaneously struck my interest, though I found them to be mere distractions when so many buildings here overflowed with tomes of knowledge.

All these new vices, all these delightful pleasures—well, they were something for a hero, not a failed soldier such as me.

Izdor shouldered me, causing me to fumble—but certainly not to drop—my mug of golden liquor. “Lighten up, Riah.”

“Yes, do as the earthlings do and *lighten up*,” Galanthia teased with a wink. Her pale green eyes glimmered and swam

with satisfaction. She must have been feeling her drink. “We can hear you worrying about it.”

Each corner of my mouth dragged to the ground. “Now just a minute. I’ve told you my mental space is a private chapel that requires respect to—”

“To flagellate yourself?” Izdor scoffed. “Please, friend. Drink some more. Pick a woman. Or a man. Or a *centaur*. Nobody here cares about your past. I swear.”

Yet his assurances did nothing to drop my guard. What was merely months passed in this realm felt more like years. And years in Estaria were so different. Everything was different. *I* had been different.

Galanthia softened while ordering another drink. She handed it to me. The tips of her fingers drifted over my knuckles, transferring mild pings of relief to my heart. “We should travel. Don’t you want to see this place called Rome? They have such phenomenal buildings. And their history!”

Booming laughter resonated over the jaunty music, commanding a sea of silence in the surrounding area that burst with life and activity just seconds later. Galanthia had a way of demanding attention—in ways that deeply rivaled that of the locals. She was twice the height of the average woman, with a well-endowed chest and a slim-thick figure with enough muscle to put any famous wrestlers to bed.

She slapped me on the back extra hard, harder than anybody in this realm who wasn’t an Elderling could accomplish. “Their history is a mess. We can easily relate, can’t we, dear Juriah?”

I tried to lift my frown from the ground, but it was hard work putting on a face. However much I suffered internally, I didn’t want my friends to suffer due to mine. I nodded and tried to shake myself into a better mindset. “Yes, I suppose we can, Galanthia.”

Izdor had glowing gray eyes that brightened whenever someone of particular attractiveness came within viewing range. “We should visit Italy as well. Their art is phenomenal.”

“Amsterdam is generous, I hear,” Galanthia added. “I’m curious about this red-light district I keep hearing about.”

“Red light?” My eyebrows went skyward. “You mean like the stoplight system? Does that mean everything stops there?”

Izdor cackled. “No, my friend! It means you can find whatever you want whenever you want.”

“But isn’t that the common way of this realm?” A hum vibrated my throat as the statement produced meditative thought. Everything was already instantaneous. “What do you mean, friend?”

“It’s for different human pleasures,” he replied. “For things that aren’t necessarily legal to sell here.”

I stared at him. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, this tavern is different. *Goat’s Head* doesn’t have the same governing laws about, say, pleasurable company as the rest of the United States.”

Some more staring. A blink every so often to let him know I was listening. This was fascinating stuff. I still hadn’t entirely grasped the ways of this realm, but the more I learned, the more things didn’t make sense. Like healthcare.

“The red-light district is more welcoming to pleasure being traded for goods,” Izdor proceeded. “There, you can find anything that tickles you.”

“But I don’t like being tickled.”

Galanthia shared my puzzled expression while Izdor sighed.

“I didn’t mean *literally* tickled,” he corrected, though then he quickly added, “though I suppose they *do* entertain people who like that sort of thing.”

“Whatever they do, I want to see it,” Galanthia said while slamming her mug on the counter. “And I’d like more gold, please!”

“Galanthia, it’s liquor,” Izdor explained, and as he proceeded with more details, I tuned in to my surroundings.

Goat’s Head had ample entertainment. There were centaurs doing tricks on the stage, a live band floating just above playing various string and wind instruments. People, some of them humans, mingled with shifters and fairies alike, each person giving off various colors and energies.

It was a gold mine of magic. While some creatures chattered away, others chose to drink themselves deep into the shadowy corners of the grand tavern. The vaulted ceilings accommodated such species as myself and my friends, including those fae folks who seemed to tower menacingly above the rest.

Despite height, weight, stature, and demeanor, there wasn’t a malicious bone in this establishment. Conversation freely spun about with plenty of words of encouragement for people wanting to perform with the centaurs on stage. Support like this wasn’t unfamiliar to me now that I lived with the Silverdawn pack in a smaller, self-contained town located on the edge of Wolfcreek.

“...no idea what’s over there, man. But it’s amazing. Anything you want, you get.”

My ears tingled with these new bits of information. Anything I wanted I could get? It sounded like its very own red-light district, according to Izdor’s terms.

“You’re kidding,” the other person replied. “I don’t believe you.”

“Listen, it’s a city within a city. It’s much better than this joint.”

The second person made a snorting sound and then spat. “How much better could it get?”

“My friend, your wildest dreams couldn’t possibly imagine what happens behind the doors of *Moss*.”

Moss—now that just sounded like something as earthy and friendly as the tavern full of drunken half-creatures and magical other-beings. What could possibly be better than

where we were already located? These creatures likely knew the way—if I could just keep listening.

“You’re missing out,” the first person stated confidently while sounding like they were standing up. “I’m going, if you want a ride.”

“I need to finish things here. Give me directions.”

And within minutes, I had secured information for my soldiers without needing to register our wings for flying overseas.

I jostled Izdor who was in a heated explanation of various sex positions he had experimented with on local single women.

“Izzy, I’ve got a place you can go for that,” I stated proudly. “It’s a wild place.”

“A wild place?” He leaned toward me with a mischievous grin. “Tell me more.”

After repeating the details of the conversation I’d heard from several feet away, he slapped Galanthia on the shoulder and waved for us to move. “We should get on! Before you forget!”

“When do I ever forget things?”

Instead of an answer, I was playfully shoved to the exit. Izdor was serious about his loins burning—I could feel his passion pouring right out of his pores. Valiant reds and purples danced around his lower chakras, the ones guarding his passionate appetites. He was ready to do things. And I had to suppose I was ready as well given my warmed state of existence.

Though perhaps that was the gold liquor.

Near the door, we recognized Raven and Killian. Next to Raven was her twin, another Elderling, a powerful being with his arm wrapped around his mate, Gia. Within her, life burst with energy, a kindling of love and affection created by their coupling. What joyous news it was to receive, and it

seemed the twins were celebrating again with their mates for an Elderling child being born of a human was news to us.

Raven stood to greet us, welcoming us with hugs and affectionate words. Killian did the same, and then Rynar was squeezing us—as he often did now with such happiness in his heart. Between him and his mate, everything was set.

Save for the fact that danger still lurked beyond our borders. What other people wanted to do things to us, to Elderlings? He was famous for his kidnapping in Germany, and then his most recent kidnapping, and then his mating with Gia. Did all Elderlings get treated this way in this realm? So much drama for such small creatures. It seemed a waste of effort.

Raven noticed my fretting and squeezed my hand. “You’re protected here. Go and have fun with Izdor. He needs some...” She peered around me to peek at Izdor who was chatting up a rather buxom goblin. Raven cleared her throat and smiled up at me. “I think he may need some tempering, if you understand me.”

“We’re going to a place called *Moss* where he can be tempered.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” Her brows furrowed briefly. “But supernatural taverns tend to pop up every so often to grab some of the customer base from *Goat’s Head*.”

I nodded. “As I understand, business is rather competitive.”

“Not much competition when this town keeps attracting a mixture of creatures.” She waved lightly and then laughed along with it. “That’s what we get for being so welcoming around here, right?”

“I do hope it doesn’t grow too big, Raven. Your hospitality has been spectacular.”

She beamed. “We’re Elderlings. We must protect each other.”

“And so is our ancient way.”

“Don’t be a stranger. But don’t be afraid to explore. I know you’re a little more hesitant than your friends to discover new things.”

“I’m not hesitant. I’m simply—”

Izdor wrapped a muscly arm around my shoulders. “Cautious.”

“Uptight,” Killian added, to which Raven glared at him and Killian shrugged. “What? He’s a little wound up. I’m just saying maybe this *Moss* place can help.”

Raven frowned curiously. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Only vague whispers.” Killian shrugged. “You know how it can be sometimes. Things can come and go quickly. Might be one of those temporary taverns.”

“Either way, be safe,” Raven said. “And let us know if you need anything. We’re only a call away.”

Such welcoming arms surprised me. But Izdor would have never led us into a situation that wouldn’t be as warm as the Silverdawn pack. While Galanthia held the door open, Izdor ushered me out into the cool night to where adventure waited for us.

Darkness gathered in the streets where the lamps didn’t reach. I walked with Galanthia on my right and Izdor on my left, a formation we had carried over from Estaria. Back in that starry place, our positions had been very different. Life had been different in every way, unpredictably so.

What we had witnessed in our elders had led us to this odd realm, a place where things managed to turn upside down quite often. Phrases were strange. Illustrious performances went on constantly. City life never quite halted, even when the sun descended beyond the horizon.

Excitement brewed in every corner of this place, of Wolfcreek. I couldn’t stop repeating the name of it in my head, turning it around with its interesting syllables and false implications. I would have anticipated a place named as such to harbor wolves above all, yet many species resided among these streets.

Izdor slapped my shoulder in a friendly gesture. “Get out of your head, seriously.”

“You could think up a storm,” Galanthia joked. “But the best strategies came from these silences. What are you thinking?”

I stared ahead, keeping in mind the directions I had been given by the stranger without him properly knowing. “I’m not sure.”

“That’s a lot of uncertainty for a lot of thinking,” Izdor joked. “Come on, tell us what you want tonight. Is it a hookup?”

My core burned at the thought. “Well...”

“He needs a woman,” Galanthia stated plainly. “There’s no shame in the longing, friend. We’ll get you situated easily.”

I laughed. “I don’t understand. That’s usually something I can do by myself.”

“We call it being a wingman,” Izdor said with a regal gesture to the path ahead. “It means I’ll make sure to make you sound as appealing as possible to whomever you choose.”

Galanthia smacked me on the back, sending me stumbling forward. “And I shall do the same!”

With friends like these, I couldn’t lose. I prepared my body for a most curious night while trying to think of what the next place might hold for us. Adventure was a finicky thing in unfamiliar places. I didn’t want to make a mistake—and I didn’t want to miss what could possibly be the best night of my life.

What remained certain was the fact that I would soon find out.

Chapter 2 - Juriah

Moss did indeed resemble its earthy name, feeling somewhat rooted in this reality while retaining a certain supernatural charm. Creatures of all types roamed the open dining area, though many chose to settle in at any of the round silver tables available. Wherever someone needed a bigger chair, a bigger one appeared without an attendant having to walk over and remedy the situation.

Baffled and intrigued, I found myself titillated by the entertainment on stage, a half-clad woman with a large bosom and pastel-pink skin shimmying up a pole. Her eyes were entirely silver and long purple hair hung in ringlets around her shoulders even when she spun upside down. Such acrobatics were the work of magic, surely.

The fact that her tiny bikini had hardly moved during her performance was likely magic as well. Much of it was stirring my loins as it did Izdor, but purely for physical carnal reasons—some of which were entirely new to me. While the earth realm was generous with its pleasures, I was overwhelmed by the ease with which I was aroused.

Something to do with being in a different realm, I had to guess. At the very least, I was able to distinguish primal desire from affection. Not that it was particularly hard. I'd yet to encounter a creature of any species who sparked affection, other than my friends and the pack. Nothing more serious than fondness had arisen from any given situation.

Perhaps I'm being punished for my failures.

My terrifying thought propelled me to the bar. This tavern surely had something resembling the golden liquor from *Goat's Head*, perchance something stronger. Curtained doorways appeared to lead to other places while steel doors hid the secrets of this lustful den. A heightened sense of desire clung to the air, reminding me of thick incense.

“Barkeep,” I requested in a commanding voice, “your strongest liquor, please.”

The thin figure behind the bar sported white hair and white eyes without pupils. When they blinked, a second set of lids blinked as well. Gills marked their luminescent blue skin in various places, most notably around the neck.

When the figure leaned forward, two slits where a nose should have been twitched. “You’re not from this realm.”

“No, sir—ma’am. Uh, *friend*.” I tried my best to follow what Izdor had taught me about manners. “Earth beer does nothing. Is there anything you have that can get me drunk?”

“You can call me sir.” The figure winked. “For the right price.”

Ah, so this one must have been trading pleasures for coins. I reached into my pocket and procured the gold coins that Izdor had gifted me. When I set them on the counter, the figure started laughing.

“Well, with that kind of cash, I can get you whatever you want,” the barkeep said confidently. “Just call me Chopper and let me grab a barrel from the back.”

After tossing a towel over their shoulder, they retreated behind one of the steel doors. I swore I smelled something unsavory waft from the back, but it might have merely been the mixture of creature smells. More people here came from the ocean than anywhere else. Which explained why the way Chopper observed me with their pupilless eyes made me uneasy.

Izdor slid onto a stool while Galanthia stood behind me. From here, my companions seemed to be on the same edge I walked, indicating their discomfort through nonverbal cues. Being such experienced soldiers meant having language that could be used without saying a word. Of course, we could use our mental capacities, but cues could be much faster than words during dire circumstances.

Though these didn’t seem like dire circumstances, I knew more than anyone how much situations could change at the last second. Chopper returned with murky liquid, stuff that seemed to be out of a literal barrel that had been aged in a

moldy room. While they insisted that the stuff would get us drunk, I wasn't so sure. It appeared to be more poison than liquor.

I paid the barkeep and kept my eyes on the stage, watching the buxom figure there twist and writhe on the pole.

Don't drink it, I warned my friends.

Wasn't planning on it, Izdor replied.

Galanthia raised her cup to her lips. *Pretend to drink it. They're watching us.*

Ah, indeed they were. Every set of eyes in the room seemed to roll in our direction without physically doing so. As soon as attention focused on us, in whatever way seemed most suitable to the watcher, their aura changed. Threatening indigo fought with horrid blue, darkness sweeping the length of the room as the lights dimmed and the set changed.

This place was odd. It was hardly the way the barkeep kept tabs on us or the disgusting liquid we were being served for such a high price. Being Elderlings in this realm meant drawing attention, even in such towns as Wolfcreek that were most welcoming. People flocked to us. People wanted to be near us, to touch us.

The same seemed to apply in this den of iniquity.

Maliciousness began crowding the air. I felt the distinct shift when another dancer wandered onto the stage, her eyelids drooping as she wore a lazy smile. Languid motions appeared mildly sultry but mostly forced. I didn't like the way she gazed with longing at the people seated close to the stage. It was like she was begging for them to whisk her away.

My wings tingled in my back. They only did that when danger was close at hand. Galanthia and Izdor prickled with the same paranoia, their eyes on the stage while their minds alerted me of their suspicions.

Is it an elaborate trap? I asked. *Or do you think it's just one of those bad places?*

Izdor nudged me lightly. *Eyes forward. There's someone approaching.*

I turned to Izdor without missing a beat and patted him lovingly on the shoulder, slurring my words as I praised him for the joke he had just cracked. Galanthia joined us, her eyes like pinpoints despite the mirth written on her face.

Izdor had been right—someone was approaching us wearing a scarlet suit. The wicked sheen on his skin resembled fire and even danced like flames, never quite remaining the same red hue. Horns sprouted from either side of his head, the impression much like those crossroad demons or the myths that humans passed between each other about devils.

Was he a man? What were his pronouns if not?

I shook off my apprehension and greeted him with a grin. “Hello, friend. What do they call you?”

“Mr. Vee,” the devil replied. “Mr. Mal Vee.”

“And your pronouns?” Izdor inquired. “That seems to be important in this realm.”

“Yes, this realm does place emphasis on pronouns,” Mr. Mal Vee tittered with amusement. “I suppose *he* and *him* would be the correct ones for me.”

I nodded while raising my glass. “I’m glad I thought correctly.”

“In any case, it doesn’t matter to me,” Mr. Mal Vee insisted. “What matters to me is only that you three are having yourselves a good time.”

“We are,” Galanthia boomed, and then gave him a hard pat on the back to prove her point. “Thank you, Mr. Mal Vee.”

The man appeared rather shocked by her strength, but then he seemed delighted to have approached us. He adjusted his blazer, smoothed his fingers over his thin black hair, and gestured to the stage. “She’s a phenomenal entertainer.”

Izdor wiggled his eyebrows. “That she is, sir.”

“She does incredible *private* performances as well,” Mr. Mal Vee continued, “that I can easily set up for one of you.” His smile widened. “Or all of you.”

Galanthia politely declined.

“She’s been known to turn many tricks,” the man went on, “especially for the plumbing. She can fit any of your desires.”

Izdor chuckled. “She looks perfectly human.”

“That’s where your eyes deceive you, *friend*.” Sinister energy slithered into his aura, replacing the charmer that once lived there. Wasn’t that the true way of devils? “She’s a shapeshifter.”

“She looks drugged,” I pointed out, and then promptly regretted my observation as the devil didn’t seem pleased with my announcement. I shrugged my right shoulder and raised my glass. “My apologies, friend. Your realm and language are still new to me. I mean to say that her motions are fluid.”

His eyes brightened. “Yes, she’s a serpentine shifter. Naturally, she can bend however she pleases.” He gestured back to the stage where the performer wrapped herself around the pole as though on cue with the devil man. “I’m sure you can imagine many ways to enjoy her—” He looked at Galanthia. “Or him, if that’s your pleasure.”

So, everyone here was available for trade. Despite the showmanship and the presentation, I couldn’t shake the feeling that things were utterly wrong. The earthy scent was beginning to choke me and the eyes I knew were watching were starting to suck me dry. If we stayed any longer, I feared that I would lose my ability to fight.

I didn’t want to be in that position again.

Galanthia, crack another joke, I instructed mentally.

She elbowed Mr. Mal Vee. “I don’t suppose you have anything boxier. I’m a big woman!” She boomed with laughter while whacking him repeatedly on the back.

The man, annoyed by her comments but attempting to be a gracious host, nodded with a tight smile. He cleared his throat, put some space between himself and Galanthia, and fiddled with his tie. “Well, if you do need anything—literally *anything* at all—our auction is about to begin. Feel free to call on me.”

I smiled gratefully. “We appreciate it, friend.”

Mr. Mal Vee gave a flourishing bow before returning to the stage. After he disappeared behind a curtain, I let my shoulders drop half an inch, doing my best to retain my wings. Alarms were ringing inside my head, quite literally. It was the loudest way to alert my companions of the danger that surely lurked in the darkness of this odd place.

Izdor touched my shoulder and spoke out loud while mentally holding our conversation intact. *Don't lose your head just yet. It seems squirrely, but not dangerous.*

I sense danger, I told him as I made light of the dancer on stage verbally. *I can't shake it, Izzy. We need to get out of here.*

If we leave now, the devil will know we're spooked, Galanthia pointed out as she inserted herself into our verbal conversation. *Lay low. Play it cool. Keep pretending to drink from your glass. We'll leave in the middle of the auction.*

No, that wasn't a good plan. My senses were tingling beyond my control, making it feel like my enemies were hovering just over my head.

One of my downfalls was the fact that my emotions were in such great availability in this realm. Back in Estaria, it had been easy to shove them aside. But here? Guilt plagued me like spiritual boils.

I just wanted relief from it all.

Hold on to your head, Izdor recommended.

Galanthia nodded and added a wink. *You're doing great. We don't have much longer.*

At least let us get a plan of escape together, I suggested.

I was relieved when both of my companions agreed. After a few minutes of mental chatter, we settled on our plan. We would wait until the halfway point of the auction, putting on our automatic responses to our surroundings so as not to alert anyone of our suspicions. Using our quick travel power, we would zap to the door and jump outside where our wings could unfurl.

At that point, we hoped nobody would notice our absence. We weren't making too much noise—aside from Galanthia and her booming laugh—and the people in the front row were starting to get rowdy. Chopper perked up behind the bar when somebody yelled for a different species to appear.

While the mer-person seemed particularly shady as an individual, they also seemed annoyed by the growing frenzy at the other end of the room. Thankfully, the commotion was drawing more attention by the second. As soon as the lights dimmed, I honed my senses, scanning our surroundings mentally to keep tabs on any approaching foes.

This wasn't a battlefield, but it might as well have been one. Crowds like this could go from restlessness to chaos in the blink of an eye. As a commander, it was my job to recognize when my troops were getting out of hand. The same instinct occurred to me now, and my awareness sharpened as a result.

Disco lights splashed across the stage. A voice resembling that of a hissing snake came through the speakers to announce the auction was about to begin. While the crowd hushed and Chopper became energetically calm as a result, my perception heightened. Izdor tensed his muscles. Galanthia towered to my left, stiffening into a defense position. We were ready for anything.

Except for what stumbled onto the stage.

Whatever words the announcer spoke were beyond my comprehension. My heart rattled in my chest as I watched a clearly drugged woman struggle to lift her head. Mr. Mal Vee

appeared on stage left wearing a charming smile as he reached out to lift the woman's chin.

I sniffed the air. She wasn't just a woman. She was a wolf, a drugged shifter who didn't know where she was or what was happening.

Mr. Mal Vee had called it an auction.

And he hadn't lied. It *was* an auction—a human trafficking auction.

Chapter 3 - Macy

One Hour Earlier

Good goddess, what the hell was Percy thinking making me wear heels? He must have lost his damn mind if he thought I'd be able to take more than a few steps without rolling my ankle.

The mirror on the wall barely covered the cracks that had grown like ivy in the brick. My tattered reflection stared back at me. It was hard to see myself as beautiful in this lighting. Even moths wouldn't have flocked to the dingy bulbs hanging above my head without any coverings. They weren't sufficient to do makeup, and they weren't flattering at all. I felt ugly, gross, with rolls that tugged my sparkling crimson dress right into them.

I pinched my tummy, bending forward to test the gaping dip of the blouse against my massive tits. Yep, *nope*, bending was out of the question if I wanted to keep these puppies in place. When I stood upright, I tugged on the dress, trying to smooth it out, trying to keep it from clinging too tightly to me.

Or maybe that was the point.

Percy hadn't picked this dress. Fabric like this belonged to a supermodel or somebody much richer, not a backwoods Barbie like me. I preferred camo pants and pink tops, thank you very much. Heels could stick with the city girls while I kept my boots and sneakers. Those things let me move around much easier.

Then again, that was probably why Percy had suggested these particular heels. He knew I couldn't run in them. That damn jerk was probably laughing it up in the hallway with his buddy, pointing at the door and snickering.

Was there a runway out there at all? Had he lied about that too?

I closed my eyes, trying to keep the tears at bay. Now wasn't the time for crying or pouting. I had a debt to pay, and this was part of paying that debt. One little performance for a night would rake in enough cash to get me a modicum of freedom. Maybe then I'd be allowed to roam the compound instead of being kept behind doors all the time.

Two light raps came from the door and then the hinges gave way to horror-movie squeals. Percy and Rick walked inside, shut the door, and bolted it. That was a treacherous sound to hear on the edge of Wolfcreek where things were much less regulated by the general populace, where screams couldn't exactly be heard.

I swallowed my anxiety and stared at them through the mirror. "Well?"

Percy stood behind me just to the right. He was rather tall with leather-tan skin and dimples in his cheeks when he smiled. A chiseled jawline like that belonged to a younger man, maybe somebody in Hollywood, but Percy was more of the producing type. He liked bossing people around and sitting back with a cigar. His dark auburn eyes glimmered as they roamed my body.

I tried not to react. Something about the way those tree-bark marbles tinted with honey-brown lingered on my bosom gave me mixed feelings. Percy wasn't ugly by any means—but he was a mean alpha, and that made him unattractive in my eyes.

Beside him, Rick stood just as tall with angular features and a broad muscular frame. Clay-peach skin boasted a healthy glow from regular care. Mine did much the same but seemed lackluster in this light.

I hated it. I hated them.

But they were the only ones taking care of me.

Percy locked his gaze with mine and crossed his arms over his chest. "Could be better."

"What?" I snapped. "I'm working with what you've given me."

Rick licked his lips. “You sure are working with a lot. Aren’t you, Macy?”

A terrifying chill laced up my spine. “My eyes are up here, asshole.”

The lascivious smirk he wore made me tingle in ways I hated. Familiar threads wove through my center, reminding me of last year when I used to think Rick was the best thing since Android phones. Try as I might to chase away the feeling, it just never went away.

I hated it. I hated *him*.

Percy sighed. “Is this really the best you could do?”

“Like I just said—”

“We gave you that expensive makeup shit you wanted,” he cut in. “We got you a damn dress off a mannequin from fucking Saks.”

Rick whistled. “Wasn’t cheap, Macy.”

“Wasn’t cheap *at all*, and now you’re standing here telling me that it’s still not good enough for you?” He shook his head. “You’re as useless as your mother.”

That stung me right down to my muscles. I bowed my head toward the mirror as penance and tried not to take it personally. Sweat dotted my upper back and wept from under my arms, making me feel gross in the poorly air-conditioned room.

More tears attempted to make their way to the surface. I smoothed my hands over the dress, trying to appreciate the quality even as I felt like a horribly made princess caricature. “I’m sorry, Alpha.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough when I’ve been taking care of you your whole damn life, Macy.”

“I appreciate everything you’ve done, Alpha.”

He stepped forward and wrapped his arm around my waist. “Are you sure about that? Because right now, I don’t see

you acting appreciative. I just see you acting like the disobedient brat that the elders tried to banish.”

Pressure ballooned in my throat. I tried to swallow the ball of shame, but it refused to go away. “I-I know. You saved me. I could have died in the wilderness, but you—”

He squeezed me tight to his side. “I took you in like you were one of my own while your mother drank herself to death.”

I closed my eyes. The tears came despite my silent protests, hot waterfalls streaking the perfect makeup I’d done about fifteen minutes ago. This was just embarrassing. How was I supposed to perform in front of a crowd if I was crying the whole damn time? I had to get my act together. I had to pay my debts and then I’d be on my way to brighter days.

Without any blood relatives to speak of, I was at the mercy of the Baneridge Hounds—and they hardly ever showed any mercy.

I was one of the lucky ones.

Percy rubbed my hip and then transferred his hand to my spine, drawing a line up to the base of my neck. Shivers erupted internally, microscopic reactions that were uncontrollable. As he rested his hand on my left shoulder, I noticed Rick glaring lasers into the mirror.

Triumph reigned in the secrecy of my mind. *I bet he’s regretting how he treated me now that I’m being showcased like a freakin’ pony.*

“Rick,” Percy stated firmly, “I need you to help Macy practice walking so she doesn’t break her neck on that stage.”

Rick started to growl until Percy shot him a sharp glance. While bowing his head, Rick kept his eyes on my body, possessiveness pouring from him like thick dough from a bowl. I leaned into Percy, impressed by the staggering metaphorical nails growing around Rick’s energy. I didn’t have a lot of skills as a stray wolf, but I could at least deal emotional damage.

Too bad I can't run in heels, I thought. But I can certainly try to learn.

“Chin up, Macy,” Percy instructed while tapping my chin. “Tits out. Like we practiced.”

“We never—”

His gaze cut me off before I could say anything more. That was probably for the best. I always had something to say when a response just wasn't required. Obedience training was recommended by the elders but denied by the pack at large. Thank goddess, Percy wasn't the type to use shock collars.

But given the way Rick stared at my neck, he definitely seemed like he would be into that as a kink.

“You need to walk proper,” Percy stated while handing me off to Rick. “Act like a lady. You want this night over with, don't you? That's it. Keep walking.”

I did my best with the heels, hanging on to Rick's extended hand to keep my balance. I pointed my chin toward the doorway, seeing it for what it was—my liberation. Percy hadn't given me too many details about the gig, but from what I peeped in the other rooms, I had to guess it was some kind of stripping show or on-site escorting.

Many of the women had accompanied other creatures or human-looking men. Some of the performers looked totally lucid while others appeared completely zonked. I felt bad for them. Did they owe their families and caretakers debts as well? Was this where women like me ended up whenever their packs got tired of them?

Rick caught me when I stumbled, his gruff chuckle annoying the hell out of me while he groped my right tit. I shoved his hand off and grabbed his shoulder to steady myself.

Shit, I was getting in my own head. I had to focus on what I was doing, had to get through the night just like Percy said. Maybe if I did well, he would give me a better place to live instead of that crummy hovel he called a cabin right behind his house. To have a place that wasn't accessible to Rick—or Percy for that matter—was all I ever wanted.

And I would be damned if I didn't make it happen.

Lights lined the front of the stage as a spotlight swung in my direction. Percy gave me a light shove as Rick said, "Knock 'em dead, tiger."

What had I just gotten myself into with this club? *Moss* sounded like a character from a television show, not a place where creatures got off to live performances. Would someone be joining me, or would I have to use this pole in the center of the stage by myself? Crap, I hadn't practiced stripping. I'd never done it in my life.

Silence stung my ears. Was there supposed to be music? As disorienting as it was to be barraged with lights, I didn't want to disappoint the crowd—even though I had zero idea what I was supposed to be doing. The other women hadn't come back from the stage. I assumed they had stepped into the crowd or gone off to a dancer booth or something.

Right foot first, Macy, I reminded myself while following my mental directions. *Left foot. Keep moving. Chin up. Smile.*

Sultry music curled around me, seeming to follow my every movement. A gruff and husky voice that reminded me of Tennessee whiskey came through the speakers. "Friends and foes, I have the pleasure of introducing the most darling little werewolf bombshell from the very heart of our fine town—Miss Macy."

Well, *that* was an interesting introduction, and it didn't sound like Percy or Rick either. The voice sounded totally disembodied, almost coming from nowhere. I held the pole in the center of the stage loosely, trying to circle it gracefully without making a fool of myself. All I wanted was one complete spin for the show, and that would be more than enough.

Or so I hoped.

When I paused, my attention hooked on the left side of the bar. It felt like there was something there I needed to pay attention to, but I could barely see anything with the lights so bright. Without squinting, I kept glancing in that direction, trying to listen to the words of the announcer, trying to keep my heart from exploding right out of my chest.

Macy.

I blinked while stepping toward the line of lights, feeling called to step out into the audience. Was there a staircase I could use? Maybe Percy had set something up. Maybe it was Percy himself who had called my name under the soft touch of rhythm and blues. I glanced over my shoulder to check the hallway next to the stage. Nobody was standing there.

But still, I heard a voice. I heard *something* call out to me.

Whistles drew my attention back to the left, closer to the front of the stage. Somebody hooted from the right. I propped my right hand on my hip and posed, giving my best model face to the crowd. Light applause erupted, inspiring a satisfied smirk.

Alright, so they didn't need anything super fancy. They just wanted to see me act sexy. Whatever would get me off this stage faster was what I was going to do.

“She’s strong in her human and wolf form,” the announcer explained. “Luscious in her hips and tits. Gorgeous in her glory.”

More whistles came to my ears, granting me a confidence I hadn't ever felt. Was this what it felt like to be celebrated? While this place was likely reserved for naughtier things, it actually felt *good* to be seen as a plus-sized woman wearing a tight dress without getting booed off the stage.

Chin up, I thought as I walked in front of the lights.
Tits out.

“She hails from the Baneridge pack and comes with a feisty attitude,” the announcer added. “However, don’t let her troublesome ways confuse you. She’s committed to labor and protection, as is reported by her alpha.”

I stiffened while focusing again on that left-most point of the bar. Some of the lights had cleared a bit, giving me a view of the sleek counter where a few figures sat. One of them was glowing. Were those wings?

More blinking. More rearranging of my position so I could get a break from the lights. Had the announcer just said something about me being committed to labor? Internal snorting proceeded while I thought of Percy and the things he had me do as tasks around the compound. Dirty chores. *Busy* chores. Sure, I was committed to labor—as much as I was committed to my liberation.

“You might have to put a leash on this one!”

My heart nearly stopped.

I didn’t like the way the announcer just said that. I didn’t like how the crowd grew rowdier in response.

“Just look at those hips,” the announcer added. He smacked his lips before continuing, “The bidding starts at one hundred thousand dollars—”

I nearly screeched.

Bidding? One hundred *thousand* dollars?

Dear goddess, Percy wasn’t having me do a quick striptease. He wasn’t selling me for a night.

He was selling me for the rest of my *life*.

Chapter 4 - Macy

Panic strangled me. Nobody could have been the wiser with their bickering and hollering, numbers flying from the crowd as the announcer spoke quickly into the microphone. The sultry music had dissipated and left me stranded near the stripper pole, disco lights cutting through the hazy fog of white.

That glowing person—that *angel* I swore was at the bar was becoming clearer by the second. Short white hair and pale honey eyes materialized on a body of rippling muscle. He was tall too, tall like a skyscraper even while seated. He didn't have wings, and he certainly couldn't have been an angel.

This was a place for devils. Angels didn't exist here.

Had I truly thought there were wings on his back? Nah, that must have been a trick of the light. And now that I could see beyond the lights in my face, I could see the men in the audience clamoring for a bid on my head.

Plus-sized women were all the rage now, huh? None of these assholes would have spared me a glance on the street other than to say something snide and disgusting. The only thing that kept me going while I was frozen in the spotlight was the fact that I knew Rick was pissing himself with how angry he must have been in this moment.

Percy hadn't given him all the details either. I sensed it along with the choking musk of jealousy I picked up from beyond the general dining area. I sensed other things too, new things and old things, familiar and strange. Good goddess, the place was *packed*. Centaurs, human men, half trolls, and full trolls raised their hands every time they wanted to place a new bid.

Popularity had never looked so unappealing. If these were the creatures that wanted to keep me for life, then I wanted to get the hell out of Dodge. I'd take my chances in a forest any day to avoid what I knew would be an awful existence here—or wherever I happened to end up.

My nostrils tingled with the combined scents of sweat, desire, and various species. A shocking number of wolves occupied the audience. Though I couldn't recognize anyone in particular, I knew they were sitting out there. I knew they were salivating over me. Would it be better to end up with a wolf like me? Or would that be significantly worse?

I clenched my jaw. *I don't want to find out.*

Among the thrum of noise, of hearts beating, of body odor mixing with hard liquor, came the surprising touch of something floral. Decadent sensations accompanied the smell, making me feel like I was about to be wrapped in a warm blanket. It was just on the edge of my peripheral vision. It called to me as much as the exit door blinking with its clearly marked red sign.

Macy, run.

Something ancient and powerful resided out there. None of the creatures I saw held the power I felt, but I felt it regardless of being able to see it. Strength like that was intimidating and simultaneously attractive. I wanted to go wherever that energy led. I wanted to be drawn away from this place, maybe even taken to another dimension.

Sweat ran to the base of my spine.

Is that possible at this point?

I took a deep breath while sizing up the crowd. Alright, there was no chance in hell I was going to make a break for it while everyone was watching. It would be better for me to put on a show than to give in to whatever gruesome fear fetish some of these creatures likely had. Predators could smell such insecurities from a mile away. Confidence would get me through the bidding—and then I could figure a way out after that.

Luck was on my side. Since I hadn't had anything to drink, I had a clear head. Sweet goddess, whiskey sounded like a great idea. But I had to make sure I made it out of here in one piece. Any kind of escape would require every ounce of my cunning and attention to detail.

Which was quickly leaving me as more attention was drawn to my body.

My heart was screaming for help while my head was trying to keep my nerves from frying under the heavy catcalling from the audience. As the announcer continued taking bids, I leaned into being the center of attention and hiked my dress up a bit to expose more of my legs. A few saucy movements had the crowd enticed, whistles and claps of approval echoing throughout the bar.

Except the counter where liquor was served. That space was oddly quiet.

Just push through, I told myself while I sauntered to the right side of the stage. *Show some leg. Show some cleavage. Make them drool.*

Head up and tits out. That was Percy's suggestion. I was going to heed it as much as I could without embarrassing myself.

After another steadying breath, I faked a smirk and bent forward, showing enough of the girls to make the vampire at the table in front of me drool. Every set of eyes in the vicinity landed on my melons.

Yep, they were knockouts, and I could definitely use them to smother someone if it came down to it. Years of being locked away meant plenty of time to learn new tricks. Percy would've had a cow if he knew all the ways I knew to defend myself. In front of him, I acted weak and subservient. There were parts of me that did it out of obligation, and more conflicting parts doing it for the simple fact that he was my alpha.

But after tonight, he would be dead to me. He could join the ranks of my past along with Rick as I made my escape. It was just going to take some serious manipulation to pick a bozo from the crowd and get him to bid higher than the rest.

Vampires were elegant fighters who typically defended their property with great force. Wolves did much the same,

though they could also be reckless if they didn't have good training with their tempers. Trolls were clunky and bulbous. Centaurs were just plain huge and intimidating.

“Show us your nips, doll!”

“That's right. Shake it for us!”

“How wide are your hips in centimeters?”

Goddess, I would have given anything to go back to Times Square. At least the catcalling there was better quality. Not to mention the fact it was just plain normal in the city to get treated this way as a voluptuous woman. Here, it was horrifying because I couldn't chalk it up to toxic flirting.

Here, it meant I was about to get purchased.

My stomach rolled at the thought. How could Percy treat me like this? How could he think that this was going to solve all his problems?

More pain settled into my jaw as I kept up my flirtatious grin. *This is what I get for turning down his proposal.*

Even the most desperate people had limits. And that was me about a year ago when Percy had asked me to marry him. It wasn't the kind of proposal where the guy gets down on his knees and professes his love. It was literally a mere question passed off as a suggestion in casual conversation as I scrubbed his floorboards for the third time in the same week.

Just a quick, “Marrying me would please the elders.”

And that was it. There wasn't a damn thing romantic about it. People would have probably thought I was crazy to expect some romance out of the deal. I mean, the least my alpha could do was spring for a ring, right? But no, I had to be treated like a maid, a tool, a means to an end.

Rick would have just used me for breeding. But Percy? He would have used me for pleasure. Which would have been infinitely better if he hadn't been such an awful alpha. Plenty of women traded their ring finger for security. It wasn't

unheard of in this realm. But I wasn't about to be *sold* like I was a piece of property.

A desperate woman like me couldn't afford limits. Yet here I stood after I had turned down my alpha and his right-hand man. Safety would have been the least of my concerns. I would have just had to worry about regular things, household things.

I sighed. There was no use getting up in arms about things I couldn't change. Besides, those weren't things I wanted. I had promised myself I would pay my debts the honorable way. Part of me felt totally betrayed by how I was giving in to this attention. The least I could do was not enjoy it.

But that seemed to be impossible. Because for as long as I had ever known, the only people who had given me attention like this were Rick and those construction workers in Times Square. Receiving it here was intoxicating as much as it was frightening. It meant I was *wanted* in some strange, twisted way.

It meant I was desirable.

A couple of mer-people pushed a silver cart at the back of the crowd that looked a lot like a safe. I figured it must hold money or something equally valuable. It was probably being kept under lock and key somewhere backstage. The rooms I'd seen on the way to the stage weren't anything impressive. They were just the same as the one where I'd changed. But I had to guess whatever money was used in the bidding process—coins, antiques, silver pieces, and the like—was being kept on the premises.

All I had to do was find it and grab a bag of it.

It's more complicated than that, I warned myself as I turned around to show off my round ass. More hollers came from the crowd when I bent with my dress hiked up. *Money will help, but how the hell am I supposed to get out of this place?*

Percy and Rick would come after me if I ran. They would likely want to check and make sure I was being good to whoever bought me too. I had to make sure I impressed my buyer, that I could drop their guard at the drop of a hat. Being sexy could only get me so far. I needed to find the room with the valuables—and I needed someone who knew this operation to show it to me.

While most of the men in the front row were drooling over me, I was checking the left side of the stage (now located at my right) for any sort of clues to who could be keeping tabs on the money room. The announcer had yet to make himself apparent, so I assumed he was either above the stage or perhaps hidden in the darkness beyond the crowd.

I turned back to the crowd to face my fans. Bidding had gone particularly long at this point, and I wondered when the announcer would finally call it. Would flashing the crowd get me some more time? Or would that just make a fight break out? Well, there was one way to find out.

A hulking shadow lurked in my periphery. Quick glances revealed that Rick was guarding the only exit from the stage. He stood with his arms crossed and his demeanor tightly stretched like he was resisting the urge to shout at me. Seeing him look so cross was wildly amusing. Goddess, nothing made me happier than to witness his disappointment in losing me.

Good. He didn't deserve to have me around with the way he had treated me.

The familiar pain returned as I tried to shimmy in a suggestive way, but I couldn't do it right with Rick watching me. I knew he was blocking my path. I knew he wouldn't rest until I was shackled in the back of a van.

My eyebrows rose. *Maybe he knows where the money is hidden.*

If I couldn't escape Rick, even in my last moments as part of the Baneridge pack, then I would use that to my advantage. I didn't know how these bidding auctions went or how the money was traded, but I knew I would be kept backstage again. Why not try to weasel my way through it?

The noise grew louder when I teased the straps of my dress. Clamoring gave way to shouting. It sounded like a mob was forming. Geeze, they were just tits. They could see them just about anywhere. How could I be this appealing to a bunch of creatures who were trying to purchase me?

Energy penetrated my confidence, a strangely alluring feeling that made me think of azaleas in a lush garden. If I focused hard enough, I could almost see a cobblestone path leading to a grand maze. The peacefulness of it all drew me in, and then I found myself accepting my situation far before I knew its ultimate end.

Impossible—nothing about this situation was going to make me feel okay. I barely had an escape plan in mind, and I was banking on things that were unpredictable. Like Rick. Like this crowd.

Yet I felt like everything was going to be okay.

The floral scent I'd sensed earlier circulated me, lulling me into a state of calm. I lazily observed the crowd as the noise came to a crescendo, the sound of it becoming an ocean of static. I closed my eyes as I tilted my face toward the light. My hands were resting on my shoulders, still teasing the straps of my dress, knowing fully that I was about to strip in front of a crowd of hungry men.

Until a booming voice shattered my concentration.

“Four million dollars!”

Gasps cut through the crowd as my eyes snapped open. It was none other than that angelic man—he stood at the cusp of the audience with his hand raised and his eyes glowing an otherworldly white. A merciful god couldn't have possibly appeared more attractive than this man right now, his bulging figure seeming to double with his magnetic voice.

Silence gathered as everyone watched in awe. This man was truly from another realm. He just had to be with the way he was commanding attention from everyone in the room—me included. While the white faded from his eyes to reveal the pale honey from before, his power never diminished, and I

felt that warmth come over me again, that loving embrace just a few steps away.

Use it, I thought. Fall in love with him as much as you can now—because by the look of it, he's about to be your new owner.

Chapter 5 - Juriah

“*Sold!* To the mysterious gentleman from another realm!”

Applause crackled around me. Icy threads laced up my spine as I stared ahead, ghastly sensations rocking my core as I watched the woman on stage watch me. My arm was still in the air. Every inch of me burned while I held her silver gaze, utterly lost to the cosmic swirls beaming from her to me.

Favor for the woman carried me forward. Something about her lured me to the stage. Creatures patted me on the back as I wandered forward almost mechanically, mild utterances of praise and heavier slang meeting my ears but falling to the wayside. None of it seemed to get through the trance I was under.

What are you doing? Izdor projected to me.

We were supposed to head for the door, Galanthia added.

I can't leave the girl, I argued. *We can't leave any of them.*

Protests rocked my skull as I kept my pace. I dropped my arm and tucked my hand into my pocket, trying to be as casual as possible while my wings fought against my flesh. Unearthly beats pulsed through my veins as I drew closer. Mr. Mal Vee seemed to materialize out of thin air.

Neat tricks aside, the man was strange. His image wavered around the edges like he was having a hard time existing in reality. Only a moment was spared to observe the creature, and then my attention was pulled right back to the wolf woman, the shifter named Macy. Green apples, a scent so heavenly yet simple, drifted into my awareness, drawing me in like a hungry predator who had just scented blood on the air.

Primality like this hadn't occurred since the wars. Most of that had been left behind, and now, even as I attempted to crawl through the few measly seconds it took to get to the

stage, time stood still. It was a stark reminder of how powerful Elderlings were on this plane.

Illusionary magic would have likely done the same. And perhaps there was something to that tinted liquid handed to us by the barkeep. The stuff had barely touched my lips yet I felt lit from within. Starry eyes like those of the wolf woman named Macy could have catapulted me right into the atmosphere had it not been for the circumstances.

Act cool, Izdor alerted. Try to smile, man. You look awkward.

I let my teeth appear and was greeted with the same from the devil man who floated a couple inches above the stage. Cloudy energy rumbled around his aura. Ugliness resided there that he was desperately trying to keep clear from prying eyes. Though I would normally keep my sight to myself, I couldn't help seeing his true colors. They were too magnificently evil.

Another glance at the woman nearly shattered me. The look on her face halted me in my tracks. Disgust twisted her features with a strong hint of defiance that told me she wanted nothing to do with me. All the calm energy in the world wouldn't put her at ease. She was suspicious. And she *should* be suspicious of strange creatures purchasing her for such high costs.

What had it been again?

Just where do you think you're getting that money? Galanthia posed, and understandably so. *You really think these creatures will be fooled by your magic?*

I kept my expression light, jovial, as I replied, *It can't hurt to try, Galanthia.*

And it couldn't hurt to try convincing this woman that I was here to rescue her. The other women would be carted off just the same as her. Once we got to the rear of the building, I'd have a better gauge on how these activities were organized—and then I could break her free.

“Your prize, my friend,” Mr. Mal Vee said with a flourish of his hand. “We’ll talk payment once we get you settled. Follow me.”

In a flash, the stage disappeared, and I was standing with the wolf woman at the mouth of a dingy hallway. Gray bulbs illuminated our journey past cracked concrete walls and solid crimson doors. The rest of the building showed signs of aging, but the doors didn’t. They seemed to be a new addition.

The devil man snapped his fingers at a large man with dark hair, piercing eyes, and peach skin that reminded me of clay. “Rick, why don’t you take our little feisty wolf to change?”

“Change?” I repeated curiously.

“Yes, sir,” Mr. Mal Vee replied as Macy was ushered quickly past me with the large man. I stared heatedly after them. “She is quite ravishing in that dress, yes?”

I nodded curtly. “Quite.”

“But we don’t want her to bolt on you. We understand that you need to sample your product before you leave, so we have a special bracelet to ensure she only leaves with you.” He clapped his hands once and chuckled. “After our transaction, of course.”

“Of course.”

Mr. Mal Vee continued leading me down the hallway, turning left and then right, and then left again. The concrete tunnel went on for ages, it seemed, until we paused at a standard crimson door with the label *4M*. He waved his hand over the knob which clicked without so much as a touch, and then the door swung open.

How strange it was to think this place had held stolen goods instead of women. Art would have been far more acceptable. Regardless of the moral implication of stolen art, which appeared to trade hands often in the world of billionaires here on earth, at least it wouldn’t have been living, breathing creatures.

Victims were often made of circumstances here. And in this room, I could sense there had been two already before the one I had purchased. On the surface, the room appeared like any other in a standard high-end hotel. The ceiling was made entirely of mirrors with coral-pink wallpaper hosting paper-white clamshells and sparkling silver pearls. At once, they reminded me of Macy's eyes. Seeing her tremble on stage had granted my hidden rage a new focus, but I kept it sternly under wraps, doing my best to make my wings behave.

Soon, I assured my wings mentally. *You'll be out very soon.*

A fold-out couch of soft teal held folded silk sheets and a white round table to the right was stocked with an assortment of goodies in a woven basket. Snacks and drinks were set up on a table just across from the fold-out couch and plush white carpet decorated the floor to the point where I wasn't sure if there was wood or tile underneath.

"Is it to your liking?" Mr. Mal Vee asked. "Would you like champagne?"

"Please," I replied kindly as I wandered into the room. "We'll need extra towels."

He snickered deviously while clapping his hands twice. The slosh of ice came first, followed shortly by the appearance of a tin bucket and a bottle of champagne. Two glasses materialized on the snack table along with a pile of towels that appeared to be quite lovely. It truly *was* a lovely setup, if only it weren't being used for nefarious purposes.

Mild panic set in as I searched my mind for something to say. I asked my companions who were located at the front of the building.

Izdor replied, *Ask about her virginity.*

I nearly choked as I snapped, *Why in the world would I do that?*

I saw it in a movie once, he reasoned. *Just try it.*

"And the lady?" I asked as I turned to face the devil man. "Is she...intact?"

He frowned and bowed his head. “Ah, my apologies, sir. She’s been broken in.”

“No matter,” I said with a shrug. “I suppose experience goes a long way.”

The tip of my tongue tasted like rust. To speak of a woman in such a fashion made me ill. Even Estaria didn’t have such backward practices. War, yes. Stolen goods, certainly. But the selling of bodies in this manner? It was utterly deplorable. No wonder she had cast her disgust upon me. I would have done much the same.

“Well, if everything is good for you, sir, it is simply a matter of payment now,” Mr. Mal Vee stated while rubbing his forefinger and thumb together greedily. “How would you like to pay?”

Coming in hot, Izdor said.

Wordlessly, I extended my right hand and caught the paper bag that Izdor had transported to me. Without peeking into the bag to see what was inside, I used the remaining sparkles around the bag to perform my glamorizing charm, transforming whatever had been occupying the container into physical cash.

Mr. Mal Vee excitedly accepted the payment. As soon as he had inspected the contents, he snapped his fingers, inviting the large man to accompany Macy into the room. Another man walked with them authoritatively; he had a leather tan and beady auburn eyes that peered at me insidiously.

Both men held some part of Macy, possessiveness pouring through every movement. She didn’t shoulder them off, though I gathered that she was in urgent need of hitting something. Her energy spiked in every direction with sharp oranges and reds, flames emitting animosity at the two men on either side of her in particular.

Are those her captors? I asked myself, keeping my thoughts guarded from my companions. *Are they the ones who sold her off?*

Mr. Mal Vee smiled like the sneaky devil he appeared to be. “Many thanks for your patronage, sir. I will be organizing the payment with these fine gentlemen. Once everything is in order, I will return with your stamp of purchase.”

Rick dug his fingers into Macy’s upper arm. The urge to attack him was strong—and came from both me and the wolf woman. But I knew better than to start the fight now. We would barely make it out the door alive, if at all in one piece. It was best to let it simmer, to let things slow down in the background.

The three men filed out of the room. Last to leave was Rick, with a surly glare in my direction and a longing glance at Macy. Once the door was shut, the knob clicked, indicating that it had been locked. Easy enough to pick that knob with magic. Did they truly think they could keep a being such as myself in here?

But I didn’t have time to think about the plan. I couldn’t stop staring at Macy, at the beauty she presented in such a gorgeous evening gown. Unlike the sparkling glitter she’d worn on stage, this one reminded me of midnight waves on the ocean. It glittered with a bluish hue and tiny specks of diamonds, the fabric appearing velvety in its dark nature.

Her curves were far more accentuated here than on stage with her bosom pressed to her chest. An emerald necklace matched her earrings. One silver bangle circled her wrist—that must have been the charm Mr. Mal Vee mentioned. Onyx hair much like the night sky seemed to want to spill from its band on her head while baby curls framed her oval face.

And why couldn’t her hair be let loose? It looked better hanging around her shoulders. Her bronze skin already glowed in the soft white lighting of the room, as though she had just come in from the beach. Green apples danced along the air between us. Ah, so it had been her scent that had infected me in the audience. It was a wonder I’d made it to the stage at all on my shaky legs.

Such a buxom beauty belonged in a refined place that served whatever her heart desired. To see her being bid on like a mule had infuriated me—and what worsened my anger was the fact that I had participated.

I bowed my head. Immediate amends were in order. She had to know that my apology was genuine, that I had no intention of harming her in any capacity. Things like that were best conveyed through energy, a transference that would be easily accomplished if we weren't under such watchful care with these renegades.

I had to be careful. But I had to be true to myself.

“My lady, I am deeply sorry for my behavior,” I whispered. “Your treatment will be nothing but the best from here on out.”

She scoffed. “Sorry?”

“Yes, it is when one shows remorse for one's actions.”

“Remorse.” Her voice was distantly quiet, almost diminished by her circumstances. Fire resided in her. I knew it by the way she presented herself. Why was she acting like she didn't hold power? “Right. I see.”

I gestured to the table. “Please, help yourself.”

“Oh, how kind of you.”

Her words were pleasant enough, yet her tone conveyed disbelief.

My gesture became firm. “I'm serious. You must be parched from being under those lights.”

“Listen, asshole. I'm not going to fall for that, okay? I'm not going to let you drug me.”

“Drug you?” Horror infected my gut. “By the very stars, I would *never* do such a thing to a lady. How dare you imply that—”

She glared at me, defiance shimmering from every bit of her, much like the way her dress glittered when she shifted her weight from one foot to another. My silence stretched into

minutes as we stared at each other, too enraptured by the glaring match to bother with words. And though I couldn't read her mind, I could witness the change of colors in her aura.

Sharp, angular feelings turned to softer, more vulnerable ones. A calmness settled into the room. If I had to guess, she needed a few minutes to adjust—and to see that I wasn't about to attack her. What terrifying world would it be if that were my *modus operandi*? No, I could never harm such a beauty.

Inside and out, she was gorgeous. Eyes like stars, a body like a goddess, and a passionate heart for a personality—the very things I would have loved in a mate. If that were a possibility for me.

But no, I had sullied my good nature with my failures. I had let down my people. That was the only reason I was here at all. For this woman—and for whomever else I could rescue on the way out—this would be my penance. Beauty and curiosity aside, this was for the sake of morality.

I would rescue her and do nothing aside from that. I swore to myself.

Even as my heart thundered at the sight of her lips...

Chapter 6 - Macy

This guy had one thing on his mind—and I could tell he was being coy about it the whole time I was standing there. Rick and Percy had talked my ears off on the way to the room with enough unsolicited advice to be considered a federal crime. Not like the laws in this country made it past the barriers Percy had erected.

The Baneridge Hounds were above everything lawful and moral at this point. Contained as its own city, anything that happened within its walls was at the whim of Percy and the elders. Someone like me hardly got to decide much of anything. But the morbid reality of my situation was that this guy *was* more appealing than Rick and Percy combined.

Still, I wasn't fooled by the angelic crap. That was probably just some kind of spell he cast around himself to appeal to helpless victims. A sort of white hue glowed around him like he carried a halo wherever he went. I'd noticed it back in the hallway when I was walking beside him, the shimmering clouds coalescing and melding with this reality.

Mr. Mal Vee had called him a man from another realm. Was that true? Had this guy traveled between planes just to get here? And if that was the case, why had he ended up in a slummy place like *Moss*?

I cleared my throat while running my hands lightly down my sides. Yeah, I knew what he wanted. And I could play it to my advantage if I tried. It had worked pretty well with Rick about ten minutes ago when I'd convinced him that I needed to pick a special dress that would match my tracking bracelet.

Just a few hot kisses and gropes were enough to produce the location of the money room. Good for me. Not great for the others. But it was plenty of cash to get me as far as I needed to get away from this place. The tracking bracelet—well, that was another challenge to overcome.

One thing at a time, Mace, I thought. Seduce the guy. Steal the money. Get the fuck out of Dodge.

Azaleas appeared in my mind then. It took me a minute to realize the scent had grown stronger in the guy's presence. It wasn't terribly odd for a wolf like me to scent other creatures, but it *did* creep me out. Because stories spoken by my elders—however corrupt they had been—spoke often of wolves who sought each other by scent and scent alone.

Wolves, I reminded myself. Not random creatures. He's from another realm so his scent is stronger. That's the only reason.

Yet my body seemed intent on responding to his allure. Already, I found myself stepping toward him, unable to drag my gaze away from the short white hair like heavenly silk and pale honey-colored eyes that resembled those ambergris pendants my mother used to wear.

I blinked.

He was shimmering again. But this time, the way he glowed felt akin to a lava lamp illuminating the corner of a dark room. I was aware of the lights flowing through the room, yet he was the only one I felt drawn toward. It was wild magic.

It was irresistible magic.

Tall was putting it lightly with this hunk. He had rippling muscle that could have broken his shirt if he flexed and a bulge that stood out just beyond the zipper of his jeans. As plainly as he was dressed, I knew better than to drop my guard. He wasn't plain at all. He had chiseled features that could have rivaled any gorgeous statue in the northern cities, a button chin that should have belonged to a model, and a radiant gaze that made me think of ancient entities.

Everything about him stabbed holes in my plan. Because everything about him made me want to run away *with* him, not away from him.

Something twinkled in his eyes. Was he amused by me? No, that couldn't be it. This guy was too tall, too intimidating to care about a short and plump woman like me.

My brows twisted together as I realized my feet were aching from the heels.

“My lady, please, sit,” the angel insisted, and he whisked me off to the couch where he sat me down and promptly took a step back. “You looked uncomfortable.”

“I am.”

I could have choked myself. Why the hell was I being honest with him? It wasn't like he was going to be nice once we left this room. He was probably just putting up a front—a damn good one, honestly.

After a moment of silence, I pointed to one of the water bottles. He obliged without question and resumed his stance away from me. Why wasn't he feeling me up yet or hitting on me? Goddess, the way the quiet continued made me want to crawl into myself and hide. It was like the longer I sat in his presence, the more exposed I became.

I guess that's how it feels when you're trafficked, I thought. I cracked open the bottle, sniffed it, and then took a sip. Please, don't let this be drugged.

I froze. Wait a second, that had been my entire reasoning about refusing a drink a moment ago. I hadn't been shy about admitting it then, that I suspected him of wanting to drug me. Yet here I was drinking something he had handed me, something I had freely requested.

“Just what kind of magic are you doing?” I snapped angrily. “Do you think I'm really that weak that you have to put spells on me?”

He exposed his palms. “I would never do magic on anyone unless it was absolutely necessary.”

“What kind of angel does magic?”

“I look like an angel to you.”

The way he stated it made me shudder. For a second, I thought the ceiling would burst open, that the mirror above would shatter, and glass would rain all around me. That was how powerful that minor statement felt to me. Surprise

lingered in the room as though his voice had carried with it a certain magic in its own right.

He shook his head. “No matter my appearance to you, my lady, I mean you no harm. My name is Juriah. I’m here to rescue you.”

I stared at him for a long time. Goddess, it must have been centuries that passed with how long I gaped at the man standing there with his hands up like he’d been caught stealing. Christ, was he serious? Did the bottle really contain drugs?

And then I just laughed. “Do I really look that weak to you?”

“I’m as serious as one can be in this realm, my lady,” he insisted. “I have a plan set. I’m going to get you out of here.”

“And this?” Chuckles lingered in my voice. “You really think you can break this charm without them knowing about it?”

He smiled, the shadows in his face growing more striking as his cheekbones were highlighted. “You think that little thing will stop me?”

“You scare me.”

I slapped my hand over my mouth. Sheesh, when would I quit blurting things out around this Juriah fella? It wasn’t like he was telling me the truth. Energy resonated in his eyes as he appeared to tower over me—without so much as moving an inch in my direction.

“I would hope not, dear lady,” he whispered as though our secrets were sacred, as if this meeting were itself a sacred thing. “My intention is to provide a retreat and temporary shelter. Nothing more.”

The smile never faded from his eyes despite his mouth drooping slightly. Something about him felt safe—yet dangerous at the same time. Maybe it was the fact that he was much older than me. Maybe it was the magic he performed. Maybe it was how he presented himself as safe and friendly.

Feelings aside, I had to ensure my escape. Which meant I had to do the things that had gotten me this far.

My smile reappeared with more lust attached to it than ever. Every man had a weak spot—even men from other planes. “Be honest with me, darling. Don’t you want more than that?”

I traced the blouse of my dress, tugging his attention right to my tits with ease. Without much effort, a gasp drifted from my lips, so light and faint that only someone paying extra close attention would have caught it.

And given how his bulge twitched, I’d say he definitely picked up on the sound.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, his voice having dropped to a raspy baritone. His eyes snapped up to mine. “Do you lust for me?”

A shiver trickled from the top of my head to my toes. Just when I thought I had turned the tables around, he flipped them right back, taking me for a spin with his eyes and his eyes alone. Lifetimes bloomed and passed while I stared into those golden pools, trying to resist the way he smelled, trying not to wonder how he tasted.

Did his lips carry the same floral odor? What about his arms? Good goddess, how long had it been since I had a decent lay under my belt?

Irritation, then anger, then full-blown indignation blossomed as easily as desire. And just like that, I was on my aching feet with my finger in his face and my whole body shaking with rage. “Now listen to me, mister. Some angelic fucker who thinks magic is some flimsy secondhand thing done around here isn’t going to ask *me* a question like that without—”

His finger pressed to my lips.

“W-without...”

His thumb traced my chin. His eyelids grew heavy, pupils blowing so wide as to take over the vivid tawny-blond irises.

“W-what are you doing...?”

Celestial white emanated from his gaze. “I can’t think when you talk so much.”

Honey coated my limbs, warm and insufferably delicious like his regard. Voices like that belonged to otherworldly beings. This one in particular seemed to want to touch me, and his touch carried an assurance that he wouldn’t keep doing it unless I wanted him to keep doing it.

Which I did.

Unfortunately.

I melted like butter on top of an oven. I was helpless to it, completely lost to the fact that I was feeling something I had rarely if ever felt in my life. Never did I think I would experience it. Never had I anticipated such a thing once my mother had abandoned me and Percy had taken me under his wing. Teenage me would have fought tooth and nail to get away from Juriah.

But the feeling persisted. The sensation of it took over my limbs, edging toward my center and filling me up.

I felt *safe*.

Without hesitation, I closed my eyes. Calm washed over me like that first step into a hot bath. Bath salt cured my skin, rubbing away the dead flakes and the dirt. Hot steam soothed my muscles and scrubbed me clean of the dread I had been carrying since I walked through the back door.

“That’s it,” Juriah encouraged. “You have nothing to fear. You may do as you wish with me, Macy. I won’t oppose.”

Anything I wished? He had to be joking. He had to be setting me up for seduction. Yet the more I fought his influence, the less I felt like I could control my body. Whatever was happening was going to happen whether I could control it or not.

And while that frightened me to my core, it also excited me.

Nobody felt dangerous like this. I mean, in the past, Rick had once given me this kind of thrill. He had toyed with me, threatened me, even tied me up at one point for some kinky fun. But it was never something like this. It had never felt so safe despite its danger.

My lips parted to speak. Words came up from the depths, totally unabashed. Totally unlike me to ever *feel* unabashed, so how in the world could my words do that? How could sentences form without them popping into my head first?

“It’s alright, Macy.”

And I knew that. And yet I didn’t know that. And I wasn’t sure how any of that made sense.

With my eyes closed and my heart pounding, I let one of those sentences float freely from me, trying not to mind what the answer might bring. “What the hell are you, mister?”

Chapter 7 - Juriah

Heat gushed from Macy as I held her chin steady and retained touch with her lips. Nothing startled me more than the way she'd given in to me—and the way I wanted to have my way with her. My mind flipped around from one moral implication to another while I tried to keep up with my companions.

Their inquiries had grown loud in the past few seconds.

Report, Izdor insisted. Please, tell me you've found a way out that isn't the front door.

Galanthia chimed in with, *Barkeep mentioned rear exit.*

When? I asked. I swallowed the impulse to ignore my friends and continued mentally, *I thought he would have said something while I was there.*

He seemed to like my chest when I showed it to him, Galanthia replied.

Chaos exploded in my mind as Izdor said, *Yeah, she flashed him.*

What is flashing? I inquired, and then retracted my question. *Never mind that. The hallways back here are a maze, and we have a bigger problem.*

A bigger problem, indeed, considering the problem was growing bigger by the second in my pants.

Macy appeared serene. My authority in this realm wasn't too shabby. Estaria women wouldn't have been as susceptible to my charm as Macy. And at the same time, I felt wretched for influencing her in the slightest.

She was nervous, I reasoned, and then realized that my thought had been broadcast to my friends. It seemed a waste of effort to retract it, so I simply proceeded, *I can perform another glamor to guard us so we can sneak out the back. Meet us in the alleyway.*

Mentally shutting out my friends was a challenge. For nothing could prevent me from remaining in contact with them other than the vixen in front of me who seemed to be swaying more the longer I touched her. I wanted to kiss her, but I knew better than to do that. She was already under enough duress.

I had to save her like I didn't save the others.

That was my sole focus.

"Juriah," she managed to whisper. She attempted to peel open her eyes. "Are you doing that?"

"I'm calming you, yes."

Her lids fluttered. "Do you want me?"

"I...I just..." I licked my lips, picturing hers pressed to mine. "I do."

"Why don't you just take me if you want me?"

That was a rather apt question, wasn't it? Desires here didn't seem to be guarded with much more than mere drive. Back home, my moral compass was solid. Here, it seemed to be tapped at every turn. What was typically north felt like south, and I wasn't sure which way to turn.

I knew I had to save Macy. I knew I had to perform for these disgusting creatures and their strange appetites. Surely a kiss wouldn't be out of place for anyone. As I rested my hand over her heart, I felt the carnal ways in which she wanted me. My energy reflected such yearning.

"Macy, look at me," I commanded, tapping just under her chin to grab her attention. Her eyelids split open. "Is that really what you want?"

She swallowed and then nodded. "Yes." Her eyes were as lucid as clear streams. "Please, take me. Before one of the others does it for you."

I must have been harboring a backlog of lust from so many days spent in a certain kind of abstinence, for my body moved before I could think of it. My mouth sought hers as my hands circled her wide waist, indulging in her pillowy softness

as she cooed. Oh, those delightful sounds were absolutely wretched in the way they tugged at my heartstrings.

A tingling energy rose from the bangle around her wrist. Ah, so the bracelet was doing its job. Though I wasn't entirely familiar with how things were done here in the criminal world, I had to imagine they had magic protection in place as any enemy would. This bracelet located Macy by her warmth and liveliness—which meant warming her up would alert them of our activities.

It was the perfect cover for a little while.

My longing for her kicked up a notch when she rubbed her breasts against my chest. I hugged her tightly to me, nearly crushing her with a magnificent strength I forgot most creatures weren't able to handle. She squeaked, alerting me that she was being hurt, and I released her immediately, settling her back into the couch as I tugged her dress up over her delicious thighs.

“Sit still,” I instructed. “Just lie back and let me do everything.”

Sample the product.

What a horrible thing to say about a luscious woman like Macy. She was delicate and sweet, a feisty vixen with a heart that beat true in her chest. The last time I had encountered such a beautiful creature had been in Estaria—and that hadn't lasted particularly long. This one wouldn't either.

But did that mean I had to skip the parts that provided pleasure?

Lace panties blocked my path. I tore them off and exposed her mound, taking a moment to admire her smooth slit beaded with a line of arousal. I dove in to taste her, instantly feeling her hands at the back of my head and neck. Urgency promptly appeared, a desperate desire to free her from the bonds in which she was locked.

It wasn't the situation, no. It was more than that. I sensed a blockage in her energy. Whatever had happened to

cause it wasn't apparent. But I knew unwinding her would help alleviate some of that tension. Another lick caused her to clamp her thighs around my head. That reaction only furthered my cause, inspiring me to lap generously over her slit and clit as I dug my fingers into her thighs.

She massaged the back of my head, applying pressure each time I passed over a particularly sensitive zone. Her aura glowed with satisfaction the more I worked, its evidence blooming inside me as much as my desire for her. Every time she snapped her legs together, I felt ever the more encouraged to please her.

Muffled gasps echoed above, highlighting her approaching eruption. As I popped her knees apart, I leaned deeper into my work, burying my mouth into her slit and shaking my head side to side. Labored panting replaced her moans, and then she was riding my face hard enough to break my neck.

After several jagged humps, she went vividly still, releasing a long groan broken up by random gasps. She slumped onto the couch as I sat back and wiped my face. The darling wolf woman was a puddle, a complete mess, but she had to know I wasn't through with her just yet. We still had a bigger performance to accomplish, one that would at the very least solidify our case as a typical underground transaction.

That was all this was, a perfectly curated performance in which both of us agreed we wanted the same thing. I shucked my pants and underwear to the ground before stepping out of them. Macy struggled to open her eyes, whimpering as she beckoned me with her arms to get between her legs. She lifted her knees to her chest and exposed more of her slit to me, glossy arousal decorating every possible spot.

The smile on my lips was pure satisfaction. Just witnessing her pleasure was enough to please me. Having more of her would cause my cup to overflow.

“Please,” she begged at once. “More. Just...*more*.”

Who was I to deny a lady a most delicate request?

Earnestness propelled my movements as I crawled on top of her. My cock plopped against her slit, rattling her with a great shiver that told me she was equally excited and intimidated. Given my size compared to her entrance, I knew it would be a bit of a challenge—it would take some time—but I had enough to spare for her.

“You’re so...big,” she whimpered as I traced her slit with the head of my cock. She glanced down, eyes growing wide. “Goddess.”

“I’d say she’s to blame for my gift, yes.”

A smile crooked her lips, and she leaned back, peering up at me through heavy lashes as she rested her arms above her head. “Just take it slow.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Skepticism emerged until I dipped gently into her entrance, using her arousal and my saliva as lubrication for my descent. Her eyes rolled, her mouth widened, and then *goodness*, the way she moaned sent a striking shudder through my entire body. Slowly, with dedicated concentration, I eased inch by inch into her wetness.

Her hands came up to rest on my shoulders. She squeezed when it got too tight and I eased back, running my hands over her hips and massaging her skin. “You can take as much as you want.”

“Can I ride for a while?”

“Do as you please. My pleasure is yours.”

She lazily gazed up at me, waves of euphoria circulating her expression as she rolled forward in slow motions. Nothing like this existed anywhere else. I knew it from the very depth of her spirit. She was giving me something that no one else had received prior to this moment, a luscious commitment to ecstasy that perhaps she’d never tasted herself.

How greedy were the men that kept her? Furious with that realization, I took control of her rhythm, minding my girth as I dove deeper for more. She surrendered to my thrusts,

widening her legs to welcome more of me, urging me with encouraging squeezes that made me want to burst.

Supple warmth coated my cock, making it hard to imagine a time when I wouldn't be able to have this. Performance, that was the focus. We had to *perform*, yet I found myself already missing what I was getting. Was that even possible? At this junction, anything could have occurred. The very world could have exploded.

I could have been sent screaming right back to Estaria—yet it wouldn't have held a candle to the excessive purity of an encounter with this wolf woman. Her heart beat faster with every thrust, chest heaving and lips circling wider, ever the wider, so her plush tongue could dance just beyond her mouth.

She hugged me to her chest with a vicious motion that told me she didn't want this to end. If I listened closely, I could feel her thoughts tumbling out, the rumble of them crashing together like a collection of nails caught inside a can that was rolling down a hill. She seemed to clash more the closer she got to release. Yet at once, she seemed intent on making me witness her pleasure.

Such was the way of this earthly realm. I had yet to get tired of her, smiling as I leaned back to get a better view, to see her in her glorious softness underneath my control. Whimpers rose faster, matching my rhythm and coaxing grunts from me that I never knew I could make. She brought it all out of me, the very primality of my being beyond that of Elderling.

She drew from me things that felt ancient and pure, things that appeared only for her and only for what we were doing right now.

Seconds dragged on as I sweated over her, pouring my force into the very claiming of her slit. She clutched me tightly while piercing me with her nails, releasing a wail that would have split the walls had they not been spelled to stay in place. I let her hump me until she was spent, and then pulled out to unload all over her stomach.

Stars dazzled my vision. I blinked a few times, trying to get a hold of myself, trying to get back to my initial plan.

Everything was warbled for the moment, my brain zapped from the delicious charm of this wolf woman.

She sat up on her elbows. “I didn’t think sex like that existed.”

I shook myself back to reality. “You must be joking. That’s a tragedy.”

“Well, I just...” She stared at the door. “Are you really here to rescue me?”

Izdor’s voice bounced through my skull. *We’re out back. Security is distracted. Move now!*

There was no time for assurance. I urged Macy off the couch and got us fixed up in our clothes. She insisted on wearing heels even though I offered to carry her. While I didn’t agree with it, arguments would slow us down too much. I had to act now.

I grabbed the bangle around her wrist. Within seconds, it melted under my touch. “Say goodbye to those pesky trackers—and say goodbye to our insurance.”

She stared with wide eyes at the messy silver liquid on her skin. “What the hell did you just do?”

“Bought us enough time to run.”

“But the guys—”

I yanked her to the door and swung it open, ears perking up at the sound of distant chatter, clattering dishes, and other various groans that indicated some kind of humping. Like what we’d just done. For the sake of safety.

And that’s all it’ll ever be for, I swore as I pulled her deeper into the maze.

“Wait,” she hissed while pulling me in the opposite direction. “We need to grab something.”

“Are there more women?”

She glared at me and tugged on my arm, pulling me a few rooms down to a dark door. Was there a reason this one

wasn't painted crimson like the others? She grabbed the knob and jiggled it.

"Damn it," she groaned. "Can you help, please?"

"Help with what specifically?"

She waved both hands frantically. "Do your weird magic shit to unlock the door."

"My weird magic—"

The door clicked, swinging open easily as a voice rang in my head. *We really don't have time to waste. Get out of there!*

Thanks to Izdor, accessing the room was but a mere stage trick. I launched inside with Macy, ready for action, wings already breaking the skin of my upper back. A giant metal safe sat in one corner on a trolley. Lining the wall was a series of locked miniature boxes that resembled the mail cases shown to me by Galanthia. They were called apartments, or something of the sort, and mail was often shoved through the back to be collected from the front later.

"Lock boxes," Macy whispered. "Wow, that's a whole lot of dough."

My puzzled expression prompted another wave of her hands. This time, dismissive in nature.

She pointed to the trolley. "Can you carry that safe?"

"By heavens, for what earthly reason?"

"We need the cash."

I shook my head. "Of all the things we could have delayed our escape for, you want it to be for *money*? You can't be serious. Izdor, this woman *cannot* be serious!"

Macy grumbled as she inspected the velvet bags on a table. The contents were more than sufficient by the sound of her triumphant gasp. She grabbed a few of the bags, no bigger than the size of a pint glass, and tossed one to me. Coins rattled inside.

I gaped at the thing. "You must be joking."

“Now isn’t the time for jokes.”

Juriah, you need to run, Galanthia urged. The guards won’t be distracted for much longer.

Shouts resounded in the distance—they must have come from the beginning of the hallway maze where my journey with this woman began. I took her by the wrist and darted out the door, racing past the room that had once housed us, following my intuition and the voice inside my head guiding—the voice of Izdor.

One right and two lefts later spat us out at a dead end. Or what seemed to be a dead end. Magic clung to the air, simmering against the concrete wall in front of us. Ah, it was a simple mirage, in which I was well versed. With a wave of my hand, I reduced the barrier to wisps of smoke, revealing a tattered green door with a bolt lock. Another wave deteriorated the lock.

I’m nearly outside, I told my companions. We’re about to—

Macy dug her nails into my bicep. Had it not been for the terror which skirted from her fingers to my heart, I wouldn’t have noticed the slight sting of her grip. Her breathing took on a new rhythm, one of pure panic as I turned to check on her. Just to the right of us was another hallway, one I hadn’t noticed when we’d approached, one hidden not by magic, but by optical illusion.

In my haste to reach the exit, I hadn’t checked for such things. I kicked myself double, and then triple when the man named Rick stepped out from the shadows with his arms crossed. Portentous energy rippled along his shoulders and dripped down his arms, energizing his aura with his intent.

He was aiming to stop us at all costs. Poor Macy was frozen like a sacrificial lamb on a slab. Nothing could have avoided her fate in this instance. Nor mine. Our escape would unfold with certainty, but not without challenges. Rick was just another obstacle to overcome, another foe.

I gritted my teeth. *So, why the hell hadn't I seen him coming?*

Fluorescent eyes roamed from Macy to me, and then back to Macy. A smile turned up the corners of his mouth, creating a sinister smile that reminded me of a mad scientist from an old horror film Izdor had me watch. *Tsk-tsk*, that sound resonated in his throat, it seemed.

“You give yourself away every time,” he said. His eyes landed on me, turning back to their original pale blue. “Hand over the girl and there won't be much trouble, jackass.”

Fury sped through my veins, a nauseating reaction that had been held back for far too long. Since I had arrived at this horrid establishment, my senses had been going wild. Intuitively, I knew something was wrong—and I had been right about that. Now that I had witnessed with my physical and spiritual eyes what was happening here, I meant to stop it.

At all costs.

Fierce passion wrought my wings from their nesting place in my upper back. Grayish white feathers unfurled in a flash, sprouting proudly to frame my body, pointed back like a cat's ears as I bowed my head forward in a defensive stance. The air thickened as I hovered hauntingly over Rick with my canines enlarged, sharpened, ready to sink into malicious flesh.

My ears picked up on a distinct noise from behind me—Macy, yes, she was still with me! I had to make sure she made it out of here in one piece. To get her to safety meant to hold true to my pledge which had been to rescue her from this den of horror.

Juriah, Izdor warned inside my skull. *Don't take his life force, friend. Just knock him out.*

The smile I wore promised to meet my enemy in an honorable battle. And to my friend, I replied, *With pleasure.*

Chapter 8 - Macy

Angels were real.

Angels were very much *real*.

My eyes weren't making this shit up. I hadn't been drugged (no matter how much my brain tried to convince me that I was high as balls) and I wasn't dreaming either. Goddess, the world had changed in literally half a second. The halo of light, the impression of divinity—I'd been right about that.

But at the same time, I wasn't. Because his eyes didn't seem to be the right shade for angels. I mean, they were supposed to have a lot of eyes, right? All those weird paintings people made, the digital drawings of angels, had dozens of eyes and multiple wings. Juriah had two of both.

White eyes. Grayish white wings. Double the size. Incalculable his anger.

Every moment I spent in my human form watching him made me feel a combination of sheer terror and exhilaration. And how? The man I had just slept with was now jumping into a fight with a man I had once slept with. Just watching the two of them circle each other—Juriah barely moving an inch while trying not to smash into the walls around him while Rick wore his usual wolf form—made it seem like pure fantasy.

I literally lived inside this world. I saw people perform magic. I experienced magic to the fullest extent. I wore it and used it myself on many occasions. It hadn't ever truly occurred to me that things could get, well, *weirder* at some point in my life. I'd seen it all.

Or I thought I had.

My heart beating and chest heaving, I couldn't help but watch. I heard the stampede of people behind me skitter to a halt. Some weapons clattered to the ground. Mouths were agape just like mine, or I had to figure that was happening

behind me. Because I truly couldn't take my eyes off the massive creature now swiping at Rick.

“Is that...?”

“It can't be.”

“What kind of creature does that?”

Irritation claimed me as I whirled around to face the hoard of men holding various weapons and charged magical charms. Without being shy about it, I dropped my dress and transformed into my magnificent wolf, silver and onyx fur glowing with a supernatural sheen that always came right after the shift. I leaped into action and tore into the first man I got my jaws on.

He howled like a puppy. Once I snapped my head back, I heard the distinct *rip* of a joint popping out of place and tossed the man over my shoulder like he was a chew toy. The *thwack* of his body against the cement wall sounded grossly satisfying—and managed to scare away two of the remaining guards.

My eyes swept the crowd. Eight men in total, two of them centaurs. Well, that would be a great show for somebody. Maybe they could make a little money off this fight. Seeing as the announcer hadn't appeared, I wondered if he'd split with whatever money he could grab like the spineless devil he was, or if he was vocalizing the fight for the patrons at the bar.

It didn't matter. I had to get out of here with Juriah. He'd mentioned someone named Izdor, or something like that, so I guessed he had people waiting for him outside. If he didn't make it out there, they would likely attack. And I wouldn't have time to defend my position if his people didn't know what I looked like.

Wolves growled on the other side of the crowd, shoving aside some of the men as two of them flew into action. Juriah appeared at my side instantly and swatted the two flying men away while I caught the jugular of the first wolf in my grasp. I swung him around in a circle before launching him at the other two attacking wolves.

Juriah growled with such booming authority it almost sounded like our fight was happening in a grand cathedral, great gaping archways and glass-stained windows included. Fear crept through my system as I swiped one wolf and headbutted another, managing to keep them off Juriah's legs while barely keeping the rest at bay.

I was overwhelmed. And just when I was getting scared of injury, Juriah swung his giant arm in front of me, swatting off the two wolves and another two men. A few more from the group ran off, the injured wolf included. Five men stood their ground while shuddering as Juriah stood at full height again.

Rick pounced for Juriah. I launched myself from the ground, guarding Juriah's neck before Rick could land so much as a bite. I took a hard blow to the ribs, but the skin didn't break from the chomp, probably because Rick didn't actually want to injure me. We landed on the ground and then rolled until both of us slammed into a wall.

"*Macy!*" Juriah's voice cracked the air like thunder.

He grabbed me by the scruff and set me on the ground next to my dress and the velvet bags I had collected. One of them was tied to his belt. He checked me all over, combing quickly through my fur, and then bared his deadly canines at the remaining two men. Three of them were motionless on the ground, blood pooling around them. Were they dead?

"Shift," Juriah commanded, his voice coming from three places at once, in various pitches. "Go back to your human form, grab the bags, and hang on to me."

More shouts erupted from the other end of the hall. Well, I wasn't about to argue with this dangerous angel. I shifted back into human form, yanked on my dress, and grabbed the three bags. Once I had tied them to his belt, I clung to his waist, trying to process what had just happened.

Where was Rick? *Percy*? What was going to happen once we got out of here?

Juriah sped toward the exit and slammed the door open. Cement and brick crumbled from where we broke out, tumbling into the alley after us. Part of me heard the zipping of spells and other various objects in our direction, but I was too preoccupied by the fact that the ground beneath my feet had completely given way.

I was in the air. I was *flying*.

I buried my face in Juriah's side, squeezing him as tightly as I could manage after that fight. Adrenaline still kicked through my system, causing my heart to slam rapidly against my chest. Could he feel that? I mean, he had to know that wolves weren't exactly adjusted to flying with random strangers.

Macy, you slept with him, I argued with myself. But flying is the line you draw? Seriously?

Seriously, I wasn't even sure. The way Juriah cradled me to his side sent shock waves through my system that confused me to pieces. That same tenderness had come from his lips, his mouth, and his tongue. Gentleness like this existed in books or movies. It didn't happen in real life. Nobody respected me enough to be kind to me, yet Juriah had crashed right through the door with his wings and his good looks and his money—

His money.

My stomach flipped and my throat locked up as we descended. Yeah, I was definitely not used to flying. Maybe on a good night I would have enjoyed the sights, but this was a getaway, an escape into...oh goddess, where were we running to?

Ground appeared beneath my feet. I kept my eyes shut while my stomach rolled and flopped, my arms and shoulders trembling as I tried to adjust to being back at ground level. Hands cupped my face. Warmth soothed my core.

"It's alright, Macy. We're safe," Juriah whispered.

He sounded normal again. He sounded like himself.

"You can open your eyes now."

One peek produced a standard alley. I knew we'd flown a good bit away from *Moss*, probably deeper into the city if I had to guess, but I couldn't recognize this alley by a glance. When I opened my other eye, I noticed the other two figures nearby and gasped as I jumped back.

Juriah took my hand. "At ease. These are my friends." He pointed to the tall woman with braided reddish-blond hair. "That's Galanthia." He gestured to the man with dimples in his cheeks and glowing gray eyes. "And that's Izdor."

"Izdor," I repeated. "Like how you mentioned inside the..." I tried to point behind me, but it wasn't *Moss* anymore. It was hardly a building at all.

Maybe we hadn't flown deeper into the city. Where were we?

"Yes, I was speaking to him," Juriah replied. "We went to the outskirts on the other side of Wolfcreek."

My shoulders slumped with relief. "So they can't find us."

"I wouldn't speak too soon on that," Izdor alerted us. "But we're safe for the time being. We have to move quickly."

I stared at the velvet bags tied to Juriah's belt. I studied the black fabric, the softness of it, even touching it with the tips of my fingers to see if it was real. Sure enough, there were hard coins inside, and there were probably a lot of them even if the bags weren't particularly big. Space spells were becoming far more popular these days.

That was why I'd asked Juriah if he could carry the safe. We would have been loaded. But then again, we would have been weighed down.

I held my hands to my chest while trying to catch my breath. It was coming faster than before, harder than when I had been up in the air. Was it a delayed response? Sure, why not? Because delaying our escape further would be *fantastic* for timing. Here was another one of my many panic attacks, perfectly timed, slamming into me like I had into Rick when I was protecting Juriah.

My eyes went wide as I knelt to the ground. *I protected Juriah.*

“Macy?” Juriah joined me on the ground. “What’s going on? Are you alright?”

Galanthia stepped forward, enough for me to notice but not to drag my attention from the velvet bags. “She’s panicking, friend. She needs immediate attention.”

Immediate attention. I laughed once, a sort of weird squeak at first, and then it broke into a fully crazed cackle that seemed to echo through the alleyway. Juriah let me laugh. He didn’t try to stop me or hug me. He didn’t touch me much except for his large hands resting on my shoulders.

Oh goddess, I was going crazy. I was absolutely losing it. All those years locked up behind Percy’s house were finally catching up to me. Being away from the Baneridge Hounds would probably make me lose even more marbles than I already had. Jesus, what was I thinking running away from them? I could barely provide for my pack, let alone for myself.

I was nuts. I was absolutely bonkers. I was going to die out here, and nobody was going to save me.

Juriah held my face firmly. Despite the pressure, I didn’t feel like he would hurt me or like I wouldn’t be able to get out of his grip if I wanted. I stared into his eyes, noticing that they were back to the pale honey they’d been when we met. No more bright white. No more angelic rage.

Oddly enough, I had actually liked it when his eyes turned. They were such a furious white that made me think of cosmic stars finally expired. How bright were those explosions in space? What did it look like when a star inevitably died? That had been visible in the confined orbs of Juriah’s eyes. That was what I saw.

Now that I wasn’t alarmed, I was impressed by him. I was in awe of his strength—and I was worried about the time it would take for it to end.

“Are you leaving me here?” I blurted. “You can take me to the woods. It’ll be easier there for me. I can shift and

run. I can survive as a wolf. I can—”

His finger rested over my lips. “Macy, I would never dream of abandoning you.”

Light filtered through the darkness, an unfamiliar sensation that made me think of dawn. Was that Juriah? Was that his energy? Or maybe his two friends were sheltering us. Or maybe they were calling their main angel dude. I couldn’t figure it out, and I wasn’t exactly committed to untying the knots that had formed in my mind. Something about Juriah made me feel okay with not being okay.

How the hell was that possible?

“Breathe, Macy,” Juriah instructed, and I found myself obeying him. “Just keep breathing. We’re going to get you out of here.”

How? Why? But there didn’t seem time to ask those questions as I finally felt the sweet freedom of being away from the Baneridge jerks.

My elders would become a thing of the past. Those selfish pricks, who made laws centering their own experiences instead of considering the children of the future, would die off—and I would be none the wiser about it. Rick would move on to another victim. Percy would probably chase me down until his hands were bloody.

But I’d be long gone by the time he got everyone together to hunt me down. That was Juriah’s promise. That was the intent of his two friends as well. I didn’t know for sure, and it wasn’t logical at all, but I could feel it in my heart. The scent of azaleas surrounded me as time stood still, as every bit of energy in the world swelled in our presence.

By his touch alone, I knew things would get better. I couldn’t prove it, but that didn’t matter. I was safe here. I was safe with him. And maybe for once I could actually live my life. Doubt crowded in around the hope I felt in my heart, taking me right back to the shadowy existence of my previous life with a tormenting thought:

So long as this guy will let me.

Chapter 9 - Juriah

Obsidian waves spilled around Macy's shoulders as she lowered her gaze. I wanted to lift her chin and hold her sight once more. I wanted to reassure her that she would never have to worry about being in danger in my presence again.

Yet as I had just experienced, my skills were lacking. I hadn't been as committed to training for combat since I had entered this world. Izdor and Galanthia wanted me to accompany them on their excursions, and we were supposed to travel the world. Milan and Nice were on the map along with plenty of other popular locations.

For me to disregard the injustice of this world while partaking in its pleasures was a great crime I would need to amend. Women like Macy were being sold in underground markets and then tossed into private rooms to be used as personal pleasure toys. That was not something I would abide by.

Especially when it came to Macy.

Ever since I'd laid eyes on her, my heart had sworn to protect her. My mind couldn't make sense of the emotional jumble inside me, the one that seemingly fought a war of its own with the rest of my body. My actions didn't quite make sense. My friends also questioned my reactions, my gut responses.

Her rescue had been the result of my intuition. Yet I had almost fatally failed to protect her.

My fingers curled into my palms. *What is wrong with me?*

"Juriah," Izdor said gently while touching my shoulder. A moment later, I had joined him a few feet away from Macy. She was still within our sight—and within my reach. "What's the next step, my friend?"

Galanthia adjusted her whip on her belt. "We should skip town."

My heart sank. “But we just got here.”

“Wolfcreek has been the best place for us so far,” Izdor stated. “The Silverdawn pack has been nothing but kind. No offense, Galanthia, but I disagree.”

She nodded respectfully. “That is true, my friend.”

“I’m sure if we speak to Raven, we can arrange for the young wolf to be hidden,” I reasoned. “We need to get back to Silverdawn territory. We’ll have more protection there.”

“We can’t put them in danger,” Galanthia argued. “They’ve been far too kind, as Izdor has just observed.”

I glanced at Macy who was still staring at the ground. She hadn’t moved an inch. “Galanthia might be right about that, Izzy. We don’t want to offend our host.”

“That’s the point of being in the Silverdawn pack,” Izdor said firmly. “They want to protect us. Raven is one of *us*, if you recall.”

“I do recall, Izzy. We just spoke to them hours ago.”

His nod felt more annoyed than agreeable. “She won’t let us fall. We have to go talk to her about this.”

“Izdor may be onto something,” I pointed out.

To which Galanthia scoffed. “You’ve been choosing the middle ground since the start.”

I growled. “I’ve been doing everything I can to protect her.”

“The conversation, friend,” she replied. “I meant the conversation. You haven’t been making any concrete decisions.” She hung her head apologetically. “I do not wish to argue with you, Commander. I want nothing but justice for the wrongs that have occurred.”

She was right. “I’m sorry, Galanthia. I’m worried about us—and Macy.”

I turned to find her in the midst of fixing her dress, the motion accentuating her bosom. For a second, I was lost in my lust all over again. Those clouds beckoned me back to her, the

way she tasted still faintly clinging to my tongue. Earthly pleasures were truly irresistible, and with Macy, I could barely contain my reaction.

Izdor punched my arm, the likes of which would have sent an earthly man flying. “*Focus.*”

“I’m focusing.”

Galanthia squinted between me and Macy. “Yes, you’ve been quite focused on this one. Is she more than just a rescue to you?”

“Don’t you dare call her such a thing. You make it sound as if she’s some kind of lost dog.”

“Is that not correct?” Galanthia scratched her head. “She’s a wolf, correct?”

Izdor snorted and then held his hands between us. “Alright, we can talk semantics later. Can we focus on the issue at hand? Those underground bullies at *Moss* are going to want to recover their assets. Now, if we’re being logical, we can assume they’ve been operating there for a brief period.”

“Correct,” Galanthia and I stated simultaneously.

Macy slowly approached us. Electric heat tingled on my left elbow where she drew close. “Things like that happen all the time.”

I looked down at her. Though she was shorter than me, she didn’t by any means look smaller—or weaker, as she had put it earlier. She wasn’t weak at all. Her resolve was incredible. “All the time?”

“There’s sort of a black market for that kind of thing across the country. So, yeah. All the time,” she replied. She played with one of the velvet bags. “I’ve mostly seen them do fighting rings.”

I frowned. “Rings?”

“They take two shifters and force them to shift. They’re locked inside a giant cage until only one of them is standing.” She hugged herself and shuddered. “My elders suggested it once for training me in obedience or whatever.”

My arm moved without my prompting, protectively wrapping around her shoulders. I clutched her to my side. “You’ll do no such thing, little wolf.”

She laughed and pushed my arm away.

The nerve of her to do such a thing in the wake of danger was insulting.

“I’m not little,” she jabbed. “And stop grabbing me so much. I can hug myself, you know.”

“You’re shivering. You’re clearly cold or scared.”

Her expression soured. “Stop treating me like I can’t take care of myself.”

“I must protect you. That means I will respond to your every need.”

“Is that why you ate me out back there? Because you were responding to my need?”

Though the turn of phrase was nearly lost on me, I felt the sudden appearance of hotness in my face. The entirety of my body seemed to respond at once, flushing in waves of hot and cold, a mixture of pleasure and guilt jolting around inside me like unexpressed anger.

But it wasn’t anger. It was something else. It was an innate calling to put her in her place.

I lowered my voice. “The performance in which we found ourselves was merely to sate physical desires *and* act as a protective layer against those listening.”

“If that were the case, then why did you claim you were rescuing me? You know...” She shrugged and then studied her nails. “*Out loud* where those *listening* could *hear it*.”

“You’re ungrateful. That’s what it is.”

She gasped and snatched up one of the velvet bags. “You know what? *Fine*. I’m ungrateful and I don’t appreciate you taking advantage of my body when I was vulnerable.”

“Ah, but I thought you weren’t weak, little wolf? You keep claiming to be perfectly capable of defending yourself.”

“If you believed that, you wouldn’t keep jumping in to help me.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and towered over her. “So, I should have left you to that mob of half-crazed centaurs, wolves, and mages?”

She puffed up. “I would have *died* in that fight.”

“With your pride intact, if I’m to understand you correctly.”

Crimson the same shade as those dastardly doors splotched her face as she flipped her hair over her shoulder and grabbed another two of the velvet pouches. “There. You can have that one. As payment for whatever services you *think* you provided.”

“I’m to be paid for protecting you,” I pondered aloud. “So, you think of me as your bodyguard then?”

“I think nothing of you.”

My eyes narrowed. “That wasn’t what I sensed when you wrapped your legs around me.”

“You’re *crude*.”

She flipped around on her bare heel while cringing and then attempted to stomp off. Whatever disagreement she had would have to be saved for another day. There wasn’t time for arguments or whatever it was she was doing. Was this a tantrum? I’d only ever known children to do such things, yet it seemed this woman wanted to fight me at every turn.

She was like a cornered animal, a caged being suddenly dropped into the world at large without anything to protect her.

Except for me.

I zipped around her faster than she could see and stopped her from wandering off. “How am I crude? I’m being

candid with you, Macy. Your body told a different story than your mouth.”

“It’s rude to discuss that in front of other people!”

Ah, so she was shy. I didn’t understand why wolves or other creatures were so abashed about their bodies and carnal needs. Every being, from our species to varying animal kingdoms, did much the same. Some of them performed out in the open.

Her frown deepened when I chuckled. “What’s funny, Juriah?”

“You get a wrinkle in your forehead when you’re angry.”

While she scrubbed her forehead, I glanced at my friends who were attempting not to laugh. I checked our mental connection, finding it void of commentary. What were they hiding from me?

“They sound so much like that married human couple from...which show was it, Galanthia?”

“I quite agree, Izzy. Much like married human couples.”

I glowered at them. “Would you two *focus*?”

Macy hissed at them, “Cut it out!”

Silence settled over the alleyway. It seemed my friends were not keen on laughing out loud, but I could tell they were quite amused by Macy and me bickering. They were right about us acting like one of those married couples on sitcoms, but I despised thinking that they were correct, seeing as Macy and I were far from being engaged.

Marriage was the furthest thing from my mind. Protection and justice were my main focal points, and my friends would do well to think similarly. Macy also seemed rather committed to her situation, even if she was doing so incorrectly. She turned so her right shoulder faced me and part of her profile was in shadows.

This alleyway was drab and wet. The rest of the city had been so full of life, brimming with the kind of activity any nocturnal creature would enjoy. It seemed we were miles away from all of that now, completely separated from the things that gave beauty to this city. Though shadows weren't inherently ugly, these felt like heavy drapes ready to unleash hell at any moment.

"You're the weirdest angels I've ever met," Macy spat. "I can't believe I trusted you."

I gaped at her. "When did you trust me?"

"I just wanted to get off that stage and out of that bar." For the second time, she hugged herself and scrubbed her shoulders as if she was trying to wash away the darkness from that club. "The way those men stared at me made me feel disgusting."

Anger returned with a vengeance. "You're nothing of the sort, little wolf. You're a gorgeous being, and you deserve to be protected."

Her attention snapped back to me, a passion infecting her gaze that instantly transferred to my body. Much like the way her desire took hold, her devotion to justice did the same. Yes, I could tell she wanted justice as well. Revenge wasn't enough when it came to a woman like Macy. Her feistiness told me so.

"You're just saying that," she said flatly, though I got the impression she didn't believe her words, "and you're just playing a part."

She didn't mean that either.

"I'm doing what I'm trained to do," I explained. "I'm a commander and these two were of my fleet. I'm doing exactly as I should. I'm doing—"

I snapped my mouth shut.

I'm doing what I couldn't do then.

No, that would ruin whatever trust she dared keep after that poorly executed escape. To be fair, our escape would have

been much smoother if she hadn't insisted on stealing from the underground black market as she had called it. I toyed with the bag tied to my belt, feeling its hefty contents, wondering if it was gold, silver, or some other material worth something in this realm.

I hummed curiously. "No matter. We should get moving back to Silverdawn territory."

She was startled. "Silverdawn?"

"They'll protect us," Izdor repeated. "Raven is a good leader. She'll make sure you're comfortable."

But it didn't matter what we said for Macy had started waving her hands again. How incredible the many meanings of such a moment. Earth certainly had curious ways. As Macy backed away into the darkness, I advanced, promising quietly never to lose sight of her again like I had back at *Moss*.

There was a moment—just a split second—when I'd been blinded by my cause. Macy had blended into the background as I handled Rick in his wolf form. The way he trotted around and nipped at my ankles was pure mockery. He had been toying with me back there because he knew he couldn't handle me with his own strength.

He had been trying to irritate me. And it had worked.

While trying to pulverize him into the concrete, I became distracted, and that group had gotten the jump on Macy. It wasn't about to happen again. Losing sight of her meant losing sight of my goal. And my goal was to make sure she never suffered such a ghastly experience again.

"Macy, please, don't run," I urged as softly as possible. "If you go by yourself, I can't protect you."

"I didn't *ask* to be protected," she argued.

But again, her tone betrayed the validity of that statement. She didn't believe it.

I held out my hands. "Just come with me for a while. We can get you somewhere safe. You know I can fly quickly."

“Don’t touch me. Don’t come near me.” She backed up faster, taking choked breaths that marked another panic attack. “Just what the *hell* are you—?”

She yelped loud enough to yank my wings out of my back. They flourished in their glory, widening so much that I chipped both brick walls flanking either side of me. Macy stumbled toward me as if she had seen a ghost—and then I noticed the figure behind her.

I sniffed the air, then I turned to hold out my hand to the others. “It’s alright. It’s just Raven.”

My wings retreated as Izdor and Galanthia stepped forward. Macy took a wide step away from me, shivering as she leaned against the brick wall to steady herself. I wanted to reach out to her and take her into my arms. Comfort would surely be a soothing gesture. But she had stated plainly how much she didn’t want my help.

If that were the case, then why had she run toward me when she thought she was in trouble? And why had my body reacted?

I struggled to keep my jaw from clenching. “Raven, I’m sorry we disappeared. Are you alright?”

“Don’t be sorry,” she said while stepping out of the shadows. “We were worried, so I went looking for you. But we don’t have much time.” She motioned for us to follow her. “We have to get back to the pack *now*.”

Chapter 10 - Juriah

Flying back to Silverdawn territory took half the time with my senses soaring. With Macy under my arm and my heart in shambles from her rejection, my adrenaline had skyrocketed. By the time we landed, it felt like I had run circles around the world several times.

The moment I released her, she shoved me away, showing me a coldness that confused me. Lust changed people in this realm. Perhaps it was me who had changed. But it was baffling to sense that she wanted to be as far away from me as possible when a mere hour ago, she had begged me to breed her into the couch.

I made a mental note to ask Izdor again later about his hookup culture experience. I must have been missing something. By definition, Macy and I had hooked up. Yet when I mentioned it in those terms, she appeared offended. Standing aside from me only affirmed that sentiment.

I had done something wrong. I was sure of it.

While the Silverdawn wolves welcomed us back to safety, Macy stood aside, avoiding meeting anyone's eye and keeping her arms crossed. Raven gestured for her wolves to give the little wolf space. Though I was apt to heed her instruction, my heart screamed for me to keep an eye on the feisty woman.

She had what many television programs deemed a "resting bitch face" with her lips finely set and her eyes sharpened like knives. Fondness sprouted from this observation, as well as a hint of annoyance.

I frowned while thinking, *Why does she wear that face in a place where she doesn't need to look like what these earthlings call a bitch?*

Help was being offered, yet she resisted it at every turn. I considered for a moment that perhaps it was men that bothered her. But her behavior with women was just as

distrusting, and everyone else for that matter. Macy simply didn't trust creatures of any species, even her own.

As Raven discussed with Galanthia and Izdor how to handle releasing the news of what had happened at *Moss*, I watched my dear little wolf. I studied her bowed head, her rapidly shifting eyes, her hunched stance. She was giving a sort of submissive energy to those around her while keeping them at arm's length. Unimposing, yet unapproachable.

It wasn't like she'd had many options back at the club. The two men with her were more than happy to give her up to a complete stranger for a whopping four million dollars. To think I had fooled those selfish people with a paper bag of napkins was truly entertaining. But that might have also been the giveaway.

Raven stepped toward me. "Juriah, would you be willing to tell us more details after you and Macy settle in?"

"Of course, Raven. I'd be happy to house her."

Macy stomped toward me. "You're not housing me."

"Do you want to sleep in the woods?" My irritation had hit peak levels. She wasn't going to turn down shelter. That was just absurd. "You're coming home with me and that's final, little wolf."

She stood on her toes to try to match my height. While it should have been funny, it actually impressed me. Despite her so-called resting bitch demeanor and her resistance to help, she was spectacularly fiery. She stood up for herself—even if it was entirely wrong.

She poked my chest hard. "You better have the right space."

"I have two bedrooms."

She poked again. And then once more for show. "Good. *Good*. I'm not sharing a bed with a creep."

When I opened my mouth to speak, Izdor stepped in with a jolly smile and a bag of clothes. "Macy, we're glad

you're staying with us. Galanthia had these lying around and they should be the right fit."

Galanthia smiled and patted Macy on her upper back. The feisty little wolf coughed and then shrugged her shoulders while adjusting her stance. What a fine woman to handle a friendly slap from Galanthia.

Macy cleared her throat and forced a grin. "Thank you, Galanthia. Don't you have room in your home for me? We should probably stick together."

"I share a home with Izdor," Galanthia admitted. "Juriah is more suited for your stay. He has the spare bedroom."

Izdor chuckled. "I also have a tendency to snore loudly."

Macy frowned at Galanthia. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"I snore louder than him."

Chuckles came from Raven and a few of the other wolves who had greeted us. Realizing she was being watched, Macy shrank away, tentatively joining my side. She tilted her chin up, which was likely the best she could do since most of the creatures around her were so much taller, and stated her appreciation.

But much like the alleyway, she didn't hold much confidence in her words.

Once we parted from Raven and the others, I guided Macy to one of the corner cabins down the road with an open backyard that led into the woods. That longing glance she shot at the trees wasn't missed—and carved a craterous wound in my heart.

I unlocked the door with a key and then waved my hand over the frame. "It's a light ward to keep nosy people out."

Macy trailed in after me, nearly running into my backside as I set my key on the small table to the right of the door. A flip of the switch revealed my modest living

conditions, my cherry wood furniture, and my television I had received as a gift from Izdor along with the pile of sitcoms on top of a DVD player. Antlers decorated the walls, things that apparently people considered decoration around these parts.

“I noticed your gratitude was lacking with Raven,” I said. “I’d appreciate you showing my leader the respect she deserves. She’s a good woman.”

Macy glared at me. “I’m not showing my captor appreciation.”

“I rescued you from that prison.”

“You *slept* with me in that prison.”

I stood inches away from her, bending just so I could get level with her face. “They were planning to kill you, Macy. Did you know that? Their auras told me. I didn’t realize it until we were in the middle of fighting them off, but your men were willing to do anything to get rid of you.”

Her resolve twitched slightly. “Rick would never kill me.”

“He sold you to me. You don’t think he’d kill you?”

“Not in a million years. He loves me.”

I stood at my full height, trying to gauge whether or not she was being sarcastic or perhaps telling a particularly dark joke. But the tone wasn’t right. The punch line never came. She stared at me as though she had just announced her intention to run for president.

Air readily emptied from my lungs along with a bitter laugh. “No one who truly loves you would ever treat you the way I saw you being treated.”

“You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“I fail to see why that has anything to do with love.”

She tossed the clothes Galanthia had given her onto the couch and pushed past me. “That means you don’t get it.”

“Where are you going?” I grabbed the garments and chased after her, passing the multitude of photographs that

Galanthia had hung in the hallway where light poured from the bulbs hanging above. “These are for you. What are—Would you get out of my private quarters?”

I took her by the elbow and dragged her toward the bathroom door.

“If you need a shower, use this room,” I commanded as I handed her the clothes. “Now please, for the love of the stars, get out of my hair.”

That was a phrase I had gotten to understanding quite well. Izdor used it randomly and Galanthia seemed fond of it too. Creatures here used plenty of phrases that were interesting, many of them entering my repertoire with barely any effort at all. But many things confused me still about this realm—and that included this strange little wolf.

I went across the way to the office, finding it much easier to move about in my home that was made for my height and stature. Most of the buildings in Wolfcreek were similar, with gaping doorways for those tall and wide as well as different types of rooms for different types of people.

But *Moss* had been particularly suffocating. It seemed like the club had been erected hastily with its only intention being to hold the auction and the erotic dancing. Perhaps other illicit activities occurred there as well—like those murder shows often depicted.

So much to learn still, and so little time for me to properly set up something sufficient for that lavalike woman in the bathroom. After a few seconds, I heard the shower start up. The glass door slid into place. The water muffled a bit once she got under the stream. I couldn’t imagine how that felt, that shower.

Was it good enough for her? Did she have what she needed in there? Raven was generous with bath items and had handed me a whole basket of soaps, shampoos, and the like. I had set up many of them in the guest bathroom, unsure of what I wanted for myself, sticking mostly to the floral body wash and sage shampoo that Izdor had picked out for me at the market. They held some protective qualities.

My back straightened sharply. *Protection*. Yes, I had to get on with that soon. Macy wasn't an easy wolf to track since we had left the ground many miles ago, but rogue underground black markets must have had their ways of finding people who didn't want to be found. After all, the club itself would have largely remained unknown to us had it not been for that perceptive eavesdropping I'd done at the tavern.

The water sputtered. Energy in the cabin shifted. I flipped the switch near the door of the office and observed the bare desk, the slightly full shelves, the pale carpet. New pictures hung next to the window. Galanthia had been in here as well. She was spirited in her efforts to decorate and make it a home for us all.

One day, she would make a wonderful mate for someone very lucky. We were blessed to have her friendship and her protection. As a soldier, she'd been dedicated to our cause. And here in the earth realm, she was more committed than ever to sticking by our side. Izdor showed much the same passion and showed as much interest in preserving our connections through pictures and gifts.

These things were literally treasure to us—to *me*. Being able to see their faces daily even while they were away reminded me of the things we had lost back home. If we could still call Estaria home, of course. If Estaria would still call us its children. What was happening there now?

I rummaged through the closet to find a suitable bed. That woman was insufferable now, but she didn't have to sleep on the ground. She needed something proper to get a good night's rest. Sleep was the kind of nurse that worked on us subtly through the night. I was willing to wager that her attitude would change in the morning.

The resonant thud of the shower shutting off caused my heart to slam twice in rapid succession. I grabbed the folded cot from the closet along with appropriate bedding and set everything up. As soon as the bathroom door cracked open, I was back in the hallway and halfway into the living room.

“Which one?” she called. “This one?” She pointed at the office.

But I wasn't worried about her hurried tone or the agitation shimmering in sharp wisps like solar flares on the surface of the sun. I was more occupied by the tiny rivers of water trickling around her neck and soaking into the towel covering her body. I blinked, coughed, looked away, and tried to point out the photographs in the hallway.

Macy groaned and shoved open the office door. “Fine.”

Slam.

What had I done now?

Chapter 11 - Macy

One loud snort woke me from my sleep. Nothing like dawn breaking on a new day inside a strange place. Well, that had just been my life lately, hadn't it? Percy had kept me locked away like a damn animal when I was living with the Baneridge Hounds, and before that I'd been a closet-lurking child. Not by choice.

Not by *my* choice.

While another snore cut through my morning reflection, I looked at the curtainless window, watching the streams of light filtering through the perfectly clear glass. Good goddess, nobody ever cleaned things at my old compound. If Rick had considered cleaning his home, it wasn't in the last century. That was how much dust had accumulated in there.

Percy, on the other hand, hired people to do his cleaning—and his bidding, and his killing, and his chasing. On the off occasion he personally saw to something, it was typically because it was, to him, very personal.

That's gonna be me, I thought. He's gonna come after me, and Rick too.

Fear crashed into my gut, turning me away from the window to face the door. Another sharp snort sliced through the wood, making my eyebrows rise. And here I thought Izdor and Galanthia were the ones who snored. Juriah never mentioned snoring.

He also never mentioned sleeping right outside the office.

Did he think I was going to steal something?

More fear lurked beyond the shadows of my ever-increasing doubt.

He thought I was going to escape.

I should have known better than to sleep with my captor. I also should have known better than to think he would treat me any different than anyone else. He'd pitched his bid on my head and won—with *fake* money. If this place was anything like Baneridge, then I was in for being sold all over again. Or kept as a masturbation sleeve.

My thighs twitched as my insides throbbed. Goddess, he had been *massive*. I'd never seen a cock that huge in my life. Porn would have been a fantastic career for Juriah if he was into that sort of thing. I mean, it didn't really seem like he needed the money. This cabin was gorgeous, freshly built with new coats of paint, new furniture, and clean carpet.

The whole place felt like a home. Which only made it feel more like a prison for me.

Silverdawn wolves were popular around Wolfcreek. Between their leader and their people, they had a huge stake in this town. Although by what I gathered after we landed, it appeared that Silverdawn had its own municipality. They probably had jurisdiction inside these walls—if there were walls.

Are there walls around this place? Is it a fortress? My mind raced with more and more thoughts. I didn't see much from the sky because I was too busy shoving my face into Juriah's side.

Flying wasn't exactly my favorite thing to do on an empty stomach.

My gut gurgled at the thought of food. Oh, I'd give just about anything for something spectacular right now, but I also didn't want to drink the Kool-Aid. Who knew what they had cooking up around here? They were full of kindness and smiles, but Percy had acted the same way in the beginning.

For all I knew, this was the start of a long stint in an underground slave ring.

Juriah groaned. It resembled the way he'd sounded when he was on top of me. The way his hands had gripped my rolls, clutched my bottom, and traced my curves had been far

more celebratory than anyone else. Most men would have just pounded out a nut and gone away.

But not Juriah. He'd gone down on me as soon as I thought about it, completely dedicated to my pleasure. Another wave of arousal slithered from my shoulders through my core, and I ended up squeezing my legs together. I wanted him so badly right now. I wanted him more than I wanted breakfast.

I closed my eyes. *Don't trust him, Macy. He's probably just using you. Just like everyone else you've ever met.*

Movement came from the other side of the door. Shortly after that, the scent of crisp bacon floated into my nostrils, coaxing me right off the cot. I abandoned the warm comfort of my makeshift bed and fled into the hallway, scooting right into the bathroom without peeking into the living room. Once I was washed up, I sidled into the hallway while listening intently to the sounds of the cabin.

Pans clanged in the kitchen. Bacon sizzled on the stove. Some light conversation drifted from around the corner, sounding so damn foreign to me. I paused in the living room, feeling like this wasn't possibly the place I had walked into last night. It was too bright, too cozy. How did people live like this?

"Ah, she's awake." Galanthia appeared from around the corner wearing a sunny smile. She held up a pan. "Do you like your eggs scrambled? Do you like eggs at all?"

I rubbed my arm while avoiding her gaze. "I'm fine."

Izdor poked his head out from the kitchen. "No, you're not fine. We all heard your stomach about five minutes ago."

Juriah hissed, and then he said something in a language I didn't understand.

Izdor grinned sheepishly and shrugged. "Sorry, I was just being honest."

Galanthia whacked his shoulder. "The girl has been through enough. Would you quit being so strange?"

“It’s fine. Really,” I insisted, but I was met with more stern denial of my announcement. It seemed like I was getting eggs whether I actually liked them or not.

And part of me felt really good about that.

Timidness followed me to the table as Juriah, Galanthia, and Izdor went back to preparing breakfast. Unexpected feelings of warmth settled into my bones as I watched them move around, their motions appearing coordinated as they shared pans, chopped vegetables, and wiped various areas of the counter.

They were in sync like a choreographed dance. They were alive as much as the food, and they were as lively as the smells that enlivened my stomach. The more seasoning, the more hunger. And while I would have complained, I didn’t have it in me to vocalize it.

Slave or not, this was a walk in the park. I slept in a damn cot, sheesh. I was treated like an actual *person* here. Everything that Juriah had promised me—the rescue, the escape, the safety—had pretty much come to pass. I mean, I couldn’t say how safe this place was specifically, but I had to guess they were prepared if they were harboring creatures like this Juriah guy.

Angels are real. Once again, that thought came without prompting, and I found myself studying Juriah for the millionth time, watching his muscles flex, watching his eyelids flutter when he was satisfied with the smell of his food. *They don’t have to be like the books say. But they’re real. At least, he’s real.*

Juriah cast a glance in my direction. Just seeing the way his eyes sparkled at the sight of me made me steam up, and I found myself glaring out the porch door instead. The blinds were pushed aside, allowing plenty of light to flow into the room. Birds chirped around the yard, squirrels pranced and wiggled about, and the trees bent to a generous breeze.

This place was magical. Other than the three beings in the kitchen creating delicious food, I sensed a certain feeling about this place that inspired nostalgia. But that was unusual

considering I didn't have anything nostalgic to drag from the depths of my memory except for my trip to New York with Rick.

He'd actually been nice back then. He'd actually been real with me. Without Percy around, Rick was just another wolf. He acted like a guy, he told bad jokes, and he grabbed my ass a lot, but he was just another wolf. Who knew what he could be if he left Baneridge behind.

Guilt slapped me across the cheek. *I've abandoned my pack.*

Galanthia set a mug of hot coffee in front of me. "You're safe here."

"I know."

"We are aware that you know, but we can tell you don't feel it yet."

I stared up at her. Goddess, she was even more beautiful than last night. Something about her perfectly symmetrical features, her aquiline nose, and her stunning green eyes so unnaturally pale that they appeared as clear seawater made me feel a mixture of comfort and intimidation.

"Why are you all so beautiful?" I blurted, and then bit my tongue.

The way Izdor elbowed Juriah with that wiggly smile reminded me of the teasing jabs these two gorgeous weirdos had made last night about us being married or whatever.

I rolled my eyes. "Forget I asked."

"Beauty is subjective," Juriah explained as he plucked bacon from a pan and set it on a napkin. "Much like many opinions in this realm."

Galanthia nodded. "You've never met an Elderling before, have you?"

"An Elderling?" I focused on my pronunciation, feeling the way it rolled off my tongue. "That's...certainly a word."

Izdor laughed. “It’s what we are. I’m sure Juriah can tell you all about it while Galanthia and I reinforce the protection spells around the town.”

Protection spells, I repeated mentally with a sigh of relief. *Well, that’s good news.*

“Good news, indeed,” Juriah stated. And then we gaped at each other as though we were kids getting scolded by a nanny. “I, uh...I mean...”

My eyes burned with curiosity and irritation. Had he just *read my mind*? Nope, that wasn’t possible. That wasn’t something anybody could manage to do without some serious magic mojo, or at the very least a super ridiculously good spell. Mages, magicians, witches—they were as good as their powers, bolstered by spirits, but they weren’t that freakin’ talented.

Elderlings were odd, rude yet considerate, and somehow capable of things that would take way more effort in this realm. If Juriah had read my mind just now, how many times had he done it last night? Was that how he knew exactly what I liked between my legs?

More heat crashed into my chest, causing me to rub the back of my neck with an itchy sense of anxiety crawling through my back. Sheesh, not even twenty-four hours with this guy, and he knew things about me that most men didn’t bother to figure out in twenty-four *months*.

Galanthia frowned in disapproval, but she didn’t say anything out loud. All three Elderlings, as they were called, stared at each other—somehow at the same time. As I tried figuring out what in the world was happening, each of them nodded in turn and went back to what they were doing.

As if they had just held some kind of silent meeting.

Right in front of me.

I gulped some of my coffee. Despite it being hot, it tasted incredible, probably some of the best coffee I’d ever had in my life. That diner up in New York couldn’t have captured a better cup.

Galanthia grinned in my direction. She seemed like she was reading me too. In her own special way, she was monitoring my reaction to things. Did she have similar abilities? Was she reading my mind?

My eyes went so wide that I thought they would pop right out of my skull. I stared into my coffee mug until Juriah set a plate near my elbow. Greasy bacon, cheesy eggs, and fluffy biscuits invaded my senses, every bit of me aching with desire as I lifted a fork and dug in. I didn't say thank you. I didn't take a damn breath as I tossed my breakfast right down the hatch.

Galanthia and Izdor joined me at the table. Juriah stood to my left like he was a waiter trying to pick the right time to interrupt my chewing. Just when he seemed like he was going to say something, I grabbed a napkin and swept it over my lips. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—it's just so *good*."

I pushed the plate away.

There was still plenty of food left, and Galanthia was particularly interested in the fact that I had left it on the plate. She pointed at it with the tines of her fork. Without saying anything else, I pulled the plate tentatively back and started picking through the remaining biscuits.

"It's to your liking," Juriah stated. "Good."

"Yes, it's..." I trailed off while taking a bite of a glorious biscuit. "Good *goddess*. I can't even believe it."

He kept staring down at me. I was already self-conscious about being so much shorter than him, and sitting wasn't doing me any favors in that department. But my curiosity wouldn't win me over. I didn't want to look up. No matter how much I wanted to see his handsome features.

When he took my chin, I squeaked and dropped my fork. His fingers drifted over my jawbone, forcing me to look up at him. "You have a cut."

I blinked. "What?"

"Here—" He touched my hairline and I hissed. "Yes, it's still bleeding. One moment, please."

Pain radiated through my forehead. I cringed against it, feeling weird with the other two watching Juriah prod my scalp. Were they going to do anything or were they just going to keep staring?

Juriah stepped back. He bowed toward me to inspect my forehead, smiling when he met my gaze. “It’s stopped burning now.”

He was right. It *had* stopped burning. But it didn’t quite register until he pointed it out. What had he done?

I touched my head. Warm admiration flooded my body. Things I’d read about in books surfaced, things I’d never thought I would experience. These were feelings that people felt when they were happy, and when they were *loved*. It wasn’t possible for me to know these feelings. It wasn’t possible because it had never happened.

Percy had owned me. Rick had claimed me. My mother had abandoned me. My elders were more concerned with my debt, and with the fact that I had tried to run away. Nobody had taken the time to feed me, to bathe me, to clean my wounds. Not a soul on this earth had ever considered it until Juriah came along.

And now that he was here, I couldn’t help wondering when it would be time for him to ditch me. How long would it take for him to realize he didn’t want me around? Three days? Three years?

Maybe that would never happen. Or maybe it would happen soon.

I looked up at him, overcome by the sheer generosity of his abilities and the fact that he wanted to heal me at all. Why was he doing this? What did he want? Because I was having a hard time believing he wouldn’t ask me for something in the future as payment for this sort of kindness.

Tears stung my vision as I struggled to keep my voice steady. “Just what the *hell* are you, mister?”

Chapter 12 - Macy

Galanthia and Izdor left after breakfast. You know, right after that sensual display of affectionate healing that Juriah had no problem giving me in front of a crowd. But if I had to guess, given the stuff he'd said in front of his friends last night, he probably didn't mind giving other types of performances either.

Yeah, porn would work for him, I thought with a chuckle. Especially with his skills. Oh my goddess, I can't believe what he did to me.

I sat on the couch in the living room, running my hands over the symmetrical patched fabric, focusing on the way it felt under my fingertips. "I don't think I've ever sat on a couch that didn't have holes in it."

Juriah sat beside me, causing the cushions to dip. Call that a first too.

"Why would a couch have holes?" he asked. "Is that for special occasions?"

I laughed. "No, it's just..." I sighed. "I've never really lived in a place that had things that worked."

He gave me a puzzled look. Jesus, had this guy ever experienced poverty?

"Percy barely gave me nice clothes," I explained. "I mean, like I would have to wear things that barely covered me. Even in the winter."

Azaleas tickled my nose. It felt like I was sitting right next to a bush of them in a garden.

I frowned while playing with one of the throw pillows. "Percy had a couch, but it always had holes in it like he was too good to replace it or something. Nobody really had nice things there. Percy usually put his money into underground stuff."

"Was he your leader?"

“Yeah, he is—*was* my alpha.”

Juriah flattened his hands on his knees. “If I had a pack of people relying on me, I wouldn’t spend a penny on myself until everyone’s needs were met.”

“How generous of you.”

“It’s not generosity to be morally good.”

I stared at him blankly for a moment. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I guess I never knew good people or something.”

He gripped his knee hard for a second, the fabric of his jeans crumbling and creaking under his touch until he let go. And then he took my hand. “You keep asking what I am. Galanthia told you we are Elderlings, but I gather that you don’t understand that term.”

I shook my head.

“I am a creature of magnificent strength. I have wings,” he stated slowly as he gestured to his back. “I can also control life force.”

My brows furrowed.

“I can suck life out of any living being,” he offered. I nearly yanked my hand away until he rushed to add, “Though I take no pleasure in it and would never intend to do that unless it was absolutely necessary.”

Something passed over his eyes. Was it a thought? A memory? An abrupt feeling? I knew too well how it felt to survive guilt, and his expression came damn close to reflecting those exact experiences. Maybe it was the wording. He spoke in an accentuated cadence that emphasized explanations. It could have merely been a translation issue.

“The language you spoke...” I nodded toward the kitchen. “Is that Elderling language?”

“I was speaking faster than you could understand.”

I chuckled nervously. “No kidding.”

“Why would I kid about something like that?”

“It’s just an expression. It means that I can’t believe it even though I experienced it for myself.”

He squinted at me for a moment, and then he nodded. “I see. I will add that to my collection of phrases.”

“So, you can fly. You can take life force. And you can...” I swallowed hard while picking through my words carefully. But there really wasn’t a subtle way to ask. “Can you read minds?”

A concentrated frown crossed his lips. He stared off for a while, clutching my hand the whole time, squeezing me like he was trying to tell me something silently. “I can communicate with my friends mentally.”

“Oh, so that’s why you were standing in a circle like that.”

“We were communicating about the protection spells, what kind of shifts we would have for monitoring the town, and what we were going to do next.”

I looked at our entwined fingers. “And what *are* you planning to do?”

“I’m planning to protect you, Macy.”

“Why?”

The sour way that word flew from my mouth stung my tongue. Bitterness came so easily. These people were protecting me. And for what? They were just inviting a wave of crap right onto their land and people. Percy would stop at nothing to recover his losses. I couldn’t speak of the underground trafficking ring, but I also couldn’t assume they didn’t want the same thing.

All of them were looking for me right now. I could feel it.

“You really don’t have to worry, Macy,” Juriah assured me, once again proving he had power beyond my

comprehension. “You’re safe with me. I’ll always protect you.”

“But *why*?”

I plucked my hand from his. Though it felt awful to lose his touch, I didn’t want to give him any more of my energy. And I was tired of him reading me. I was tired of him just *knowing* things about me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Didn’t you call out for help?”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Yes, you did,” he replied for me. As irritating as it was for him to do, it was true. “Your heart screamed. Did it not? I heard the horrifying wail from across the bar.”

Terror struck me like lightning. Again, it didn’t make sense. How was it this man could read me when no one else had so much as tried? I was a basket case, a complicated ball of fury that would lash out at anything and everyone given the chance. I’d proven that. I’d hurt his feelings already.

Yet he kept trying. *Why*?

I was getting tired of wondering. But I couldn’t help the way I felt.

“Macy, I can’t ignore a cry for help,” he whispered as he stroked my cheek. I closed my eyes, hot tears rolling down my cheeks at the thought of him granting me grace in the wake of everything. “Yours was too painful to disregard.”

Confusion ran amok. How was I supposed to respond to that? How was I supposed to *feel* about that?

Nothing could have stopped the tide of emotions overwhelming me. Not Juriah holding my hand again. Not the way he wiped my tears from my face. And certainly not the knock that erupted from the front door.

I jumped from the couch and hauled ass down the hallway to the bathroom. It was too early to be sobbing in a

stranger's arms. Sure, I'd done many more intimate things last night, but that was under the cover of darkness and now the sun was out. That meant things were different.

Everything was different in the light. Even kind men like Juriah.

Distant discourse met my werewolf ears. I ran the faucet and splashed cold water on my face, avoiding the mirror because it was hard enough feeling self-conscious. I didn't need to look self-conscious. A multitude of emotions rose and fell inside me, a warring sea sprouting where I'd recently felt desire. Or had it just been lust? Things were different in underground places like *Moss*. Hell, they'd probably already torn the whole building down or covered it with a fancy spell.

People like Juriah could make places like that disappear with the snap of a finger. The way he had grown and shifted with those massive wings told me he could probably flatten entire cities with one distinct scream. Being in his home confused me more than it had when I first walked in.

There was no earthly reason for him to protect me. He must have wanted to own me. That was the only logical reason.

I shut off the faucet. I patted my face dry.

The smell of a wolf sneaked into my awareness. It was paired with something unique, something more supernatural than what already existed here. Bits of it were floral, kind of reminding me of Juriah, of Elderlings.

When I returned to the living room, Raven stood up from the couch and greeted me with a wide smile. Someone that matched her height stood next to her, causing me to pause near the mouth of the hallway.

"You're all so...tall," I said as kindly as possible. "Are all Elderlings tall?"

"Yeah, it's a thing," Raven replied. She gestured to the man with platinum blond hair and brown eyes. "This is my brother, Rynar. He's a hybrid like me."

I waved but didn't move. I didn't like being the shortest person in the room.

Juriah inched toward me. "They brought more clothes for you."

Lo and behold, a pile of more fashionable threads sat on the couch, folded neatly with care. Far from the haphazard tossing my previous pack would have done. *If* they gave me new clothes at all. I stared at them. They looked kind of nice.

"I figured a woman would like more than just some shorts and a t-shirt," Raven continued. "And I wanted to welcome you again to the Silverdawn pack. Juriah tells me that you have nowhere else to go."

I snorted with indignance. "I was *taken*. Or did he leave that part out?"

Raven glanced at Juriah and then at Rynar. When she focused on me, she nodded with understanding. "Correct. You were taken. He said he bid on you during the auction and paid with fake money."

Surprise led me to lean against the wall. While crossing my arms, I cleared my throat and agreed with her.

"You can stay for as long as you like," Raven offered. "I've heard about trafficking happening near Wolfcreek, but not in the town. That shocks me."

"A lot of things happen there."

She looked sad. "You'll never have to worry about those things here. I can promise you that, Macy."

"Are you sure?" I pointed at Juriah. "How do I know this isn't some scam?"

Rynar stepped toward me. "Are you challenging his honor and integrity?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," I stated confidently even though I felt far from it. "He plucked me off a stage, put me in a room, and—" I stopped.

I didn't want to say much more.

Tell them as much as you want.

Agitating as it was to have another voice in my head, I found it somewhat relieving to hear Juriah assure me that I could keep details to myself. After his rather rude outburst last night, I was feeling out of control. But it was hard to say I felt in control when he was in my head at random intervals.

No, I couldn't say anything. It was one thing for Galanthia and Izdor to be aware of me hooking up with Juriah. It was another entirely for their alpha to know about it. I didn't think she'd be disappointed. I just didn't want her to look at me like I was some kind of slut.

One shaky breath later, I squared up and continued, "Anyway, I don't know him. I don't know either of you. Who's to say you aren't running your own ring?"

Rynar appeared offended. Raven looked understanding. Juriah seemed intent on inching toward me as quietly as possible until he was close enough to touch.

I glared up at him. "Would you give me space?"

"Anything can happen from one moment to the next," he reasoned. "I'm simply taking precautions by staying at your side."

"You're breathing down my neck."

He frowned. "I'm doing no such thing! I haven't done that since—"

I held up my hand. "Please, just...I'll try to be clearer about my phrases, but what I mean is that you're standing too close to me and it's making me uncomfortable."

Raven appeared amused. I didn't like that smile on her face, nor did I appreciate the implication of the joke I knew she was about to make. Because it was probably the same original knee-slapper that Galanthia and Izdor had made last night.

"Of course," Juriah agreed with a nod. "I'll give you space."

“Thank you.” I looked at Raven. “And thank you, uh... thanks for the clothes and shelter.”

She beamed. “If you need anything else, please, don’t hesitate to tell me.”

“I’ll probably need a rocket to get out of Percy’s reach,” I joked.

But despite the humor, I felt the horror of that statement. Because its truth was magnificent. The only way that I could escape Percy was by leaving the planet for good.

I glanced at Juriah. “Percy will stop at nothing to get me back. I hope you know that.”

Juriah smiled. And with his smile came a malicious weight, something I’d seen just before his transformation last night right as his wings had popped out of his back. He took a deep breath, his grin growing wider with his exhalation. “Let him try me.”

Chapter 13 - Juriah

I motioned for Macy to walk into the main bedroom. She hesitantly drifted past me and then hopped as far away as she could, pausing near the bed to touch the silk sheets.

“You said you need space.” I gestured to the room. “Here, take as much space as you need.”

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

Attention like hers could have zapped me into another realm. Those eyes were fiery regardless of how cool they appeared. Marbles made of gray glass couldn’t have possibly shone brighter. She was so intense, so feisty.

I coughed. “I meant you could take the quarters for yourself.”

She froze with her fingers floating over the pillow. “What?”

“The office is too small, and the cot hardly suits you.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

I frowned. “I’ve said no such thing, little wolf. Your comfort is my priority, so you must take the bed. It’s only proper.”

She stared at me for a long time. What was it she thought about while she stared at me in moments such as these? Snippets of feelings came through the mire in various colors—an excessively bright scarlet with tiny streaks of sunny orange seemed the most common for her. That was her passion. What lurked beneath was a bed of muddy violet that reminded me of the moors.

That was her depression.

Such extensive feelings created vibrant, illustrative colors. And hers were far more impressionable than any I’d witnessed. Most people gave off a medley of colors that usually blended well together. Yet hers constantly fought

against each other. It seemed she was in a perpetual inner battle.

She pursed her lips, made a sound that resembled agreement, and then went to the window to throw open the curtains. “Oh, you get so much sun here.”

“I love the sun.” I joined her at the window, keeping enough distance between us to satisfy her. “I dare say I draw more life from the sun than anything else.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

Questions like those were typical for soldiers, and why wouldn't they be? As a commander at one point, I had led many into battle. I had fought horror unseen by this realm. I had witnessed terror in its purest form.

But hearing that question from her mouth made me feel guilty. “The witch will be here soon.”

“Witch?”

“Etta. She will be helping me with the wards around the house.”

Macy's gaze softened as she peered through the window. What wonders did she see out there? Had she ever experienced such a view? It was a simple yard connected to the woods with a lush garden, so it must have been something she had witnessed in her time. “Do you want to go outside?”

She turned to me with a shocked expression. “No, I just...”

“You just seem like you've never laid eyes on flowers.”

“It's not that.”

I studied her countenance, noticing the dip that formed beneath her lips when the corners of her mouth drooped into her jawline. A certain glaze had fallen over her irises.

“Macy, please, don't ever hesitate to ask me for anything. I've rescued you from that immoral den and I pledge

to protect you from whomever or whatever may attempt to come after you.”

Sharp, jagged lines formed around her energy. She was putting up a shield without so much as a glance in my direction. Things like that occurred when people weren't apt to share their experiences or thoughts. That must have been what she meant by needing space as well.

Though I didn't entirely understand our connection, I knew I could prod her mind every so often for a glimpse into her mental chatter. Right now, a towering steel wall stood between me and her mind. I respected that. Her space was hers, and my space was mine. I wasn't about to violate the sanctity of her thoughts.

I sighed as I turned away. *Izdor and Galanthia do it all the time. I understand.*

Macy touched my arm. It was so light, so feathery that it dragged goosebumps up the length of my arm and over my shoulder. I turned enough to look at her, trying to control the way my body reacted to her presence. I still didn't quite understand that either.

“I'm sorry. I just...” She hauled a breath so loudly that I thought she would start screaming instead of talking. But she whispered instead, “I'm not used to being treated like this.”

“Whatever makes you comfortable is what I'll do. I'll give you space.”

Difficulties abounded as I drifted away from her to reach the door. A canyon sprang up between me and the hallway, a gaping crater so wide that it seemed impossible to cross. And when I glanced back after trekking hesitantly across the carpet, it felt like I had walked for decades.

She seemed so far away. But that must have been the distant expression on her face. She was trapped inside her own world now, lost in a sea of thoughts that were lashing her from every side. Although I couldn't hear them, I could tell they were wringing her dry. The poor woman had gone from totally vibrant energy to utter depletion.

What bothered her so much?

She just escaped abuse, I reasoned mentally. She's been thrown into a new environment. She's been flown across the city and forced to sleep in a place she doesn't like.

But it was for her safety, and I was being a good soldier by giving her my room. The lock on the door was much stronger than the one in the office, the bed was far comfier, and the window gave way to ample sunlight. She would recharge soon and see the benefits of using my quarters as her own. The couch would suffice for me.

An almost comical feeling drifted over me when I approached the couch. That thing wasn't nearly long enough to accommodate my body. My feet would hang right off the edge. Surely the woman would see reason at some point and ask me to sleep next to her. It wasn't like I hadn't seen her naked, or had her in various positions, or kissed her hard enough to bruise her lips.

I chased away the thoughts. Good soldiers didn't dwell on their good deeds just to get a good night's rest. They took responsibility for their actions. Macy was my responsibility. I had chosen to rescue her and harbor her, to protect her. It would be my pleasure to make sure she remained safe.

Even if she did make me feel like I was losing my mind.

Mellow energy drew my attention to the door. Ah, that was Etta getting ready to knock. I opened the door to find her standing on the porch with her fist in the air. She was a slender woman with radiant copper skin and black hair that hung to her waist. Dark eyes like volcanic ash sparkled at the sight of me.

She smiled. "Juriah, it's good to see you."

"And you in such fantastic health."

She stood on her toes to kiss my right cheek and then my left as was her custom. When she floated into the living room, she gasped, holding one of the many pendants that hung

around her neck and blended with the multicolored silk blouse she wore that matched her long tan skirt.

“This must be Macy,” she whispered, and then ran to Macy like she was a long-lost sister. “You’re more beautiful in person! I sensed your energy the other night, but gosh, you’re so *bright*. Look at her colors.”

Etta tapped the air around Macy who appeared rightfully confused. It appeared Macy didn’t get to meet many witches like Etta, witches who were, much like Elderlings, in tune with auras. My senses informed me that Etta didn’t see auras exactly like Elderlings, but she got their impressions, and that translated to colors and feelings in her brain.

“Violet, *wow*,” she groaned. “Don’t you worry about a thing. Etta is here. Etta will fix everything.” She looked curiously back at me. “Doesn’t matter what kind of tension is hanging around here.”

Macy blanched while I scratched my head. Tension? I hadn’t anticipated such a thing occurring here. I knew Macy was upset with me. I knew she was ready to punch me in the face if I got too close to her. But I didn’t think of it as *tension*. I merely assumed she was running on fumes from last night and unaccustomed to showing gratitude.

Hmm, tension, I considered once more. I should make more coffee.

Caffeine had become a common staple in my diet. Estaria had similar beans, so it wasn’t terribly unfamiliar, and I found earth’s coffee to be much tastier than Estaria’s. I brewed a pot, passed out mugs, and then followed Etta around to help with the wards. Within twenty minutes, the entire cabin was secure.

“And for good measure...” Etta announced while reaching into her satchel. She lit the end of a bundled wand of herbs. “Juniper should help cleanse the air. Lavender should, uh...” She glanced rapidly between Macy and me. “*Soothe tension.*”

“What is this tension you keep referencing?” I asked, but received no response other than a few short chuckles.

Macy stood aside, grumbled something under her breath, and then retreated to the kitchen. The sound of the sink came next. Was she really washing the dishes? Of all the things the woman could choose to do—like perhaps rest, take a hot bath, or walk through the garden—she *chose* to wash the dishes?

I *humphed* while Etta finished up her cleansing. She stubbed out the bundle of herbs in a tin tray and went to the door. “Would you be so kind, mister?”

Nodding, I went to open the door for her.

Ashen eyes peered over my shoulder. “You know, many couples in this pack started off just the same. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

I frowned. “Etta, what are you talking about?”

“I know I’m new and all—” She made a symbol in the air with her fingers while whispering the late Philomena’s name. “—but I can tell true love when I see it. Good luck!”

Off she went without further explanation. How irritating it was for people in these parts to say things without clarification. It was typical to come across such people in the general population of Wolfcreek, and even more beyond its borders.

At any rate, Etta had misread the situation. The protection wards were to make sure Macy wasn’t discovered, not to protect her from running away from me. A comment like that wasn’t important enough to linger, yet it poked at the back of my mind as I returned to the kitchen and started taking meat out of the fridge for dinner.

True love—that was silly.

How could it be true love when Macy practically hated me?

Evening came upon us quicker than anticipated. When the steaks had fully defrosted, I set them on a cutting board and started seasoning them. I figured something hearty would be good for Macy. If this morning's inhalation of her breakfast was any indication of her appetite, she would enjoy eating homemade mashed potatoes and grilled steaks.

Right on cue, Macy wandered into the kitchen wearing what Raven had brought earlier in the day. The jeans hugged her curves and the top accentuated her figure, forcing me to turn away to keep my body under control. Never in my days had a woman had such an erotic grip on me. Just seeing her wearing something snug and casual made me feel like I was about to burst into my true form and fly circles around the sun.

It's just hormones, I told myself. But I wasn't so sure. *Earth's realm has a strong effect on me*. That could have been true without Macy's influence, yet it didn't seem reasonable either. *She's hot*.

The last thought inspired me to set my knife aside. The steaks were prepped enough. I placed them on a plate and covered them with foil before going to the sink to wash my hands.

Macy observed the steaks. "Tenderloins, huh?"

"I thought you would enjoy them."

"Why did you think that?"

I shrugged. "I got the impression you weren't fed particularly well."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it means, Macy," I snapped as I shut off the kitchen faucet. "Why is it you constantly question my direct statements? They mean what they mean when I say them."

Her eyes narrowed. "Somebody needs a nap."

“I think you’ve taken enough naps for us both.”

“Are you judging me?”

I shook my head. “I’m surprised you fell asleep at all. You hardly slept last night.”

“You should know. You’re the one who slept right outside the door.”

I slammed the kitchen towel on the marble counter. “I was making sure that if we were followed, I could defend you.”

“And what about the window? Wouldn’t that have been more logical to guard?”

“I would have heard the window. I would have heard anyone approaching.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, a sign I was starting to interpret more as protecting herself than acting snotty. There was so much more to Macy than her feistiness. She guarded herself carefully—except when it came to sex.

“I don’t know if I believe you,” she said. “I think you just did it to make sure I didn’t run away.”

“Should I let you run away?”

She glowered. “Why would I run away?”

“You mention it often enough. You say you want to be left to your own devices. You wanted me to drop you off in the middle of the woods, Macy. Do you know there are beasts out there?”

She laughed bitterly. “Like I can’t handle beasts.” Her eyes dropped to the zipper of my jeans so quickly that I almost thought it was a hallucination. But the scarlet patches on her cheeks told me she had indeed glanced at my package. “I can handle anything.”

“I don’t doubt that, little wolf.”

Vulnerability flashed in her eyes briefly until that hot temper returned. She tightened her arms over her chest and

tilted her chin downward, angling her eyes up, sharpening her gaze.

Nothing could have been more attractive at that moment. I'd never been one to argue. I despised any sort of petty confrontation that didn't give way to some kind of solution. But the way Macy fought with me—her resistance to my help and her strength—made me want to take her by the throat and slam between her legs until she was a puddle of limbs.

Her face hardened and she marched to the sink. “Look, if you're going to make a good side, you're going to need my help.”

“And what side did you think I was going to make?”

She gestured to the basket on the counter. “Those potatoes look good.”

“Did you read my mind?”

“Don't make fun of me.”

I tried to hide my smile—and failed. “I wouldn't dream of it, little wolf.”

“I can tell when people are making me the butt of a joke, so don't even try it.”

“What I said remains true.”

She huffed while grabbing the basket and forcefully washing the skin of the potatoes. “You didn't even scrub these. Sheesh, they still have dirt.”

“That gives them flavor.”

“Don't argue with me. Grab a peeler from the drawer —” She groaned when I lifted a knife. “No, a *peeler*. You don't have peelers on your planet?”

“Realm,” I corrected.

She begrudgingly stopped washing potatoes and went to one of the drawers. Water splashed on the counter and the floor. Irritatingly enough, she didn't bother trying to wipe her

hands or dry the areas that had been affected by her careless, agitated motions.

I grabbed a towel. “Macy, you’re making a mess.”

“It’s a kitchen. It’s meant to be messy.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean be reckless.”

She spun around just as I reached for the counter to dry it. Her forehead collided with my chest, causing me to reel back a step or two. I rubbed my sternum.

“Goddess, that was hard,” she whined, and then covered her mouth while looking up at me. “Sorry, I didn’t—”

I threw the towel to the ground, frustration taking every inch of me by storm. I grabbed her waist and pressed her flush to my body, not even caring that the faucet was still running, and not even caring that water was soaking through my socks from the ground.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. I had to kiss her.

So I did.

Chapter 14 - Macy

Furious heat snaked between my thighs as I arched into Juriah. His height made it impossible to kiss him normally. I had to stand on my toes and cling to his shoulders, helplessly pressed to his hot erection that bloomed by the second. Everything about this kiss was infuriating, and yet at the same time, totally arousing.

I couldn't help it. I wanted him.

Much like last night, my desire took me over, turning my brain into mush while my body took control. Nothing could have stopped me from getting what I wanted out of him. And I didn't think anything could have stopped him either.

Silent agreement produced another kiss, and then another. I hooked my nails into his flesh, delighting in the shocked gasp he released when he moved away from my lips. He plunged into my neck, trailing kisses along my sensitive flesh to the strap of my blouse. Intense luxury sprouted from his mouth. Was he going down again? Goddess, *please*, let him do that again.

It was the most alive I'd ever felt.

Conflicting emotions swirled in my center. On one hand, I knew sex would relieve stress and get me what I needed out of the situation. I'd done it with Rick, and I'd almost done it with Percy at one point. Who wouldn't seduce their captors to get an extra piece of bread and a warm blanket on a cold night?

I mean, it wasn't like Juriah had me locked up. He'd given me his bed without asking for anything in return. Or maybe the kiss *was* the request. Maybe the dinner was supposed to mean something.

Pleasure coursed through my core when Juriah swept his thumb over my bra.

Distracting thoughts didn't last long with him, did they? Other considerations came to mind in random roves, like

the way that witch had spoken of couples in this pack. I wasn't even part of this pack—yet Juriah seemed intent on keeping me here. Raven was welcoming enough. Everyone seemed kind.

Juriah skimmed his hand beneath my blouse and unhooked my bra. Free at last, my breasts bounced to life, his mouth opening to welcome my left nipple. I hissed when he sucked on the tender nub, rocking my hips into him to get him into action. His hungry growl vibrated my nipple, sending another surge of pleasure through me.

“Please,” I begged while clutching the back of his head. “Touch me again. Do what you did last night.”

He smacked his lips when he broke away from my nipple. He met my gaze with a swelling heat, white heat, that simultaneously terrified and aroused me. While he hooked his hands under my bottom, he whispered his commands, urging me to unbutton his jeans.

“That’s it,” he encouraged when I gripped his cock. “Show me what you want. Show me with your hands.”

This would have been embarrassing if it hadn't been for his graceful patience. Juriah didn't expect me to know things. He moved with me, flowed with me, guided me. His confidence inspired me as I stroked his cock, watching fluid bead at the tip while he worked away at my jeans.

Within moments, my clothes were on the ground. I was shivering in his arms, still not used to being seen in my full form with such a loving glance. The way he drank me in was like I was a gorgeous work of art that he desperately longed to devour. As he licked his lips, I imagined them on my slit again—but we didn't have time for that.

I was too eager today. I wrapped my legs around his waist and hugged him close, perching his cock at my entrance while using the cabinets at my back to brace myself. When I rested my hands on his shoulders, he bucked into me, a slow thrust that shook me from the inside out.

A smile appeared. And then another thrust. He gripped everywhere he could, roaming freely around my curves and folds, taking his time to get to know every inch of my body. Sweet worship like this hadn't ever been an option for me before. Any other man would have just dipped his dick and taken off.

But not Juriah. Never this sweet angel. He seemed to tune in to me, knowing just when to buck and when to pull back. Slow, fervent pumps turned to quick, pulsing thrusts that rocked me into the cabinets, causing them to quake. Each frenzied buck slammed me harder, pushing sounds from me that I didn't know I was capable of making.

Cold heat swept right through me then, pouring in gushing waves over my body as he leaned back with my knees over his shoulders. Just a few more thrusts sent me falling over the edge, tumbling into oblivion, yearning for more despite how much I was getting lost in him. It wasn't until he collapsed against me that I realized he'd joined me in the same realm, gotten lost with me at the same time.

No, that couldn't be the end. That wasn't enough. I stroked his hair and bounced my hips, grateful for the fact that he was still hard. Sheer determination took over when he lifted his head, a growing sense of urgency palpable in the air.

“Do you really want me that badly?” he teased while pushing my knees toward my chest.

He exposed so much of my slit that cool air swarmed my mound. I shivered—but he never stopped thrusting. He never stopped pleasuring me.

His grin returned as his eyes went white again. “Give me your tongue.”

Obedience wasn't anywhere in my nature. But with Juriah, I didn't second-guess myself. I didn't question him. I did as he asked and lost sight of him as he bent forward to slurp my tongue into his mouth. More feverish thrusts broke out from there, sending us sliding sideways on the counter, knocking over whatever was nearby.

Pleasure stung me in places I didn't know existed. A new orgasm slammed into me, this one much quicker than the first but just as satisfying. I slumped on the counter while trying to keep myself from falling over, tumbling into a fit of giggles and groans that came in short bursts.

Juriah came with me. *Again*. That was impossible, the kind of stuff that only got edited into porn videos or something.

I stroked his hair as he struggled to focus on me.

“Dinner is...” He chuckled with disbelief. “Sorry, little wolf. Dinner is going to be late.”

“I thought I was dinner.”

His face twisted with confusion, causing me to laugh even more as he slid out of me. The loss of his girth prompted me to pause, a sadness taking over that I hadn't anticipated. As he helped me to my feet, I discovered the mess we had made. Both steaks were on the ground.

Juriah looked torn. I shrugged it off, collected the steaks, and moved the potatoes aside. “It's alright. We can rinse them off. The grill will get rid of any germs.”

“I didn't realize you could do that.”

“Well, when you grow up like me, any food is good food. Even floor food.”

Hurt plastered his features. “Were you ever forced to eat off the ground?”

I didn't answer that question. I didn't like how much I could feel his feelings about the whole situation. Arousal soaked my inner thighs, my tits were still hanging out, and I hadn't bothered to clean up or put on underwear. I was already stark naked.

How much more naked did he want me to get?

“Here,” he said gently while holding out a fresh set of clothes. “I brought you a towel as well.”

I dropped the steaks on a fresh plate. “Wait, how did you move so quickly?”

“It’s a gift.” He chuckled lightly and then added, “I suppose your realm would call it a skill.”

“I just...I didn’t see...”

I stared at him as I shut off the faucet.

His smile came back as handsome as ever. “You were taking care of something, so I took care of something. We’re balanced.”

We’re balanced.

Feelings from long ago sprouted like they had been planted just this morning. Guilty feelings. *Shameful* feelings. Because he shouldn’t have been calling anything between us balanced when our relationship was based on the fact that he had purchased me from an underground trafficking ring.

He wasn’t that much better than Rick or Percy in that regard. He just wanted to take control of the situation. He just wanted to hold his power over me. That was what all men wanted to do. Hell, it probably wasn’t even just men, because my mother had done the same thing.

I grabbed the clothes. “Who says shit like that?”

I didn’t mean to snap, but I didn’t want to give way to his kindness. All kindness came with a price. It didn’t matter what people said. There was always some sort of exchange going on in the background. So, in a lot of ways, he was right about balance—and that balance would come back to bite me if I let him take care of me too much.

My mother did it. Percy did it.

Juriah would do it too.

I fled the kitchen and locked myself in the bathroom. I used the hand towel Juriah had handed me to clean myself up, trying to ignore the fluttering feelings in my gut as I wiped away the fluid from my slit. That was another stupid mistake I had just made. I’d let him bust his load right inside me.

I threw the towel into the trash can. Where the hell was my head these days? Why couldn't I get a damn grip? Survival should have been the only thing on my mind, but I couldn't stay away from Juriah. And then when I was away from him, I couldn't stop thinking about him.

The whole cabin reeked of azaleas. I wanted nothing more than to get lost in the scent all the time, to let myself get taken over by the comfort of it. Tears choked me up as I yanked on my clothes and leaned against the sink for probably the second or third time today.

I kept my eyes closed. No more mirrors. I didn't want to see what I was becoming under this state of duress. While I listened to the sound of Juriah moving around the kitchen and opening the porch door, I tried to imagine what life would be like if I stayed here.

Can I do that?

Wrinkles clogged the space between my brows. Who was I kidding? Juriah wasn't going to keep me around, and Raven would probably send me off before Percy could attack. He was going to find me. Because he always found me. And if he didn't find me, I would end up crawling my way back to him.

This would be the fourth time. What was he going to do to me?

My nails ached as I tried to dig them into the porcelain sink. When I finally let my lids slide open, my eyes were bloodshot, and my face was soaked in tears. I shook my head and ran the faucet, again.

For the millionth time.

Cool water was the only thing that would soothe me at this point.

Soothe.

That Etta witch had said that word. She had lit that bundle of stinky herbs and walked around the house waving it elegantly. She was gorgeous. She was skinny. She was successful. She had kissed Juriah's cheek.

Anger inflamed me. I finished washing up, wiped my face dry, and went back to the kitchen where the porch door sat open. A light breeze beckoned me to step into the yard, carrying with it the smell of lighter fluid and charcoal. Bags rustled. Grunts gave way to sighs of satisfaction.

Juriah appeared in the doorway. "There you are."

"Yes, I'm here." I fluffed my hair. "I, uh...sorry I took so long."

"You never have to apologize for taking your time."

I pointed behind him. "Need help?"

"No, but you can help if you want."

If I want? I gulped. Oh, he doesn't think I can cook, does he?

I took a deep breath and pushed past him, taking a seat in one of the rocking chairs on the porch. The grill sat about ten feet from the rear steps. Smoke billowed from inside it. On the table beside the grill were the steaks I had rinsed. I frowned while glancing at Juriah.

But he seemed to have read my mind as he handed me the bowl of potatoes and an empty bowl to go with it.

Peeler included.

"Don't get used to this," I warned, but in my heart I was desperate to get used to it. "I'm just helping you out while I'm here."

"Of course," he said. "Take your time."

But I knew what he meant.

I knew that he was saying so much more than what he was saying. Juriah demanded directness while coating his words with other meanings. It wasn't necessarily on purpose or anything. I could just tell he meant more.

My walls rose fiercely, surrounding me with the protective layer I had come to intuitively trust. As I dug into peeling the potatoes, I leaned into my survival skills, allowing

my gut to carry me forward even though my body wanted desperately to stay.

I couldn't stay here.

I couldn't let this man take care of me. I couldn't let this pack suffer the consequences of *my* actions. Had I been more committed to Baneridge and paying off my debts, I wouldn't be trapped in a new place—although it was a damn nice place to be trapped in.

Take your time, he had said.

But what he really meant was, *Stay as long as you like*.

Chapter 15 - Juriah

Two Weeks Later

“You just haven’t learned how to keep your lanky arms to yourself, have you?”

Macy had started using this jab as a common deflection whenever I took her by surprise. I knew because I was standing chest-to-head with her in the kitchen where we often collided. Though I didn’t mind, she had shown increasing hostility about it lately.

Something about her had changed. I wasn’t sure if it was the brief captivity or the close encounters, or perhaps she was hormonal because she was just hormonal.

My gaze focused on her stomach.

Perhaps it’s something more than hormones.

Affection poured from her gaze while attitude spat from her lips. Were all earthly women like this? Or was it just the wolves?

I had a lot to learn about supernatural earth women.

“We’ve been over this, little wolf,” I teased. “I’m not lanky. I’m muscular. I just happen to be taller than the average earth man.”

“You’re older too.”

I noticed how she scooted around me, taking extra care to keep our bodies from touching again. How odd it felt to be avoided. After peppering Izdor with many questions regarding hookup culture, I found myself as confused as I had been at the very beginning. Some people preferred having emotional connections, while others wanted never to be bothered.

Macy displayed a baffling mixture of these desires. She never clearly stated her intentions to sleep with me, yet two weeks ago she hadn’t denied me the course of action that had

led to her eruption—twice, if memory served correctly. She ogled my body when I worked in the garden, yet turned her nose in the air when I approached her.

Had I done something to offend her? As I skimmed the memory of our coupling in the kitchen from two weeks prior, I realized I had never taken the time to *eat her out* as it was commonly called. I quietly kicked myself.

Perhaps that was why she was angry.

Tension gathered in droves around us. She sidled up to the pantry and plucked through her snack options. Since her arrival, I had been sure to stock it with ample choices. She often chose cookies and pickle chips. Sweet and salty seemed to be her favorites. As she grabbed those from the top shelf, I observed her curvy figure.

My mouth watered. The gods had truly blessed her with a glorious figure. And since she had taken up running through the woods under the watchful eye of Raven, she had gained even more deliciously toned muscle.

She waved her hand in front of my face. “*Excuse* you.”

“Yes, sorry.” I stepped aside. “Here.”

“No, I mean, stop staring at my ass.”

I stumbled over my words, for she had caught me right in the act. Frustration bubbled inside me while shame clouded my thoughts. The more time I spent with her, the more I boiled over with feelings that were foreign to me.

She snapped her fingers. “Hey, that counts for my tits too.”

I growled. “I wasn’t staring at your breasts, Macy. Stop accusing me of things!”

“Then stop *doing* things and we won’t have a problem.”

“I thought the attitude would go away with care and attention, but you seem dedicated to retaining it despite how much we give you.”

She glared up at me. “There it is. The catch. You’ve been waiting to throw that in my face, haven’t you?”

“I’ve done no such thing.”

“Just admit it. You want me to give you sex in exchange for protection. Isn’t that what you did when I first got here?”

My face drooped and my shoulders went with it. She was exhausting. Hadn’t she wanted to have sex with me on that second night of her stay? She’d begged me to get between her legs. She’d practically shoved me into her without hesitation. Now she was saying I was using her for sex.

When did it end with her?

I fixed my posture and went to the counter to grab an apple. “When are you going to learn to trust me?”

“When are you going to learn that I don’t trust people?”

“If that were the case, you would have run off by now.”

Silence.

Was that the silence of defeat? Of me being correct? Or had she finally given up her bickering? Truly this woman must have been tanked every night after her daily arguments. I was growing tired of her myself, regardless of how much I wanted to slam my mouth to hers—if not to taste her sweetness, to simply shut her up.

This was dizzying. I rinsed the apple and took a bite, taking my time to enjoy the tart and sweet flavor exploding in my mouth. Green apples—that was her scent too. It was one that stuck with me whenever I left the cabin. It came to mind when I was flying over Silverdawn territory to check for invaders or faulty spells.

It was her and her alone.

Why did she haunt me so?

“Fine,” she sputtered.

And then the sound of her footsteps retreated from the room. A door slammed down the hallway. The lock turned right after that.

Predictably so.

Doesn't she get tired of that too? I asked myself as I took another juicy bite. *It's like she just has it ready to go.*

At least she looks good from the back, came a thought that wasn't mine.

Fury whirled me around, positioning me at the porch door. Sunlight streamed over Izdor's shoulders while he flashed his usual sneaky grin. He tapped the glass a few times, urging me to let him inside without saying—or mentally speaking—a word.

I reluctantly opened the door. “You need to stay out of my head.”

“I could say the same about you to her—and her to you.”

“How do you know about—?”

But that was truly a silly thing to be asking such a powerful Elderling. I shook off the inquiry and invited him into the kitchen, checking the hallway to make sure the door was tightly sealed.

It was.

“I've got new information,” he whispered. “Baneridge Hounds are starting to make more waves in the surrounding areas. They've gained traction with a northern Mafia group.”

“Any word on which group?”

He shook his head. “No, but there are a lot of ears to the ground.”

I stared quietly for a moment.

“It means I have people listening to whatever rumors are going around,” he added. “That means I know what Percy is doing most of the time.”

“Which is?”

He lifted an apple from the counter and tossed it idly with one hand. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

He nodded slowly. “*Nothing.*”

Suspicion crawled into place like an old friend. Many foes had succumbed to my strategies in the past from such a tactic. Was Percy attempting to smoke us out with something similar?

“I find that hard to believe,” I whispered. “He must be doing something to find Macy.”

“I’m sure it won’t be long until she’s located.”

I breathed deeply. “I don’t want that to happen.”

“We might have to send her away then.”

“No, that’s out of the question.”

But it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility.

Sending Macy to a remote location with minimal magic surrounding her would likely be a greater protective measure than what she was currently receiving.

Izдор stopped tossing the apple, tracing the skin with the tip of his finger. “I’m sorry to say it, friend, but I just think it might be best.”

“She’s safer here.”

Logic said otherwise.

“You need to consider what’s best for her,” Izdor stated. “And you. Don’t you want to travel?”

“She’s my responsibility.”

He gave me a sympathetic frown. “I get it, Juriah. I remember what happened.”

Anger flared in my eyes. “*Don’t.*”

“You can’t ignore it forever, you know. You have to face it one day.”

“I face it every day of my eternal life.”

He tossed the apple back into the basket with the others. “What you’re doing is you’re beating yourself up. It’s not going to earn you any forgiveness.”

“They can’t forgive me when they’re *dead*, Izzy.”

Quiet guilt, as adept as a gazelle, launched into the clearing of my center. Where my emotions typically sat still was a gaping well that swallowed everything up—except the guilt, of course. Never the guilt.

Why can’t I get rid of the guilt?

“You made a small mistake,” Izdor said calmly. “It’s so small on the scale, Juriah. You can’t keep living like this.”

“It’s my *duty* to live like this. I’m a commander in the seventh army of Estaria’s—”

He grabbed my shoulders. “We’re on earth now, Juriah. We’re not at war anymore. *Let it go.*”

I twisted out of his grip and walked to the porch, yanking open the door to let the wind inside, to let the world witness my pain. No one else could have carried me through the wreckage of my mistakes like Izdor and Galanthia. And no one else could have possibly understood the vindication required for my crimes.

I balled up my fist and whacked the doorway’s frame. “It’s my fault, Izzy. Those people died under my care. I should be punished for that.”

“You’ve suffered enough.”

“I’ve barely scraped the surface of suffering.”

He groaned while stepping past me. He gestured to the garden, to the life that grew as a result of my care and commitment. “Look at what you’ve built.”

I laughed, more of an irritated response than one of amusement. “We haven’t been here long enough for me to build anything.”

“You’ve granted life to so many from one action.”

“She’s not entirely safe yet.”

He glanced to the right of the cabin, to the window that observed the backyard. “She’s more than safe with you, Juriah. She’s full of life. I should have never suggested sending her away.”

His demeanor had changed. His countenance held tenderness as he turned to me, a small smile playing on his lips.

My right brow rose. “Why are you changing your mind?”

“Because you care for the woman. I can see that.”

“See what?”

He chuckled. “You never were very good at playing dumb, Juriah.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Yet I knew precisely his implication.

While confusion ran circles around my mind, I felt strongly for Macy. I felt responsible for her safety and happiness. I wanted nothing more than to keep her in my clutches so I could ensure her security. No other action would be acceptable regarding this matter. I wouldn’t allow anyone to make up my mind for me.

Perhaps I was as stubborn as she was.

Izdor grinned and invited me into the yard. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk.”

“But—”

“She’s fine, Juriah. Etta has been renewing the wards every week.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “I don’t like leaving her alone.”

“She feels the same.”

I growled. “Would you stop spying on my little wolf?”

“*Your* little wolf?” He held up his hands and showed me his palms. “My apologies, Juriah. I had no idea it was that serious.”

“It’s not serious.”

He gave a teasing grin. “Sure, and I’m the king of Buckingham Palace.”

“Don’t taunt me. I’m not ignorant.”

“Just to her feelings about you.”

I snorted with disbelief as I shut the porch door and descended the steps. “She has no feelings for me other than irritation and bitterness.”

“She’s just flustered because she wants to ride you.”

“Izzy!”

Cackles echoed through the trees as we approached them, mostly from Izdor, and partly from my disbelief in his candid statement. A layer of shame wrestled me over Macy, an odd and protective sheen that forced me to keep the details of our encounters to myself. It must have rubbed off from her. I had never been shy about this in the past.

As his chuckles faded, he patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Stop poking around in our minds.”

“It’s hard to ignore when it’s being broadcasted.”

I ran my fingers over my head. “I’m doing no such thing.”

Yet again, it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. Strong emotions had a way of manifesting in the world. That was the way unresolved feelings worked.

“Juriah, why don’t you get some air or something?” he suggested. “I can hang back. Watch the house. Keep her entertained.”

I spun around to face him. “You’ll keep your distance from her.”

Realizing I'd yelled at a friend, I fixed my posture to be less threatening and more welcoming. I tugged at the hem of my shirt a few times, trying to find the right words.

"She has requested extra space," I explained. "Just be sure to honor that."

"I won't sleep with her, Juriah."

Anger snapped me out of my friendly demeanor. "Why would you say that? I'm not a possessive prick who is trying to mark her or something. She's not mine. Do as you please."

"I see. So, if she asked me a favor, one that involved me pleasing her, you wouldn't mind?"

I struggled with where to put my hands. "Well, that's not what I said."

"If she wanted, say, a foot massage—no opposition there?"

"No," I squeaked. I cleared my throat a few times while keeping my gaze level with the trees. Anything else would make me feel out of control. "*No*. She doesn't belong to me. She's not my property."

He hummed in a way that annoyed me. "No, but if you wanted to claim her—"

"That's barbaric, Izzy. What a concept!"

"You could propose to her or something."

The thought hadn't occurred to me, though it appealed to me in many ways. This realm treasured marriages. They adored the ritual of proposals, engagement parties, and weddings. Such a thing wasn't beyond my scope of desire, but it shouldn't have been a consideration at all since our circumstances weren't exactly ideal.

"Would that keep her safe?" I shook away my curiosity. "No, it doesn't matter, Izzy. Stop putting ideas in my head. Go watch her. I'm heading into town."

His chuckles trailed after me as I marched away from the house. I resisted the urge to turn back to him, to say

something, to act as Macy would with a sharp click of her tongue and a lash of words. Then again, wouldn't it be liberating to allow myself such freedom?

Perhaps that explained her treatment of me.

Regardless, she wouldn't be my problem today. She'd be Izdor's problem today.

And I couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not.

Chapter 16 - Juriah

Wolfcreek flowered with life as I parked in the community lot near the park. Light gleamed out of shop windows, children freely shifted and ran about, and a few vendors were set up on the corner selling something that smelled absolutely heavenly. As I locked my truck and turned to the street, I noticed how different it felt during the day.

My isolation had sped right past me. Just a couple of weeks ago, I had been with Galanthia and Izdor inside a tavern with various species drinking to their hearts' content. It had been that same length of time since I had visited Wolfcreek, having been too occupied with Macy's comfort at home.

Other than the handful of trips to the community center inside Silverdawn territory, I hadn't strayed particularly far from my home—or Macy.

I felt empty without her. With so much life around me, so much care and contentment, it felt odd not to share the moment with my little wolf. And truly, I had come to think of her as mine in certain ways. Perhaps not in the possessive way most earthlings on this plane would claim, but mine in a fond expression.

Little wolf, I thought. What have I done to anger you?

The question carried me to the nearest vendor. I purchased a couple of pastries glistening with otherworldly spices and then took them with me as I wandered up the street. At the roundabout sat a large fountain with a few cement benches surrounding it and plenty of trees. Once it was safe to cross, I jogged over to the fountain and sat down, absorbing the warmth that emanated from the seat beneath me.

Ah, this was the right place to absorb life force. The sun beamed down at me, the wind brought each new inhalation, and the trees offered their shade. When I tilted my head to the sky, I could feel myself growing more rejuvenated by the minute. Izdor had been right—I needed fresh air.

What better way to find it than to sit in town?

Though Estaria would have granted me much more life force from nature, earth had a decent bounty of it, and it fed me enough to keep up my glamor. To anyone from the Silverdawn pack, I would appear as Juriah. But onlookers in town would see a much older gentleman with a white beard and a ball cap ready to feed seeds to the pigeons.

It was innocuous enough to keep me safe while granting me a reprieve from the tension in my household.

Tension that could likely get resolved if Macy would simply call herself mine.

I shook off the ridiculous thought. As I had established with Izdor, there was no need for Macy to belong to me. I didn't ascribe to the rituals of this realm, nor did I find it appealing to put my needs ahead of hers when her safety was my priority.

But owning her would protect her.

The point of winning the bid had been to get her under my care. It didn't matter that the money was fake. Though I had to wonder if Baneridge would be keen on a new monetary agreement, one that involved real money.

Where am I going to get money like that?

I stared at the pastries in my lap. Sandy hues reflected golden drops of sun, flaky bread breaking apart under my influence to reveal gooey red jelly inside. Such delectable treats were to be savored and shared.

Emptiness came to me once more. I glanced to my right, almost expecting to see Macy at my side with a pout of disapproval on her lips while she chewed. If she were here, she would probably comment on how she could make something better out of dirt and river water.

To save her meant to save myself. She was my responsibility, as I had stated to Izdor, and I planned on making sure her security was more than amply provided. If that meant robbing a bank to secure the right funds to purchase her from Baneridge, then I would do it.

In less than a heartbeat, I would accomplish that task.

The crisp scent of green apples slid into my awareness, and I jumped up from the bench, turning about until my eyes landed on the origin. Macy waved sheepishly as she approached, opening her mouth to speak, and then immediately shutting it when she noticed the pastries.

I offered her one. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought you would yell at me.”

I frowned. “If you thought that, then I’ve done a horrible job at taking care of you.”

“Well...”

“Is that how I’ve disappointed you?” Her eyes became the sword of defeat that plunged into my heart. “That must be why you’ve been so angry. I’ve let you down.”

I bowed my head. She tapped my chin in the same manner I would do for her and invited me to sit. The moment we relaxed was the moment I sensed the glamor surrounding her. If I squinted, I could see Etta’s handiwork. Such lovely webs formed in a geometrical pattern around Macy.

“Are you an old lady as well?” I asked while physically touching some of her glamor threads. “How did you get past Izdor?”

“Actually, it was his idea.”

I dropped my hand into my lap. “He’s nosy.”

“He’s worried about you.”

I focused on the fountain, lifting one of the pastries to my mouth. “When is he not?”

“I guess when he’s sleeping.”

“Ah, I never stop worrying about you even when I’m sleeping.”

She held a paper cup out to me. “It’s tea from the café. I thought you might like it.”

I stared at the cup, trying to determine why she was acting this way. “Macy, why did you leave the house?”

“For the same reason you left. To get some air.”

“You’ve gotten your air. You should go back.”

She huffed with amusement and then emphasized the cup in her hand. “Please, it’s a peace offering. I’ve been a... well, a bitch.”

“Isn’t that just the face you wear?”

“What did you just say?”

I clamped my mouth shut.

She laughed while placing the cup into my free hand. The contents were comfortably warm. And when I sipped from it, it was the perfect temperature. I got the sense it would never cool past this temperature, that it would remain perfect until I finished consuming it.

I stared at the cup. “What is this?”

“Magic matcha,” she said with a grin. “I thought it would be nice.”

“It tastes like...” I licked my lips to be sure. “Chocolate.”

“I think it tastes like that too. But still like sweet tea. I like it.”

“I like it too.”

She smiled. “Is it a good enough peace offering?”

“Why are you being so nice?”

Suspicion must have clung to me from my conversation with Izdor. I was used to Macy being rude and bitter. Her kindness, while refreshing, felt unmatched, making it odd behavior.

And then the sky seemed to crack open when she smiled. Radiance was born from that smile. The word hadn’t existed prior to her display of such joy. “Why don’t you smile more?”

Some of the radiance died on her lips. “I hate when people ask me that.”

“Then I shall never ask again.”

She searched my eyes. “Why are you so kind?”

“It’s my nature.”

“But I don’t understand.”

I took another bite of my pastry, encouraging her to do the same with the one I’d given to her. Pleasure rippled through her countenance as she chewed and hummed with delight. Elation beamed generously from her grin. When she was done, she set the pastry aside and rubbed the crumbs from her lap. A couple of birds flew up to her feet to get the crumbs.

I took her hand. “I’m kind because kindness wasn’t freely given where I came from.”

“But Estaria sounds gorgeous.”

“Gorgeous things can be torture. I’m afraid you’re familiar with that, little wolf.”

She looked forlorn. “Yeah, I get it.”

“Earth has...a mixed bag of kindness. Is that the right way to use that phrase?”

A small smile appeared. “Yes, that’s the correct use.”

“I feel obligated to give.”

“I mean, but what about trusting people?”

I shrugged. “People are going to do whatever they’re going to do. My job is kindness, and to take care of those who can’t take care of themselves, and to—”

My willingness to share had gotten ahead of me. Telling of that dreadful day to Macy would surely cloud her opinion of me. She wouldn’t be kind. She wouldn’t make peace offerings. And perhaps that was just what I deserved.

But the thought of losing her attention in the slightest wounded me.

I hung my head. “I understand what it means to lose.”

“I know that too.”

“Then you understand why kindness is so important. You’re doing it now.”

She chortled. “Yeah, I guess I do get it. I just...it’s hard. I don’t trust people.”

“I can tell.”

“You don’t have to be rude about it.”

I smirked. “My apologies, little wolf. I won’t speak like that to you again.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“What?”

She caressed my cheek. “All of you are beautiful, you and your Elderling friends.” She paused for a second, worry wrinkling her forehead. “But I don’t find them as attractive as you.”

“You find me attractive?”

“Why else would I sleep with you?”

Heat cluttered my face. “I suppose there are many reasons why you slept with me. Convenience, attraction, security—Izdor told me all about hookup culture.”

Her smile turned into a wiggling line. “Did he? Well, that sounds...that sounds so...” She coughed, the sound giving way to a flood of laughter. “That explains so much!”

“I don’t understand. Why are you laughing? Have I offended you again?”

She waved as she continued laughing, a pink hue decorating her cheeks that enlivened her beauty. Her laugh was as wonderful as her smile, perhaps more so, regardless of how much it currently confounded me.

“He’s...” She coughed a couple more times. “Well, he’s not the *best* person to talk to about hookup culture, from what I can tell. But it sounds like he did his best.”

“Isn’t that what we did? We hooked up. Am I wrong?”

She smiled bashfully. “We did, Juriah. But I like to think that it meant more than just merely hooking up.”

Finally, the pieces fell into place. The things that had confused me about her behavior were in full view for me to observe.

I stroked her cheek. “You want me to court you.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it like that, but...” She bit her lower lip. “I’m scared, Juriah. I’ve already told you how I do with trusting people.”

“You don’t trust people.”

She nodded and played with her long braid. “But with you, I want to trust you. I want to be around you. That’s why being at home without you was so weird.”

“Do you consider it your home?”

Something like panic bloomed in her eyes but reduced when I squeezed her hand. I transferred everything that was pertinent to her, all the wonderful feelings she made me feel when she gave me attention, and when she gave me pleasure in the many forms she delivered it. That seemed to help ease her stress.

After a moment, she nodded. “Yes, I consider it a home. Which scares me because I’ve never really had a home.”

“You do now, little wolf. You do with me.”

Her radiance came back at full volume, showing me the brilliance of her smile and her contented giggle. She lifted her paper cup from the bench beside her and took a sip, staring at the fountain for a moment as she leaned against my shoulder. Her touch was light. Her face was free of the usual bitchy expression.

All that remained was what felt like home.

“Juriah?” she asked softly as she extended her legs. “What did you do that you feel like you have to punish yourself?”

She overheard my conversation with Izdor, I thought timidly. I can't tell her. She'll see me as a monster.

I squeezed her hand firmly, waiting until she squeaked to cue my release. I wrapped my arm around her then and held her close to my side, conveying every gentle intention possible. "Something I don't speak of."

"Why don't you tell me?"

"I suppose you're not the only one with trust issues, little wolf."

Amusement danced over her tone. "So, there is a crack in your armor. I was waiting for that one."

"My armor holds the strength and beauty of the great goddess herself. Why, the stars would be *dazzled* to find themselves reflected in the sanctity of my armor!"

She sat back and laughed, glorious giggles that rang through the roundabout, matching the whimsical trickle of water from the fountain. I could see now she was joking, and I joined her with a few timid chuckles. It was hard getting used to her jokes since her attitude had been more stubborn than friendly as of late.

But this was wonderful. I could get used to being like this with Macy.

"Sensitive," she commented while rubbing my knee. "I like that. I like sensitive."

"I don't see why I shouldn't feel the scope of my emotions."

She beamed. "You'd be surprised how many men don't think that way."

"And so, this realm continues to baffle me."

"Yeah, well, what can you do?"

I stared blankly at her. "Don't you hold rallies and festivals?"

"Yes, but they don't always work. Some people are just stuck in their ways, you know? They don't want to be kind or

gentle. They just want power.”

“Such things are familiar to us in Estaria.”

Witnessing her sadness hurt me, but I knew she was merely sharing the load of that burdensome statement.

“It’s hard to think a magical place could be so unfair,” she admitted. “But I guess everybody has problems.”

I nodded. “I fought in a war. I was a commander. I’ve seen things done with magic that weren’t magical at all.”

“That sounds terrible, Juriah.” She held my shoulder. “When you’re ready, you can tell me. I can promise you I’ve seen some pretty fucked-up shit in my life.”

“Yes, they would be considered fucked-up, as this realm would put it.”

Her grin shone once more, reminding me of the light that dwelled within her. “You’re really catching on, huh?”

“I’m learning as I go.”

“You want to learn some more funny phrases?”

I motioned for her to continue.

Our afternoon unfolded with a lightness unmet in our previous encounters. Between our first meeting at *Moss* and our current circumstances, I couldn’t have ever predicted this kind of engagement. She was remarkable in every way, understanding, and patient with my questions about various phrases.

Sitting with her now felt entirely different from how we’d met. There was something different between us, something that made me feel like things had changed. When I tapped into her aura, I noticed a new color resonating way down deep underneath the rest. It was a sunflower yellow, a starry hue that made me think of warmth and comfort.

It was the start of something wonderful and new.

Chapter 17 - Macy

Hours passed on that bench with Juriah. I should have told him then what was brewing in my belly. I should have given him more details about why I was snapping, but I didn't. I hadn't. I just couldn't.

Because I wasn't sure what to do yet.

By the time we both agreed to head back to Silverdawn, my ass had fallen asleep along with most of my left leg. Explaining that to Juriah made him offer help, and I didn't even mind the pins and needles feeling that came with it as I hopped with him back to his truck.

As soon as I pulled my seat belt on, he jumped into the driver's seat and started the engine. "How did you get here without a car?"

"Izdor flew me out."

"And he didn't stick around?" Juriah searched the parking lot, nostrils flaring.

I frowned. "He didn't communicate with you? He told me he would say something."

"No, I didn't hear anything." He scratched his head. "Perhaps I was preoccupied with our engagement."

"Can you reach him now?"

He was quiet for a moment, an eerie feeling sneaking into my chest as I watched him concentrate. Relief came with his smile.

I sighed. "Don't scare me like that."

"I just got a hold of him. He said he has eyes on us."

"Good. That's good."

My heart thumped a few extra times for good measure. Good goddess, Izdor probably just got distracted, but it was strange because I didn't see him as that type. Disregarding the

alarms in my brain, I sat back and tried to focus on the fact that I had Juriah to myself.

The ride back would probably be nice and quiet. That was the thing about Juriah that felt odd too. He usually got quiet for a bit, and I usually didn't mind it. Silence typically meant people were scheming, or at least that was what I had always experienced. With someone like Juriah, silence just meant comfort. I was getting used to it.

I might have been enjoying it too.

It was weird feeling safe with him. I'd never felt safe with anyone. But the past couple of weeks had shown me he meant it when he said he would give me space. Other than the handful of run-ins in the kitchen, he stuck to his word. Which annoyed me. And impressed me. And made me frustrated too.

I had wanted to jump his bones so many times. I wanted him to pin me against a wall and rail me like I was his personal toy. Every other moment with him felt like torture. Either it was desire or sheer hatred. There was no in-between.

Until today. Until we sat on that bench and talked to each other.

One conversation was enough to drop part of my guard. While I didn't want to let him all the way in, I knew I couldn't get to a good living point if I didn't try. He hadn't attacked me. He hadn't tried sneaking into the room at night. He didn't demand to know what I was thinking about or interrogate me about where I had gone when I went for a walk.

I crossed my arms over my chest. And then I promptly uncrossed them.

I didn't need to hide from Juriah. As confusing as it felt to like him, I didn't want to deny the feeling any longer. It hurt to turn him away, and I was just tired of hurting. For the first time in my life, I wanted to be around a person because they made me feel good, not intimidated.

I wanted to hang on to that feeling for as long as I could.

Juriah reached for the radio. "Music?"

“Sure.”

Country came through the speakers. I laughed when he made a face.

“I’m just not used to it, I suppose,” he confessed. “I like the orchestra.”

“Do you like opera music?”

His grin widened. “Galanthia showed me the opera. I’ve been wanting to see more of it in person.”

“I’d love to go with you.”

“I didn’t think you were the type to appreciate such culture.”

I scrubbed the back of my neck. “Well, I haven’t been given the opportunity much.” I shut off the radio. “I don’t like country that much either. It’s pretty much all we get on the radio out here though.”

“Do you have any favorite music? Bands? Performances?”

“I haven’t really explored that much. When I was with Rick, we had one of those box televisions that only got a few channels.”

He glanced at me. “Channels? Like Netflix?”

I chuckled. “No, like cable television. Hasn’t Izdor shown you that yet?” I glanced out the window. “Actually, I don’t see why you would watch cable. Raven probably has everybody hooked up with a streaming account.”

“Everyone I know has Netflix.”

“That makes sense. You guys sound so spoiled.”

He reached for my hand. “I would be happy to share my Netflix with you.”

“I’ve never heard such a romantic phrase in my life.”

“Do you want me to say more?”

I threw my head back and laughed. It was weird to think I was so disconnected from technology. But no matter

how far I was from it, I still knew a lot more than Juriah.

“Sure. Hit me with your best shot.”

“I don’t want to—” Realization broke out on his face.
“Oh, yes. I will deliver my best.”

“You’re cute when you’re realizing things.”

The truck started to slow down. I lurched forward, grabbing Juriah’s hand hard, feeling the pit of my stomach sinking as I held my right hand to my heart.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, and Juriah pointed ahead.

I hadn’t noticed it at first. I kicked myself for not noticing it first. Because dropping part of my guard meant losing my second sight on my surroundings. Skills like mine had been valuable to Percy because I always noticed changes and abnormalities ahead of everyone else.

It was what kept me protected. It was what kept me *safe*.

With my hormones going wild and my heart fluttering at every turn with Juriah, I’d gotten distracted. I’d made a mistake.

I gripped his hand harder. “It looks like the engine blew.”

Smoke curled up from the hood of a Cadillac. Black smoke—yeah, that meant the engine probably had gone to shit. A woman wearing a visor and white shorts waved us down. She whipped off her ascot and waved with it, flagging us like we were her saving grace.

Juriah clutched the wheel. I knew because I heard the squeak of the leather under his grip. If I could read his thoughts the way he thought I could, I would have probably heard him kicking himself too.

Just like me.

The highway only had two lanes. It wasn’t like we could zip on past her without trying to offer help. Though this highway also led out of town, it went right past the entrance

for Silverdawn, which meant she could have been going there or out of town.

“What a horrible place to break down,” I commented. “We need to stop.”

“We do.”

I felt him squeeze my hand right back. “I have a bad feeling too, Juriah.”

“We should proceed with caution then.”

“Yes, we should.”

I placed my hand over my stomach. Izdor was hanging around, wasn't he? I had to guess he could see what was happening from the sky. Anybody with a good brain and a working pair of legs would see Izdor and Juriah in their pissed-off angel forms and determine that running for the hills was the best option.

But that hadn't happened with Rick. No, Rick had gone absolutely berserk trying to get to me through Juriah. He didn't care what Juriah looked like or what kind of powers Juriah had. He'd gone totally bonkers just to get to *me*.

If this was a setup, then it would go just the same as it had in *Moss*.

The truck slowed even more. Fear created a nest in my belly, one that made it nearly impossible to keep down the delicious pastries and tea that we had shared just fifteen minutes ago. We were all smiles then, so carefree in the way we carried ourselves.

Yeah, I'd been smart enough to take on a glamor done by Etta. I'd been cautious enough to go with a powerful Elderling into town. But had that been good enough to protect us from being discovered?

I wasn't so sure.

The closer we got, the more details I saw on the woman. She was tall, like runway model tall, and her polka-dotted blouse was tied off just under her tits. She seemed almost out of time with her chunky heels and purple bangles.

The visor matched, but it didn't at the same time. Almost like it was all a hastily tossed-together outfit.

The woman wasn't real at all. My stomach knotted with the realization, and then I struggled to retain my food when I saw two black cars appear behind us. They hadn't been there when we left. Had they been following us the whole time?

“Juriah.”

“It's alright, little wolf. Relax.”

But I couldn't relax. I couldn't go back to Rick and Percy with a baby growing inside me. Going back meant death. I didn't want to die. Not after I'd found someone like Juriah to spend time with. I mean, hell, we hadn't even known each other for very long, but we already made love like we were lovers who had been together for ages.

I had just accepted that.

How could I possibly give it up now?

“Macy, breathe,” Juriah instructed, “and whatever you do, don't let go of my hand...”

Chapter 18 - Macy

Juriah bowed toward the wheel. His eyes slid over the horizon. He was looking for danger the same way I was looking for danger. Signs of betrayal. Signs of being given up for good.

I clutched his hand. He'd told me not to let go. But how could I trust he wasn't lying to me this whole time?

Maybe Izdor and Etta set me up, I thought with a flash of pain. Maybe he's been working with Percy this whole time to break me in.

Horror stories surfaced from memory. There was a time when Percy had brought in a young woman around the age of twenty, barely made it through college that young thing, and she had been tossed in the dirty cabin with me. She told me about how she had been "rescued" by some hot billionaire up north.

While she recounted being spoiled and treated like a princess, her expression grew dark. Her skinny shoulders sank inward. She had practically curled in on herself by the time she was done telling her story. Everything that had happened to her had just happened to me. That hotshot billionaire had been paid to earn her trust so she could practice sex.

That was it. That was the whole point of her existence.

I shouldn't have trusted him. But it didn't matter. It was too late for all that. If this was Percy and Rick about to collect me, then I had to accept that. There was no going back. Acceptance would be the only way forward.

Then maybe I could die on my own terms.

Azaleas met my nostrils. Goddess, the scent was so thick in the air now that I was practically choking on it. Already, a certain white aura was brimming around Juriah. I had to do a double take because I could hardly believe my eyes. Glimmers of silver and white danced over his skin. The

back of his shirt warped like there were things moving underneath it.

Like his wings were about to pop out.

I turned back to the fast-approaching scenario ahead of us with that woman who was no longer waving. The sinister grin she gave us told me we'd fallen for the trap. My hackles rose as my wolf fought to get into the open air, begging me to let her out.

Not yet, I told her. Just stick to Juriah's plan. He's going to help.

My heart and head were battling all over again. Izdor and Etta should have intervened by now. While I couldn't communicate with them, I knew they would have swooped in as soon as they sensed danger. That alone told me things were fishy. But if things weren't fishy, then that meant they were—

“Hold on, little wolf.”

One of the black cars raced beside us and then ahead. They hit their brakes, forcing us to stop just before the Cadillac. The black smoke cleared up. The woman waltzed up to the car and hopped inside.

“A witch,” Juriah whispered. “Just hang on, little wolf. This will be over soon.”

“What's the plan?”

He cleared his throat and pitched his voice to sound much older. “Act like you're an old lady, Macy.”

Knock. Knock.

Percy stood outside Juriah's window. Rick stood outside of mine. They had both knocked, scaring the absolute daylight out of me. Following Juriah's lead, I rolled down my window as he rolled down his.

Juriah beamed. “What seems to be the problem?” He laughed lightly and gestured to the Cadillac. “Other than the car, of course.”

“Sir, have you seen these two?”

Percy handed over a grainy security footage picture of Juriah and me. With my tits just hanging out everywhere.

Because *of course*, he chose that picture.

Rolling my eyes would have given me away. I had to lean into my glamor, so I smiled easily at Rick, pointing to the remnants of the tea and pastries. “Young man, would you like a snack?”

Rick shook his head. “No, just answer the question.”

“I’m sure you’d be happier with a snack.” I slowly reached for the brown bag, listening to the jaunty way Juriah spoke to Percy. How was he being so cool right now? “There’s just a little bit left, I’m afraid. My appetite has been wild lately.”

“Ma’am, it’s alright. I’m not hungry.”

I blew a raspberry in disapproval. “Nonsense. You remind me of my grandson. Stubborn and too proud to eat. You have so little on your bones. Just have a bite.”

He gaped at me. “Pardon?”

But I was too busy rooting around in the bag to bother laughing at his expression. If I knew Rick, he’d run back to the compound and obsessively pump weights until he shook off the disparaging remark.

“We were swinging right on through,” Juriah explained. “The kids are raving about this place on the other side of... Honey, what’s it called again?”

Without looking up, I replied, “Beats me.”

“You know, the adventure park?”

“It’s called a *theme* park, Harold.”

He chuckled. “Silly me. Yes, it’s a *theme* park. Something the grandkids keep going on about. Something about shifters being good there.”

Rick perked up. “Are you two shifters?”

I scowled at him. “Can’t you use your nose?” I shook my head. “Young people these days just can’t be subtle, can they? They just need to know *everything*.”

Rick looked sheepish for probably the only time I’d ever witnessed in my life.

“Sorry, ma’am,” he said. And when I waved a pastry at him, he waved it off. “No, I don’t want your weird old people food.”

“So rude,” I complained. I tossed the pastry back into the bag. “Back in my day, you accepted a gift from a stranger because it was polite.”

Juriah laughed even louder. Percy smiled but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. By the way his cheeks crinkled up, he was losing his patience.

Good. That meant the ruse was working. We just looked like an old married couple heading to a theme park recommended to us by our grandkids. I was surprised by how in sync I felt with Juriah. We hadn’t discussed much prior to pulling over, and since I had doubted his intentions I hadn’t thought anything would actually go well.

Maybe everything would be okay soon.

Juriah squeezed my hand. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

“What?” I let my eyelids droop and smacked my lips a few times. At this point, I was mimicking what I’d seen on cable television. “What did you say? Harold, I can’t hear you.”

“I said, we’ve been married for thirty years.”

My face lit up. “Yes, we have been. And yet I can’t get him to turn off the damn news when I need him to pick up a broom.”

Percy forced a laugh, his eyes piercing me as he said, “Men can be fickle like that, ma’am.”

I didn’t like the way he looked at me. I didn’t like it at all. I hung on to Juriah for dear life, trying to find a good grounding spot that wouldn’t give me away. Sure, these

glamors were fantastic, but where were Izdor and Etta? Why hadn't they appeared?

Were we about to get killed?

"You'll understand if we search the outside of your car, right?" Percy smiled like a cat who was about to pounce. "It's just standard procedure."

"Is that woman alright?" I pointed to the car ahead of us. "I saw her get into that car. Is she okay? Boy, those heels were something. I wouldn't be able to keep my damn balance!"

Rick and Percy exchanged glances. *Shit*, I'd said too much, hadn't I? I just had to take my personality way out into left field—so far that it was unbelievable.

Or maybe it was too believable.

Percy chuckled and broke his staring match with Rick. "I'm sure you were a killer in heels back in the day... What was your name again, sweetheart?"

I gave him a charming smile while cursing him to hell in my head. "Martha."

"Martha," he repeated slowly. "Never quite met a gal with a name like Martha."

"Mama named me after her, and she was named after Granny. That's our family."

Percy squinted. "Interesting."

Yep, I'd said too much, and he was about to shoot us to pieces. Rick knocked against the truck, making me squawk in a way that was so frightening I had to keep clinging to Juriah to keep myself from giving up the ruse.

"Would you cut that out, young man?" I griped. "You're going to chip the paint!"

Rick rolled his eyes. "Paint's already peeling, old woman."

Percy clicked his tongue a few times. "Now Rick, is that any way to speak to a *lady*?"

My heart flared to life in my chest. We'd been found out. Percy was toying with us. Rick didn't seem to have a clue, but I knew my alpha—and I knew my alpha knew *me*. Juriah shot me a dashing grin that made his whole face glow, and I noticed his wings struggling to stay still under his shirt.

“Say, Martha, why don't you get the map out of the glove box?” he asked. “That should tell us where the heck we ended up.”

“I want to know about the woman in the heels,” I complained. “Was she just doing some magic or something?”

Percy nodded. “She was just practicing her tricks.”

“So, the car is okay?” I feigned relief. “You sure know how to frighten an old lady to pieces.”

“Yes, a lady like you shouldn't be frightened,” Percy agreed. “I wouldn't want to do that on purpose. We had no idea you were...” His eyes roamed between us, shifting shadily. “We had no idea who you were.”

I faked irritation. “Well, who do I look like to you? The pope?”

Juriah cackled while I giggled between coughing fits. This was about to get a little too real a little too quickly. Because if that was a witch in that car, then surely she could peek through a couple of hasty glamors, right?

Percy nodded to Rick who nodded back. The two of them rounded the front of the truck, tapped on the hood, and then rounded the rear of the vehicle. They performed another series of taps back there, causing me to lean toward Juriah as innocently as I could.

“I'm scared,” I whispered. “I think he knows who I am.”

Juriah grinned. “He hasn't the faintest idea.”

“How do you know?”

“I can see his aura, Macy. They're all stumped. Their colors are totally confused.”

I took a deep breath. “And the witch?”

“She’s still in training. Her colors aren’t as confident as they were when she was waving.”

Both men returned to our windows but with their positions switched. Percy leaned causally against the open window, tipping his head back like we were old friends about to catch up at a diner.

“You wouldn’t happen to know this girl, would you?”
He showed me the photo.

I made a face. “Good golly, is that how women act these days? *Yuck*. I wouldn’t be caught dead looking like that anywhere.”

“You sure you haven’t seen her?”

“Nope. I would know that face anywhere. Looks like an angel. But her clothes, my god. Get some manners, mister, before you go around flashing things like that to sensible people!”

Percy tucked the photo calmly into his pocket and patted the door. “You take care now, ma’am. Be good to your husband.” He glared at Juriah. “Good men are so hard to come by these days.”

For a tense few seconds, the two of them stared each other down. I thought Juriah was going to launch across the seat and sock Percy in the face. Energy billowed like a cloud of locusts traveling the sky. I held my breath for a bit, trying to keep myself under control, making sure to bite down on my tongue as hard as I could.

Percy nodded. “Alright, go on then. Enjoy that park.”

Rick and Percy went back to the car behind us with their entourage. Within a few minutes, the two cars pulled away, leaving us in a dusty shadow. I had to keep blinking, keep breathing, keep hanging on to Juriah.

He hadn’t sold me out.

He hadn’t betrayed me.

He hadn't handed me off to Rick and Percy.

I was safe—and so was our child.

I buried my face into my hands and sobbed. His arm circled my shoulder and yanked me into him, shushing me while he rubbed my arm. Frustration from that encounter broke me open like a dam, and I couldn't stop the flood. I couldn't stop the words leaving my mouth.

“I was so scared. I thought you were going to abandon me. I thought you were going to leave me with them and then...and then just...”

Juriah crammed me against his chest. His heart beat so hard in my ear that it sounded like a bowling ball rolling across a wooden porch. “Little wolf, you're my entire universe, and never in a million years would I give you back to those disgusting men.”

“The woman...that witch...that *woman*...”

I was worried.

Maybe she was in the same boat as me. Maybe her powers were her only saving grace. Juriah claimed her to be a young pupil. Had Percy replaced me that quickly? My head spun with question after question as my paranoia grew to new heights.

Juriah squeezed me harder. “Stop thinking, Macy. You're hurting my head.”

“You're hurting my heart.”

He rubbed my chest gently. “I'm sorry. I'd never sell you out. Never ever. I promise.”

I let him hold me. I let him cradle me the way nobody had in the past. This man had faked a relationship with me just to save me. But I didn't want these things to be fake. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life not knowing how good it would feel to proudly announce how long we had been married.

Thirty years.

Was that how long he pictured a life with me? How long did Elderlings live?

I tilted my head back. “Don’t leave me.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“You promise?”

He chortled. “I mean it, Macy. I promise.”

“You better mean it.”

His brows knitted together. Something about the worry on his face made me lean back. I checked the road, checked the mirrors, and checked our surroundings. We were alone now. Percy and Rick hadn’t come back.

I gasped. “Izdor.”

“I can’t reach him, little wolf.”

“We need to get back to Silverdawn. We need to find Etta.”

He popped the truck into gear, testing the gas a little bit to make sure the guys hadn’t messed with the vehicle. When he felt confident, he peeled off the side of the road, kicking enough dust into the air to make it look like a tornado was following us in the rearview mirror.

“Did Etta stay behind?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, she was supposed to meet Izdor in town.”

“They might have been taken.”

“Do you think that’s why Percy and Rick cornered us?”

He stared ahead, brows furrowed, expression unsure.

Goddess, I hated seeing him look like that. He was worried about the members of his pack. He was probably trying to figure out how to locate them. I had a few ideas myself, but I knew we had to get back to Silverdawn and talk to Raven. We’d be useless if we tried to find the pair by ourselves.

We have to regroup. We have to plan. We have to make sure they're okay.

He grabbed my hand and kissed my knuckles. "We will, little wolf. I promise."

And this time, I didn't get up in arms about him being inside my head.

Chapter 19 - Juriah

My tone couldn't have been more urgent as I reached for my friend. *Izzy, are you there?*

Tapping into our channel provided nothing but static. I waited for what felt like ages, a litany of horrors rising from memories of old battles, failed strategies, and selfish missions. The wheel wheezed under my grip. Green apples tapped into my senses with the same ease I communicated with my friends.

I glanced at Macy. "You're not doing anything wrong."

"I didn't say that."

"You haven't made any mistakes either."

She frowned, casting a long look out the window at the house like she wanted to say something more. Gloom hung over the sky in patches of slate gray and charcoal with intermittent flashes of light. Rain would slow our search efforts. We had to regroup with Raven and Galanthia before it was too late.

Izzy, please, I begged, but the silent static persisted. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten you into this.

Macy rubbed my shoulder before stepping out of the truck. She shut the door lightly, leaning against the metal while staring at the sheet of rain already blessing the forest behind the house. Rain gave life too. Much like the sun, it was a force of power, but it wasn't as satisfying as the greatest star in our solar system.

Once I joined Macy on the other side of the car, I noticed Galanthia in the distance. Her gold whip sat on her hip as her wings carried her toward us. She landed gracefully in the yard, the golden design from her tear ducts down her nose glowing brighter than usual. She had been listening in to our channel—and she seemed to be just as successful as I had been in finding Izdor.

“I called for Raven to meet us here,” Galanthia said while clasping my hand. “She’s bringing Rynar and a group of wolves. We’ll be able to search together.”

Humidity thickened in the air as the breeze picked up. Rain would be hitting us very soon. Macy hugged herself, bowing her head when Galanthia glanced in her direction.

“Dear wolf friend,” Galanthia greeted. “There is no shame to be had.”

“It’s all my fault that Izdor and Etta are missing.”

Galanthia extended her hand. “They’re fully grown creatures capable of making their own decisions.”

Macy stepped back. “Doesn’t mean I didn’t hurt them. Everything I touch just gets hurt. Don’t touch me.”

Such an abrupt shift rivaled the way she had responded to me off the side of the highway. Just moments ago, she had begged me never to release her. Now she didn’t want to be touched. Were we going right back to the hot and cold game she had been playing lately?

Agitation billowed around her aura along with another glowing color, one that defied description in this realm. Gold would have been my first guess, but that didn’t seem quite right. It kept shifting, molding into something new as though it were its own life force.

That was what had felt different about her this morning. Something *had* changed. But I couldn’t pinpoint exactly what.

Galanthia turned. “Raven and Rynar approach.”

“Greetings, Raven,” I said while pushing my thoughts to the back of my mind. “Have you heard any news about your witch?”

She frowned while shaking her head. “Etta is a free spirit. I know she’s alive because the wards are alive, so I’m hoping we can locate her quickly along with Izdor.”

“I can take the skies,” I offered.

Galanthia and Raven protested simultaneously. Macy remained quietly attached to the front of the truck, away from the group, hugging herself still as she stared at the roof of the house. Was she looking for Izdor in her own way?

I cleared my throat and motioned for Raven and Galanthia to stop talking. "Please, it's the least I can do."

"It's dangerous," Galanthia pointed out. "Baneridge is looking for you and Macy. You have to stay here where it's safe."

"I'm the whole reason they went missing," I barked. "Izdor offered to take Macy to me, and Etta helped. That means it's my fault."

Macy snorted. "Right. Because you want to be the martyr *so* badly."

I stared at her. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. You're just leaving out some massive details about how we just barely escaped Percy and Rick on the way back here."

Raven blanched. "You encountered the enemy?"

"We were halted on the highway, but we were wearing our glamors enforced by Etta and me."

She tapped her chin. "That changes things. You didn't see them with the enemy?"

"If I'd seen them with the enemy, I would have saved them."

Macy bounced from the car and marched toward the house. "I'm getting a drink."

The door slammed. Thunder crashed above. Lightning fluttered across the clouds, casting eerie shadows upon our heads. Once again, I found myself confused. I had done something to offend Macy, to earn her ire, yet I couldn't determine specifically what action it had been.

When would this carousel come to an end?

I had risked everything by heading into town—at Izdor’s behest, no less. I should have told him it was a foolish idea. Silverdawn had plenty of places where I could have gotten space away from the house. And then Macy would have joined me without much fuss at all. And then none of this would have been happening.

Instead of thinking about protocol or trying to protect my people, I had selfishly gone out into the world without a backup plan. I hadn’t given much mind to my surroundings. I’d relied entirely on my magic to carry me, and then practically thrown Macy to the wolves.

A hand came down on my shoulder. Galanthia stared into my eyes. “You’ll hurt yourself if you keep thinking so hard.”

“I’m trying to figure out where I went wrong.”

“Izdor said you needed some time to yourself. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

I rumbled with exasperation. “I should have returned promptly before Izdor got the bright idea to bring Macy to me.”

“She cares about you,” Raven interjected. “I’m sure he meant no harm.”

“I don’t blame him at all,” I insisted. “I blame myself.”

Galanthia shook me. “Enough of this self-flagellation. You couldn’t have predicted the circumstances that came to pass. It’s up to us to deal with the results and to make sure we protect our people.”

Her words didn’t register as I retreated into my mind, repeating that fateful day on loop. This was just like that selfish solo mission I had attempted on the battlefield. If I hadn’t gone off by myself, those young Elderlings would be alive right now.

Though I didn’t think Izdor was dead, I knew he was in trouble along with dear Etta. Both of them had become precious members of this pack. It was my fault they were in dire straits, so it was up to me to rescue them.

I clenched my fists. “I’m taking the skies and that’s final.”

Raven stepped back with a sigh. “I’m not going to argue with you, friend.”

“I’m going with you.”

Every head swiveled around to look at Macy. She was wearing one of my t-shirts and a pair of snug jeans that made her curves appear more appealing than ever. Boots decorated her feet. Her hair was tucked into a snug bun and her demeanor was meaner than ever. She wore a utility belt with a hunting knife, a dagger, and a purple pouch.

I faced Raven. “She’s staying here.”

“Like hell,” Macy argued. “If Izdor hadn’t taken me to you and Etta hadn’t drawn that protection thing around me, both of them would be fine.”

“As I’ve said, little wolf, this isn’t your—”

She squared her shoulders while stepping toward me. “Stop telling me what to do. Stop trying to control how I feel. I want to take responsibility for my actions just like you. Okay?”

Honorable were her intentions. A ferocity had taken over her aura now, her sights aimed at the skies and finding our friends. Though her initial resistance had been aggravating, I found her current commitment to be inspiring.

When I faced Raven and Galanthia once more, I nodded. “We’ll both take the skies. Galanthia, will you stay close for backup?”

“Yes, sir,” Galanthia replied with a salute.

Raven clapped her hands and turned to her wolves. “We’ll cover the forest and the surrounding highways.” She pointed to a group of four wolves. “You, stick to Wolfcreek. Check alleyways, weird buildings, unmarked cars.”

Nods all around.

“If you see any members of Baneridge, call for me *first*,” Raven instructed. “We don’t want them getting the jump on us. They can clearly make people disappear quickly.”

“How do we know it was Baneridge who did this?” Galanthia inquired.

Raven took a strong breath. “I can’t think of anyone else who would try to drag us out.”

I snapped my fingers. “Izdor and I were just talking about this, how the Baneridge Hounds would probably sneak up on us.”

“And they have done that,” Raven agreed. “But we shouldn’t let that deter us, okay?” She offered a confident glance to each person in attendance. “We won’t let that stop us!”

Cheers cut through the air as another round of thunder rolled through the ground. My feet vibrated while my heart thumped in my chest. Raven and Galanthia spoke in low whispers as the group dispersed with their assignments. Soon, Macy was the only one left beside me, and she was staring off again, withdrawn from me.

I focused on her. “Macy, what have I done?”

“Nothing.”

“I’ve done something. Please, tell me. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

She opened her mouth for a moment, letting her jaw hang as she searched my face for something I didn’t quite understand. Perhaps if she told me, I *could* understand. But she had to tell me about it.

Some things weren’t easily read, even with powers like mine.

She inhaled shakily and then stared at the ground. “I just feel like it’s all my fault. Baneridge is looking for me.”

“What they’ve done to you is not your fault.”

“No, but they’re after me. I should have gone away or something. Just like Izdor suggested.”

Blood pooled in my chest, warming me instantly. “I’m sorry you heard that.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I’m glad you didn’t send me away. But…”

“But?”

She embraced herself. “I’m so tired.”

Heavy droplets plopped on my head. “I know, little wolf. I’m sorry. I would have solved the issue myself if I had the money.”

Her eyes met mine. “What?”

“I thought about approaching Percy with real money. I thought maybe I could buy him off or something.”

“You’re serious.” Water trickled down her forehead. “That’s such a stupid idea, Juriah. Is that why you went into town?”

I growled. “It wasn’t my original intention, no.”

“But it was something you wanted to do.”

What started as a steady patter became a loud rush of static as the sky opened up. Macy rushed to the porch for shelter with me hot on her heels. She spun around to face me, splashing me with rain that flung from her clothes.

“I can’t believe you,” she said over the noise. “Why didn’t you tell me anything? Why didn’t you just *ask* me how I wanted it to be handled?”

“Because I have to protect you!”

Ancient choirs amplified my passion, increasing the volume to a supersonic level that caused Macy to cover her ears. Space—we needed to put space between us. This stress was taking me over, turning me into a monstrous soldier with a one-track mind. That wasn’t me. That wasn’t *us*.

I knew better than to raise my voice to her.

“My little wolf, I’m sorry,” I apologized. “Forgive me. I should never take such a tone with you.”

“Why?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Pain sat in that one syllable. *Dear goddess, forgive me for being selfish.* “I don’t know why I raised my voice, little wolf.”

“No,” she whimpered while grabbing my shirt. “Why do you want to protect me?”

“Because your life is bonded with mine.”

Logic didn’t exist in the spaces between us. Space didn’t seem to exist either. I was bound to her in ways that weren’t reasonable yet were entirely tangible. Hadn’t she picked up on that in the truck when I told her I wouldn’t leave her? My goal was to make sure her life was treasured and valued, beyond protected. And now that I recognized that, I understood the fierceness of my tone.

I took her hands and massaged her knuckles with my thumbs. “I don’t know why. I don’t know *how*, Macy. I just know that from the moment I met you, I knew I was meant to protect you.”

“This isn’t a fairy tale.”

“I’m not a prince.”

She laughed once, the sound so disjointed from reality that it could have very well been a hallucination. Duress could cause such things. And we were under plenty of it.

“No, you’re not,” she whispered in agreement. “But sometimes, you look like one.”

“Would you be my princess?”

She blinked a few times, silence stealing her lips like I had once done with a kiss. Without warning, my desire magnified, resounding through the sky just as my voice had done minutes ago. She did that to me. She gained control over my faculties without even trying.

All it took was a look, a sigh, a sound fit for a relaxed queen. That was her. To call her a princess simply wasn't enough. She was a queen. She was a woman of regal standing in my eyes. Nobody could take that title away from her now that I had bestowed it upon her head. Life burst from her in every way.

Her aura confirmed it.

She jumped into my arms, trusting me to catch her just the way she liked with my hands on her bottom and my heart meeting hers. Whimsical laughter exploded from us next as our energy mixed together, a hurricane of emotions whirling around us so hard that I had trouble discerning what belonged to whom.

It didn't matter anymore. She was mine. I knew it in my heart, and the way her colors danced under my touch told me she knew it as well. Even so, it was important for her to state it on her terms. In her time. With a sober mind.

No stress. No horror awaiting us. When the dust settled and our friends were safe, I would wait for her. And if she denied me then after all this time, I would accept that. For true affection didn't possess, no matter how much I desired such a thing.

I hugged her. "Hang on tightly, little wolf."

My face hardened as my wings grew from my back. Macy kept her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist while I stepped into the yard. As my vision tunneled, my wings came to fruition, unfurling happily from where they were forced to hide. Shifting was encouraged here, but circumstances hadn't been ideal for me to wear my wings so freely.

One day, my worry would be a thing of the past. I could openly sport my wings and let them absorb the sun. I could fly wherever I wanted in the world with Macy at my side. I could do everything I planned and more—I just had to settle the score once and for all.

Macy turned her lips to my ear. “Where are we going first?”

I embraced her as snugly as she would allow. “Back to where it all began.”

Chapter 20 - Macy

Flying made me nauseous.

My stomach crumpled up like a greasy napkin as I peeked over Juriah's shoulder to look at the ground below. That was progress for sure, even if I hated the fact that we were so high in the air.

It also changed my opinion of thunderstorms.

Lightning spread in cracked spiderwebs across the sky, shining brightly on our faces as Juriah drew closer to *Moss*. Thunder came swiftly after and shook me to my core, reminding me of the powerful might of nature. With it came the memory of Juriah's booming voice declaring his desire to protect me.

Again with the protection stuff. Could anybody blame me for being wary of that claim? It wasn't like my life was made of rainbows and kittens and crap like that. Everything had been pure hell since the moment I gained consciousness. Even before I became an adult, all I could recall was jumping from one place to another with my drunk mother.

My eyes flitted up to the clouds that were starting to clear. Was she out there somewhere in the great beyond? Was she watching me right now? Maybe her spirit had already been reincarnated. Maybe she was spinning in a cycle of pain from the karma she had accrued.

There was no way of telling. The most I could do was hope that she was at peace somewhere—which was more than she would ever deserve. And it was more than I deserved too.

I squinted at the ground. The streets were torn up and muddy from the rain. While most of the clouds had stopped spitting on us, the thunder and lightning were just as heavy. I wanted to get down and get my feet back on the ground. But Juriah had other plans.

“Is that it?” I pointed to a dilapidated building. “That can't be it.”

“My senses say it’s the spot,” he replied. He went quiet for a moment and then came back with, “Galanthia states this is where *Moss* was located.”

I groaned. “It can’t be, Juriah. There’s nothing there!”

Seriously, the place was completely wrecked. The walls had caved in, the roof was gaping in random places, and what window panes remained were cracked. Along with the concrete parking lot. One sheet of fencing ran the length of the left side. Besides looking like many other buildings on this side of town, it felt ominous to stare down at it.

It was so much bigger inside. But then again, that was underground magic. That was the way of the black market for the supernatural world. Here one night and gone the next.

My heart jolted. *That could have been me.*

“Don’t worry, little wolf,” Juriah assured me as he flew us to the ground. “We’ll find shelter quickly.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

He hummed in the affirmative. Galanthia followed, holding her golden whip ready as she glided to the ground beside us. Hair like hers should have been soaked, damp, and maybe frizzy from the humidity, but it just looked as polished and gorgeous as it had earlier in the day. I was jealous.

She smiled. “This is the part where we need your help, Macy.”

“What?” I carefully applied weight to my feet, feeling the familiar tingle of sleepy limbs. After testing whether or not I could stand, I smoothed my hands down my shirt and checked my belt for my weapons.

“Can you shift and use your nose?” Juriah asked. “I can hold your things.”

I tapped the tip of my nose. “I should be able to track in this form. I just need to know what I’m looking for.”

“Your old pack,” Galanthia replied. “Can you pick up their scent from here and see where they might have gone?”

I shrank back from the building, from the two Elderlings who were on my side. They wanted me to go after Baneridge *on purpose*. They could have handed me a cloth with Izdor's scent. They could have told me what Etta smelled like instead. But no, they wanted me to use my horrid memories for this task.

Juriah rubbed the space between my shoulder blades. Within seconds, the nausea dissipated, and the anger returned to the murky depths of my soul.

I looked up at him. "I'm doing this to find your friends."

"They're your friends too, little wolf," he said. "I appreciate it. *We* appreciate it."

Galanthia tilted her head to the sky. After a second, she turned to us and reported, "Raven has a wide circle on us with her group."

"How many wolves again?" I asked. "Just so I know what to discern from the rest."

"Five."

I nodded while studying the building, trying to find that weird maze of a hallway in the rubble, trying to figure out how such a short amount of time could feel like an eternity. Two weeks ago, my fate would have been sealed if Juriah hadn't stepped up to the plate and won that bid. I would have been long gone with someone else.

I didn't even want to try imagining what would have happened if he hadn't intervened. Sex slave, servant, breeder, furniture—fate would have thrown something my way. It wouldn't have been pretty. And I probably wouldn't have survived it.

I had barely survived Baneridge.

"Take your time, little wolf," Juriah reassured me. "Don't rush your nose."

I smiled crookedly. "Time is of the essence. We need to move quickly."

“While I agree with that, I support your process.”

“Who talks like that?”

Galanthia chuckled so low that it sounded like a phone vibrating. Juriah shot her a hard glance that influenced her expression, turning her from chuckling to serious in half a second. Elderlings were interesting people. I wanted to find out more about them. I wanted to hear whatever stories Juriah felt like sharing.

Hopefully, that would include the story of how he'd formed his ridiculous hero complex.

But I could be patient. *Sometimes.*

I swallowed hard as I walked toward the building. Bricks and chunks of cement grew in piles the closer I got to the original structure. I could see some of the main bar area where broken bottles decorated the old tile. Nothing looked the same. I mean, that made sense considering the whole place had been under one giant spell.

My nose twitched. Whiskey came to mind. Percy never wore cologne or anything like that, but he liked his whiskey, and it usually stunk from his pores the next day if he had too much. It became a good way to recognize whether or not he was approaching the tiny shed that had doubled as my home back in the day.

That wasn't too long ago, I thought. Time is weird.

The scent sharpened to my right. I turned toward the parking lot, listening to the sound of the old fence posts clattering in the wind. I wandered toward that side of the street as the trees *whooshed* together, creating a gentle sound as their leaves shimmied.

My brows knotted as I squinted at a pathway between two trunks. “I think they might have gone in that direction.”

“You think?” Galanthia questioned.

But I didn't have time to respond as Juriah took my hand and pulled me toward the path. “Don't second-guess yourself, little wolf. Honor your gut.”

“My gut wants a cheeseburger.”

He grinned. “We’ll eat once we’ve determined our next steps.”

“Can you magically make a cheeseburger appear?”

“No, but I’m sure we can figure something out.”

Ugh, rude. What was the point of magic if I couldn’t get what I wanted out of it?

Juriah tugged me a little harder, shooting a teasing gaze in my direction that sent heat to places I’d forgotten existed. Nope, that wasn’t fair. We were out on a mission right now. He couldn’t deny me a cheeseburger while also arousing me. That was just plain illegal.

I’ll treat you soon, little wolf, came his voice in my mind.

I stopped in my tracks.

He focused on me, holding onto my hand, ears twitching every so often when he heard a small critter move along the branches.

His eyes widened. *Can you hear me?*

I nodded.

Galanthia had taken to the sky. I heard her wings *swish* above us, and then felt the impression of her protective energy. My feet continued carrying me forward as though propelled by instinct. With the smell of whiskey guiding me and my understanding of Baneridge as a cohesive unit, I was starting to feel more confident.

I can’t believe it, I projected to Juriah. We’re communicating. I’m not even in my wolf form. How is this possible?

Elderlings are different than wolves, he explained.

Is it because we had sex? I asked. But that didn’t seem right. Because even before we had sex, I’d felt like he was in my mind.

Maybe it was the trauma bonding or something. Maybe it was my pregnancy.

I followed him quietly, trying to think of a good time to drop the news. I should probably have told him before we got jumped, but I was nervous. It all happened so fast. That must have been an Elderling thing too.

Juriah helped me over a log and moved some branches aside. This path wasn't a typical one. It didn't seem to have a lot of tracks on it either, but it had the scent of Percy. It had the musky sweat of men. I had to assume that they had gone this way for something at some point. Smells as fresh as this were probably from the past few days.

Drops of water fell from the canopy above, chilling my neck and back. Juriah warmed me with his touch, every so often running his fingers over my shoulders and down my spine. He seemed to intuitively know when I was getting too cold and jumped right into action.

I didn't know what to think. This Elderling man wanted to protect me. He could have chosen anybody to protect. He could have waited for other women to stumble onto that stage. But he'd chosen me. Because he'd heard the plea from my heart that I needed help.

Was this fate?

Juriah caught me before I could take another step. He pressed his finger to his lips and then pointed ahead through the thick brush, noticing something I had yet to see.

There's a house, Juriah told me mentally. Don't panic. They can't see us while I'm cloaking our position.

I squinted through the brush. Sure enough, the structure came into view with enough concentration, two stories if I was seeing correctly. A chimney sat over the right side with barely any smoke billowing from it. Windows lit up with yellow light. Wolves were posted on the porch with guns.

If we took another step without any cover, we would be shot.

While still clinging to Juriah, I pulled him away, putting enough distance between the house and us so we could talk openly.

“Galanthia spotted it while she was flying,” Juriah informed me. “We should regroup with Raven and try to take them by surprise.”

I stared at my boots. “No, we shouldn’t do that.”

“What?”

“I mean, we should tell Raven that the house is here. We should tell her Percy is probably inside. But we don’t know if they have Izdor and Etta.”

He frowned. “You’re right. But we can’t risk avoiding the house.”

“No, we can’t. But I think I have a better idea.”

He waited patiently as I continued staring at the tips of my boots. They were the perfect size, a gift from Raven the other day. Part of me was tempted to click them together. Would it make me wake up from this awful dream?

Take your time, his voice came again.

I smiled weakly. “I think I should give myself up. Could you bust in and save me?”

“Little wolf, no.”

“I think it’s our best option. You can communicate with Galanthia and Raven. They can easily get their forces together while I talk Percy down. Even if your friends aren’t in there, we can handle this situation without too much of a fuss.”

His features darkened. “I can’t let you go in there alone.”

“I’m the person they want, Juriah. I’m the one he’s after, remember?”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be reckless.”

Funny enough, I thought it was reckless of him to handle Percy the way he did this afternoon. Sure, things had

actually worked out, but had they really if Izdor and Etta were taken? And how had they gotten the jump on such powerful creatures? That was the thing about Percy that people didn't get—he was sneaky. He could make things happen.

And that was a scary thing in this situation.

I sighed. "It's not reckless if it's calculated."

"Macy, please."

"I know you want to protect me. But have you ever considered that maybe I want to protect you too?"

His eyes glossed over with something I knew all too well.

Tears. They were tears.

He gripped my shoulders lightly. "Why are you hot one moment and cold the next?"

"Probably trauma," I joked. "But honestly, Juriah, I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose this before it..." I clutched his hands. "I don't even know what it is. But I don't want it to go away before I've figured it out. Okay?"

"You're a stubborn woman."

I chuckled tearfully, feeling the sobs start to clog up my throat. They would just have to wait because I had shit to do first. "I've been called worse."

"I don't want to call you worse."

"Juriah, your friends are good people. Izdor and Etta showed me so much kindness today. They took me to you because they knew I missed you. I didn't even really say it, but they knew. That's goodness if I ever saw it."

I almost cackled but remembered there were wolves nearby who weren't on our side.

"I haven't seen much goodness in my life, but that's what it felt like. Just goodness."

"Izdor is my best friend." He went quiet for a moment. "Would you really risk your life to get him and Etta back?"

I slowly nodded as a tear escaped my left eye. He swept it away. I smiled so hard that I thought my cheeks would explode. “Yes, Juriah. I would risk everything for you. Why do you think I fight you so much? Because I want to fight *with* you. I want us to protect each other.”

“I don’t want to lose you in the process.”

“Well, I guess that just means you have to trust me, right?”

He smiled wryly. “You mean like how you have to trust me?”

Alright, he had me there. My eyes rolled with a hint of annoyance, but honestly, I was just happy that he agreed with me. For once, we weren’t bickering like a married couple. We were working together like one.

That was definitely good enough to trust. More than that, it was good enough to defend with my whole heart.

I cupped his cheek, offering him a gentle grin while sending him as much affection through my fingertips as I could muster as a wolf. He closed his eyes and turned his nose into my palm. “Come back to me.”

“I will when you knock down that door.”

“Kiss me, little wolf.”

Willingly, with every ounce of joy to spare in my body, I hooked my arms around his neck and smashed my lips into his. Unfiltered happiness poured from his hands that smoothed over my bottom, my back, my shoulders. He touched everywhere he could at once like he was committing my body to memory. We could have been attacked right then, and I wouldn’t have regretted the distraction.

Butterflies batted the inside of my ribcage, alerting me of the heat increasing between us. We had to stop kissing soon—but I desperately didn’t want to let him go. I wanted to take him with me so we could storm the place. I wanted to burn it to the ground.

But that would just make things worse. We had to be crafty about this, as crafty as Percy had been with that roadside distraction while Izdor and Etta were taken. It no longer mattered whether he had discovered our ruse. He had distracted us with a disgusting amount of success that made me want to personally chop off his balls.

Time slowed when I drifted back from the kiss. I held on as long as I dared while Juriah pressed his forehead to my cheek.

“Trust me,” I whispered. “And barge in when I give you the signal.” I pointed to my temple. “Now that we can communicate, this should be a piece of cake.”

Before he could say anything, I slipped away from him. I walked briskly through the brush, marched up to the edge of the clearing, and glared at the wolves on the porch. Soon, Juriah would drop the cloak. They would notice me—and I would have seconds to convince them *not* to shoot.

I just hoped it would work.

Chapter 21 - Juriah

From my vantage point, I counted six wolves in total. One of them sat on the roof with a sniper gun, two circled the yard, and three guarded the porch door. Each one of them wore heavy gear that would stop even the strongest of bullets. I sensed their irritation, their frustration with standing around doing nearly nothing.

Nearly.

As soon as I dropped the cloak on Macy, a red laser pointed directly at her chest. Guns cocked. Voices clamored. She held up her hands and shouted, “Don’t shoot! It’s Macy!”

Shouts floated around the den like disembodied voices. Lights flooded the yard. I ducked behind the bushes even though I still had the cloak surrounding me. While they weren’t able to see me, they could possibly pick up my scent, and I didn’t want to blow Macy’s cover.

“Please,” she called out. “If you don’t believe me, get Percy.”

Boots slammed along the porch as more men struggled to communicate appropriately. Hadn’t Izdor stated they were on the rise with a Mafia group from the north? How was that possible when they were barely able to agree on their next move?

“*Hush,*” came a familiar gruff voice. “That’s her. That’s Macy. Jesus. I mean, literal fucking *Christ*, Macy. What were you thinking coming up to the house like that?”

Peeking through the bushes produced a decent view of what was happening. Percy dropped down from the porch and ran up to Macy. He scrubbed her arms. He kissed her cheeks. Jealousy flared throughout my limbs and nearly caused my wings to spring out.

No, I warned them sharply. *We have to save our strength. We have to wait.*

Microscopic bursts of anger sprouted up along my arms and chest. It was impossible to ignore, the kind of heat that came from a blazing fire consuming a large building—or perhaps even a town. Seeing her met with affection by the very man who had sold her to me made me sick.

And enraged me further.

He hurried her up the steps and into the house. Moments later, wolves resumed their position, pointing their guns toward the darkness outside the clearing. Waiting behind like this made me feel weak and useless. If Macy had allowed me to go with her, I would have leveled this clearing.

Perhaps that was why she wanted me to stay behind. This particular approach required tact, it seemed, something she was intimately familiar with manipulating. In this case, her association with the Baneridge Hounds would gain her favor even if they took her hostage. It was likely they already had her bound.

I'm inside, Macy told me. Izdor is here. He's injured. Etta looks...oh goddess, she looks so bad.

I hunched down, preparing to hop out of my position. *Tell me when to come in, Macy.*

Is Galanthia still flying overhead? she asked.

Without glancing up, I knew my friend was hovering, cloaking herself with Elderling magic to keep the wolves from knowing any better.

I projected to my friend, *Galanthia, prepare to alert Raven and the troops.*

The snap of a whip sounded from above. A smile grew over my lips, a reminder of the old days when we had worked together with Izdor.

She replied mentally, *Have you been able to contact Izdor?*

I bowed my head mournfully. *I believe he might be too weak for communication.*

I'll keep trying, Galanthia assured me. I'll wait for your mark.

Ahead of me, the wolves were easing up. Without anyone else marching out into the clearing, they didn't seem all that intimidated. The fact that they were dropping their guards quickly meant I could get a quick jump on them.

Yes, Galanthia is still with us, I told Macy. She'll signal Raven when I burst through the door.

I'm almost ready, Macy said. Just a few more minutes.

Of what? She was already inside. She had Izdor and Etta in her sight. What could she have possibly been waiting for?

The men on the porch spun around as glass broke somewhere in the distance. They raised their guns and focused on the window overlooking the porch. Some kind of commotion was happening on the other side.

Crash!

Glass exploded onto the porch. My head swelled with Macy's voice, her shouts overwhelming my ears as she urged me to get inside. I pounced from behind the brush and let my wings unfurl, revealing my gargantuan size, my claws, my glowing eyes, and glinting canines.

A few of the wolves gasped and pointed their weapons at me, but I was two steps ahead of them with my claws. *Slash.* Red painted the walls as a mighty roar strangled the silence of the forest. Gunfire popped off in the space between growls, inviting me to double my strength as I hauled toward the door.

One gunman went down. Then two. Then there was a pile of werewolves in the yard with their hearts beating just enough to keep them breathing. Wood splintered under my punch as I launched into the living room of the house, my head knocking over the ceiling fan and sending broken blades to the ground.

Macy screamed.

My furious roar rattled the windows of the house as three wolves launched at me. One of them smelled familiar, dancing around my legs as though he was repeating a dance we had done before. That must have been Rick, and that meant Macy was—

“Juriah, watch out!”

A wolf latched onto my shoulder while another bit my arm. I waved them around like they were stuffed animals, shaking them loose with a few hard jerks. One of the wolves bounced across the living room while the other landed on his feet, digging his claws into the vinyl floor.

He bared his teeth while approaching me with Rick. Both of them were bloody in the eyes, so hungry for vengeance that I didn’t have time to check the rest of the room for more enemies. Above, the roof split open, exposing the second floor to the glorious sky. Galanthia’s whip cracked through the hearty sound of battle as a group of wolves outside howled viciously.

Ah, that would be Raven and her soldiers. These three wolves wouldn’t stand a chance against more than one Elderling. Although I had to admit that they had certainly beaten Izdor to a pulp according to Macy.

I punched one wolf as I grabbed the scruff of the other. Rick managed to fly at my shoulder and dig into my flesh with his teeth. As I wailed in pain, I tried to find Macy, my vision tunneled so much with white that it was difficult to see.

Orange, red, blooming pink came in radiant waves. There she was across the room, livelier than she had been on that stage and so gorgeously haunted as Percy held her by the throat. Galanthia came barreling down the stairs with two wolves on her tail. She turned to whip them, splitting their fur open down to the bone.

Knock them out, I reminded her. Don’t kill anyone!

Galanthia nodded and released her war cry, charging forth with her whip folded in half. Raven cried out from the yard as the wolves assaulted all sides. War echoed outside

every window, reminding me that were wolves out there who had been left bloodied up but not quite knocked out.

Soon enough, they wouldn't be a problem. Raven would handle them just fine.

Right now, my problem was with Rick and his two friends. I managed to fling the other two wolves from me while Rick deepened his bite. I slashed his ear and yanked on his tail, managing to toss him off toward the others with a resounding *bang*.

Macy choked. Percy was squeezing her throat now, sending a terrifying glare in my direction that dared me to decide her fate. Would I keep fighting with Rick and the other two wolves? Or would I save Macy?

Galanthia flew over an overturned couch and smacked Rick in the snout. She turned back to me. "Get her, Juriah! The others are upstairs!"

Fear chased me across the room. Percy held up a hunting knife—the same one Macy had packed on her belt—and teased it at her throat. A bead of crimson pooled at the tip.

I stopped. "Don't you hurt her."

Percy faked a shocked expression. "Why? Would that be bad?" Sinister energy crawled right back into place as he sliced Macy's wrist. "Oops, that's a deep cut. She's only got so much time until she bleeds to death."

"Let her go."

"Or what? You'll give me your weak Elderling friend?" He spat at my feet. "Useless to have only one. But three?" He glanced at Galanthia who was keeping the other three wolves she hadn't yet defeated at bay. "We could have ourselves a real big party."

I couldn't see beyond the pain I felt in my soul. Macy was bleeding out in front of me. Her aura was fading fast, and I could sense two others in the house who were in desperate need of medical attention. If I didn't act quickly, someone would die.

My vision sharpened as a long ringing sound echoed around me.

Not again, I swore as I bent into an attack position. That's never happening again!

The sounds of war muted as the ringing took over my ears. I heard someone screaming, and then I heard the horrifying sound of flesh tearing. Hot liquid pooled around my fingertips. Light flashed in my eyes. Voices grew loud, rose to divine heights, and then crashed, producing an explosion unlike the one I'd heard before I barged in here.

Macy was on her side in a crimson tide. Percy was staring at me with bulging eyes, clawing at my wrists to get me to release his throat. Somewhere, pain registered along my arms, tiny scratches produced by his partially shifted fingers. His tongue lashed out of his mouth as he croaked and struggled to breathe.

“You’ll never have us,” I stated in a voice made of a thousand sounds. “Our deaths will never be in your hands. For the rest of your life, you’ll be torn, wondering why I bothered to spare you.”

When I dropped him, he scampered into a corner, staring at me with a terrified look. Galanthia joined my side. She held Rick by the scruff, a wound in his throat pouring life force out into the room. Infectious energy tugged at my heartstrings, making it nearly impossible to focus as I realized just how much life force was available for me to take.

Galanthia dropped Rick at Percy’s feet. “Your wolf is dying. But I won’t be the one to show him mercy. Will you?”

A groan from my right caught my attention, dragging me back to earth, back to my usual size—and back to Macy. I dropped to my knees beside her and cradled her head, trying to discern exactly how much blood she had lost. So much of her life force filled this room. Her eyelids fluttered. Her lips parted.

I shushed her. “Don’t talk. I’m going to help.” I ran my fingers over her wrist. Within seconds, the skin patched

together as beautifully as it had appeared hours ago. “You need water. You need rest. Let me take care of you.”

Though her lips barely moved, I felt her energy swirl around me. Her heart beat so faintly that it made me sick to think she might lose the beat entirely. Behind me, Galanthia was telling Raven where the others were located.

Raven paused near me. I waved her off. “She’s fine. Go get the others!”

Groans came from the staircase. Raven raced up the steps with a couple of her soldiers in tow, skittering on the wood floor upstairs and hopping over the hole I’d made in the ceiling with my head. Injured wolves whimpered from outside. As far as I could tell, they were all Percy’s men.

My eyes floated to the corner where Percy held Rick’s head. Angry tears streamed down his face as he took a deep breath. The injured wolf blinked with a dazed expression, his tongue hanging lazily out of his maw. Dark patches stained his fur.

Macy’s hand flew up. I grabbed her wrist and held her hand steady, trying to shush her again.

“You tell Macy,” Percy said, his voice scratchy and bruised from my claws. “You tell her how you made me kill her lover.”

Snap.

A new life force trickled into my system. Galanthia inhaled sharply, feeling it too. Rick had left us—and Percy would probably blame us for his death. But the stark truth was that Percy had started this war by putting Macy on parade. He had invited death to his doorstep. He had practically begged for it.

Despite that, we weren’t going to kill any of his people. What Raven’s wolves ended up choosing to do was on them, but Galanthia and I—and Izdor, though he wasn’t currently conscious—had agreed just after we arrived in this realm that we wouldn’t kill again unless it was absolutely necessary.

Even then, we would do everything in our power to avoid killing.

Never again.

I lowered my gaze to my love, watching her snooze peacefully in a pile of rubbish and blood. When I heard Raven come down the stairs, I looked up, noticing Etta on her back and Izdor on another wolf's back. Galanthia ran to him. He was incredibly weak, kept alive by magic given freely by the weakened witch.

My heart soared with triumph. I scooped Macy into my arms and guided my pack to the door. Percy coughed from his corner, the surroundings so distinctly quiet that it sounded like he was hacking into a megaphone.

“You’ll pay for this,” he rasped. “You and your family. You’ll pay...”

I glanced at Raven who merely marched forward. She didn't want to give him a second glance, so I followed her lead and ignored his gruff cries. We wouldn't kill him. But we wouldn't save him either.

Sensational light glowed from Macy. Gold, yes, that was the color I recalled from earlier, but there was another unearthly color in there that reminded me of home. Brilliance like that existed with supernatural life forces, usually with Elderlings right after they absorbed such energy.

Healing her had transferred some of that life force. It was probably highlighting the new pieces of her aura and enhancing them. Nothing more. Once she got enough rest, her colors would settle, and then I could probe her energy to see what precisely had changed between us. Was it that our bond had gotten stronger?

I called my wings forth as I stood in the yard. The groans of the injured met my ears, tossing me back into the dark cavern of my past where my crimes had gone unpunished. I studied the woman in my arms as my heart bled with guilt, shame, and regret.

Never again would I commit such heinous acts. Nor would I have to worry anymore about atoning for them, for this woman had shown me resolute strength. She had nearly sacrificed herself for my friends and me. She deserved nothing less than my dedication—and that would be enough to make up for my mistake.

Her care and safety were my duty until our lives ended. I swore it as I extended my wings and launched into the night sky, rain lightly pattering us as I flew back to Silverdawn. Life billowed around us despite the bloody scene we left behind. Her love did that, and it fueled our journey home.

Love, I thought. This must be what that feels like.

Chapter 22 - Juriah

Three Days Later

Even though Macy had been healed on the scene, she had fallen into a coma during the flight back to Silverdawn territory. Starry sparkles had taken to her skin, making her appear soft and dewy like she had just run in from a light rain shower. With her eyes closed and her cheeks perpetually rosy, she appeared as a preserved doll.

I smoothed lip balm over her luscious lips. I fluffed her pillow. I made sure the sheets were tucked just the way she liked them under her hips. She was picky about her comfort, and I had brought the memory foam pillow from my bed that she favored. It smelled like her. It smelled like green apples.

Spirited energy floated into the room. Etta appeared shortly after, smiling weakly as she shuffled toward us. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s a trooper.”

“She’s got you, so she’s got plenty of trooping left to do.”

I chuckled. “You have a wonderful bedside manner.”

“I know. I just...” Her eyes drifted to the doorway. Across the hallway was another room with another bed and another person—Izdor. “I kept him alive for as long as I could.”

I bowed my head with gratitude and reverence. “For that, we are incredibly thankful, Etta. You did more for him than anyone could have asked.”

“He’s kind and sweet. He’s been good to us.” She hung her head. “I just wish I could do more.”

“You’re doing plenty, Etta.” I smiled. “Did we get any news about Baneridge or Percy?”

She shook her head. “I was trying to help Raven with a location spell on the remains of the house, but I kept getting blocked. “Turns out they had a witch locked in the basement who, uh...”

She paled so much I thought she would faint.

I reached across the bed and took her hand, relaying as much comforting energy as I could muster. “Etta, I didn’t know there was anyone else in that house. None of us did. Please, don’t beat yourself up over that.”

“I just wish I could have done more. I was so weak.”

“You were kidnapped. You did your best.”

She shuddered. “That poor girl died in a cage. They must have been using her magic for something. They ended up draining her.”

“Is that what blocked you from tracking them?”

“Yeah, Percy must have been using her force, or something.”

I frowned. “That must be why he’s so interested in Elderlings. It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve been harvested for our powers. But doing that to a regular witch would—and did—kill her.”

“We buried her this morning. Held a witch funeral.” Her lips tightened as she wiped an errant tear from her cheek. “Had a nice turnout too. New wolves showed up.”

I stared at her. “New wolves?”

“They showed up when we were burying the witch. Raven invited them here.”

“New wolves?”

She giggled. “Is there an echo in here?”

“I’m simply shocked, Etta. Forgive me. I didn’t think Raven would invite strangers back to her pack right after a battle ended.”

“That’s the weird part. They’re not really strangers.”

The door for the center squealed open. Two—no, three Elderlings were approaching. That must have been Galanthia, Rynar, and Raven. I stood up from my perch and went with Etta to the doorway, noticing a few wolves had drifted into the center as well.

Etta gasped. “Those are the guys that showed up.”

“Do you know if they’re kind people?”

“They don’t seem too bad.”

Concern prompted me to turn to Etta. “Would you make sure Macy is alright for a few minutes? I’m going to speak to Raven.”

“Of course. Take your time. I’ll sit with her.”

Etta was a truly remarkable and wonderful witch. With her guarding Macy, even in her slightly weakened state, I felt comfortable joining the miniature crowd in the center’s lobby. Modern couches flanked one corner along with a coffee table and a bookshelf holding magazines, books, and DVDs. A television was mounted to the wall that one of the strangers was inspecting.

Raven and Rynar greeted me with matching grins. How much they looked like each other in this moment.

Galanthia approached with a hesitant expression. “How is he?”

“Still sleeping. Etta is minding them if you want to see him.”

She smiled and hopped past me, disappearing in a flash.

I faced my alpha, her brother, and their three guests. All three wolves focused on me with suspicious expressions.

Raven cleared her throat while gesturing to the men. “Juriah, I’d like you to meet the England brothers.”

I squinted at them, trying to piece together their auras. When they stood closely, their energy conformed with each other. Impressive yet intimidating. I wasn’t quite sure what to

make of the men. From left to right, each man had varying characteristics—fiery red hair worn in spikes with hazel-blue eyes, wheat-blond hair with crystal-blue eyes, and obsidian-black hair with reddish-brown eyes.

But when the one on the far right with black hair smiled, I extended my hand. “Welcome, friends.”

The man laughed while clapping his hand into mine. “You mean welcome back, my guy. I’m Spencer. Those two shmucks are Xavier and Andres.”

“If you’re brothers, why don’t you look the same?” I inquired as I went to shake Andres’s hand. “Is it an adoption thing?”

Andres guardedly shook my hand. “Sure.”

Xavier did the same, appearing more muted than the other two. “Something like that.”

Raven stepped toward us. “They’ve been gone for a while, traveling. I’m glad they’re back. We have a lot of catching up to do, especially with the Baneridge pack on the loose.”

I made a noise of agreement. “Yes, Etta informed me about the failed tracking spell and the discovery of the witch.”

Sadness enveloped my alpha. I regretted mentioning the details, feeling her sorrow lace through the room and change everyone’s expression instantaneously. “I knew I should have checked the basement, but everything happened so fast.”

“It did. You’re right,” I whispered, and then kicked myself.

My job had been to protect Macy. But that left other people open for harm.

How could I have given up my punishment so easily? Just because of Macy? That wasn’t fair to the people who were hurt and lost their lives in the process. Renewed with a sense of justice, I rested my hand over my heart and bowed deeply in front of my alpha.

“I swear I’ll make up for this mistake, Raven.”

She urged me to stand upright. “Stop it, Juriah. We all made the same mistake.”

“But I should have been paying attention.” Anger like this couldn’t be quelled. I had to retreat for a while and think about what I’d done. “Macy distracted me from protecting civilians.”

“Juriah, this isn’t a war. It’s not your responsibility to ___”

I held up my hand. “It’s my job to make sure people don’t die. And I failed you, Raven. I should have done better.”

The three wolves exchanged glances.

Rynar gestured to the hallway. “Why don’t we go check on your friend?”

“A good idea, friend. I haven’t seen him this morning.”

While Rynar accompanied me to Izdor’s room, I listened to Raven explaining the chain of events to the other men. The England brothers—but they weren’t related by blood. Perhaps it was a friendly bond that kept them close, much like the one I shared with Galanthia and Izdor.

Rynar rested his hand on my shoulder. “I understand how you’re feeling.”

“Then you understand that I need to take my punishment seriously.”

“Juriah, you don’t have to trade harm for harm in this world.”

I sighed. “No, but the least I can do is atone for my mistakes.”

“You can do that here. You don’t have to leave.”

“I didn’t say I would leave.”

He smiled. “But you didn’t say you wouldn’t.”

“Time can heal wounds. I should head up to the mountains and seek meditation. That always worked back in

Estaria.”

“What about Macy?”

I paused near her room, watching the way the women took care of her. Galanthia read to her from a book while Etta monitored her health with glowing fingertips. Seeing her receive such tenderness made my heart warm over—and then I grew cold again, realizing how much I had let her down.

Rynar pulled me into Izdor’s room. My friend was sleeping off the damage done to his body. What had those monsters done to him?

I sat in the closest chair and watched as Rynar sat down in a chair next to me. He folded his hands together. “Everyone wants what we have.”

“Yes, that has come to my attention. You suffered at the hands of these selfish earthlings, so I’ve been told.”

He nodded solemnly. “I’m not sure what they had that witch do. I’m not sure what kind of torture they did either. But they hurt him badly, Juriah. He needs you to be strong for him.”

“I shouldn’t have let this happen.”

“The more you beat yourself up, the more useless you become to your mate.”

I stared at him. “What did you just say?”

“You and Macy are meant to be together.”

“I knew that much, but I would have never considered her a mate...” I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Is that why I feel so drawn to protect her?”

He nodded. “From what I can tell, yes. Raven said she used herself as bait to save your friends. That’s the kind of sacrifice made by love.”

“She nearly got herself killed.”

“And she would probably choose to do it again and again.”

I grunted. “I wish she wouldn’t. It makes it difficult to protect her.”

“So, don’t leave her behind to go on a meditation journey. Beating yourself up won’t fix the past. Being with her, though—that can change the future.”

Izdor looked so unbothered while he was sleeping. I leaned forward to take his hand, sensing his energy was healing much faster now with Etta’s attention. He would wake up soon. They both would.

I wanted to be here when that happened.

But I felt like I didn’t deserve to witness it. “I just need some time, Rynar.”

“Well, if you need some time, we’re happy to watch Macy.”

“You make it sound like you’re babysitting her.”

He chuckled lightly. “We might be acting as babysitters soon enough.”

“What could you possibly mean by that?”

But Rynar didn’t have time to answer as Galanthia came into the room. “Juriah, I think she’s about to wake up.”

I rushed into the next room, resuming my position with my hand in hers. Etta smiled while ushering everyone into the hallway. “Alright, give them space. Let her wake in her own time.”

The door shut quietly. The air shifted around me.

Macy didn’t move. She didn’t twitch. Nothing had changed since I’d left her. But Galanthia wouldn’t lie about something like that, so it made me wonder what was happening.

“Did she get tired of reading to you?” I joked, trying to keep my smile steady. It was hard to face my love when I knew I had made so many errors. “What was she reading to you?”

I peeked at the bedside table. *Aesop's Fables*. Wasn't that some kind of mythology or fairy tale book? I shrugged and returned my attention to Macy.

"I can't believe I let all this happen. I should have been better about protecting you," I explained. "The others think that I haven't really done anything wrong." I rolled my eyes. "They don't understand."

I licked my lips.

I'd never told Macy about that awful day on the battlefield. She had asked once, and I'd kept it to myself, too fearful of how she might have reacted.

But since she was asleep...

"Back in Estaria, there was this great war," I whispered, "and many people got caught in the crossfire of it. There was this group of young Elderlings, perhaps five of them, who had gotten lost in the woods. I came upon them during a raid."

My tongue felt like hot leather and my body tensed at the memory.

"The other night made me think about it. And for a second, I thought that I didn't need to punish myself anymore, but I do, Macy. I need to pay for that failed attempt."

I smoothed my fingers over her wrist, enjoying the warmth of her skin, the safety I felt while holding on to her.

"I was just trying to get them to safety when we were attacked. There were so many enemy soldiers." I sucked air into my lungs. "They were slaughtered, Macy. Great Star Goddess keep them in rest, they were torn to pieces. I barely had a chance to defend them."

Disappointment returned in droves. The pain of that day, the sheer horror of what I had witnessed, and the powerlessness that had followed at once—it all felt fresh. Between the memory and reality, it felt like it had just happened.

“When I let you go ahead of me, I just...I thought you would die, Macy. You almost died. Izdor and Etta nearly lost their lives. So many other people did. That witch...”

I dropped my head into my hand as tears took over. It ballooned in my chest, reducing in short bursts as I cried quietly.

“I’m a bad Elderling and a bad soldier. I’m a horrible commander. I should never have taken you with me to that house. I should never have let you go in there by yourself.”

More of that gaping sorrow crashed into me then, forcing me to shove my face into Macy’s side. Her warmth circulated my body, feeling more like a blanket with the passage of time. I let myself cry until my eyes burned and my throat ached. I let myself give in to her presence, to appeal to her forgiving nature.

“Forgive me, my love. I should have been better.” I lifted my head and sniffled. “That’s why I have to leave for a while. I’m going to the mountains to meditate on what to do next and how I can improve my actions for the future. You deserve better.”

She grabbed my arm.

The sudden movement jarred me, catching me by surprise far better than an enemy. Though her eyes weren’t open, her lips were quivering as though she were about to speak.

“Praise the heavens,” I groaned. “Galanthia was right. You’re waking up!”

“You...promised...”

I clutched her hand to my heart. “Yes, love. I promised. I told you I would protect you and I failed. I failed everyone.”

Her eyes snapped open then and she grinned weakly. “You promised...you wouldn’t leave me...ever again.”

Irritation mixed with relief as I laughed out a few more tears. I kissed her hand repeatedly, holding it to my cheek as I

stared into her silvery eyes. Gray-like clouds burst with energy as she attempted to sit up. I helped her adjust her pillows.

“Don’t hurt yourself—Alright, just sit there and—Macy, would you quit moving?”

She whacked my arm playfully and then pointed to the nearest object, a bottle of water. As soon as I handed it to her, she chugged it, crumbled the plastic in one movement, and tossed it across the room.

“You must be a masochist if you want to torture yourself,” she teased. “Just what kind of creature are you, mister?”

I should have never been so overjoyed to be annoyed. I rested my head on her lap, feeling the waves of grief, the horror of my past, the strange unfamiliarity of my future, letting the feelings consume me. She ran her fingers through my hair. She stroked my cheek.

“Juriah, I could never hate you for what you’ve done in the past,” she told me. “What happened was an accident. You couldn’t have saved those kids.”

“I should have tried.”

She rubbed my temple. “You did try, Juriah. And you did the same thing today.”

“You mean three days ago.”

She froze. “Christ, was I asleep that long?”

“You suffered blood loss. We almost lost you.” I lifted my head to look into her eyes. “I healed you in time, but your body needed to rest.”

Her brows moved together and parted in quick succession. Oh, how I missed seeing her various expressions. I kissed her then, feeling the abrasiveness of my stubble scraping her cheek, and the hum of her delight greeting my lips. Green apples snapped over my tongue as I kissed her repeatedly.

While hovering over her, I sensed that the life force I had granted her during the healing process had remained.

Curious, I ran my hand over her chest and stomach, searching her aura for what could possibly have remained.

Two pulsating thumps met my fingertips. I stared at her stomach, shocked by the fact that I hadn't noticed it sooner.

"No," I whispered. "You can't...there's no...*Macy*."

She bit her lower lip as red clouds gathered on her cheeks. "Well, don't be mad, but—"

"But what?"

"But I might be pregnant."

Emotions rushed me, clawing for attention at the same time, causing me to bow over my love and wrap her in a gentle embrace. I pressed my cheek to her stomach. I listened to the steady thump, recognizing the golden hue inside as the aura of life growing.

My lips trembled as I whispered, "You're pregnant."

She rubbed the back of my head. "We're going to be a family."

"A family," I repeated, loving the way the words felt drifting from my lips. "I can't imagine anything better."

She grinned. "So, you won't run away?"

"Never, never, never..."

I covered her face in kisses. I held her until she giggled and shoved me away. I stayed as close as possible, completely lost in the beauty of the news, enamored by the comfort I felt hearing her statement.

We're going to be a family.

I could rebuild at last because she was giving me a second chance at life.

I caressed her face as I held her gaze. "I love you, Macy."

She gasped. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean that. Of course I mean that," I assured. "And I'll mean it for the rest of my life..."

Chapter 23 - Macy

One Week Later

I sat at the lake's edge with my feet buried beneath the surface of the water. Cool temperatures always had a way of calming me down in the wake of anxiety. It was something I used to like doing back when I'd been held captive by Percy.

The wind brought the scent of azaleas. I smiled as I faced the breeze, closing my eyes as my love drew closer. I heard him sit beside me and untie his boots. Within a few minutes, he had dunked his feet into the water with mine.

My smile widened. "Thanks for coming out here."

"How can I deny any of your requests?"

I laughed. "You're always welcome to say no."

"That's good to know, little wolf. But I don't ever want to do it."

"Why are you like this?"

Since I'd woken up from that coma, I wasn't as worried about Juriah leaving me. A man who was as powerful as he was, who had chosen to sit by my side while I was useless, wouldn't dare abandon me. I knew that now.

Yet I still wondered why he was being kind to me. "Sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. I understand."

"I don't think you do."

Some agitation sprouted in his expression. He took my hand and traced my knuckles with his thumb. "Explain it to me, then."

I took a deep breath. And then another. And then a bigger one. I couldn't stop my fingers from shaking, but that

didn't matter because Juriah was hanging on to me. He wasn't letting go.

At the very least, that assured me I wouldn't drift away once the memories started taking hold. "You told me about what happened in Estaria."

"I did."

"Do you still feel guilty?"

He glanced at the water, ripples echoing from our conjoined feet. "Yes."

"I still feel guilty about a lot of things. Like..." I faded for a second as I blinked away a sudden onset of tears. "Like there was this girl once who was forced to live with me for maybe a week. She was sold after being broken in by Percy."

"That sounds awful, but that's not your fault, Macy."

I took a shaky breath. "I know. But I still felt responsible for her, you know? Because I held her when she cried at night." I shivered. "There were so many girls. There were so many things I had to watch those assholes do. I can't believe I was ever faithful to them."

"Did you love Rick?"

I stared at him for a second, the randomness of the question taking me off guard. "Why would you ask me that?"

"While you were unconscious at the cabin, Percy said you loved Rick. *You tell her how you made me kill her lover.*"

I shuddered. "Goddess, I knew Rick was dead, but I didn't know Percy had killed him."

"Galanthia injured him gravely. He was bleeding from many wounds."

"Like me."

He nodded. "We gave Percy the option to give him a merciful death. He chose to do so, but he seems to blame us for it."

“Technically, it’s my fault.” I resisted his opposition. “Juriah, please, it’s true. I know we shouldn’t go down that road again, but I should say it at least once. Rick is dead because of things that happened with me.”

“Did he love you?”

Concentration forced me to frown. “You know, I’m not sure. There were times when Rick took care of me—usually when Percy wasn’t around—but most of the time, he just treated me like trash. He...he did...”

I choked. Juriah tucked me under his arm. “You’re safe with me, Macy. He’s dead.”

“I know he’s dead. I just can’t shake the memories.”

“Take your time.”

Patience like his was divine. Then again, nobody had shown me such kindness in the past. He and his pack had practically spoiled me rotten. I chortled while rubbing my stomach, leaning harder into Juriah to get rid of the abrupt nausea rocking my gut.

“I’m so scared of this,” I admitted. “I’m scared to love you. It’s easier to pick at you and argue with you because that’s been my experience.”

He rubbed the space between my shoulder blades. Comfort emanated from the circles he massaged into my flesh.

“My pack hurt me so many times,” I explained. “Every time I tried to run away, they would chase me down. They would hurt me some more. They would shame me in front of everyone else.”

“What did they do to you?”

I cringed. “Percy made me wear a shock collar for a week.”

He clutched my shoulder. “That’s barbaric, Macy.”

“That’s not even the worst thing he did to me.” I closed my eyes, releasing some of the tears I had been holding back. “When he sent me off with Rick, I thought it was because he

was giving me some room to grow. I just had to pay my debts like the elders kept demanding.”

“What debts did they hold over your head?”

I laughed. “Anything. Everything. My mother had used them as her personal piggy bank until she drowned in her own vomit.”

“That’s terrible.”

“That was my life. I was a teenager who had nowhere to go, and Percy had a nice house with clean clothes and a good bed.” I glared at the water, wiggling my toes to keep myself grounded in the cool liquid. “Yeah, well, all that looked glamorous to a kid who had only slept in closets.”

He rubbed my back some more. “What about your father?”

“I don’t think my mother had any idea who he was, honestly. He was probably a drifter or something.”

“Such pain in your life. I wish I could heal it.”

I looked up at him then, beaming from ear to ear despite spilling my awful trauma all over his lap like bad spaghetti. “But you do. All the time. Like literally every day.”

“How?”

“By being yourself.”

He smiled tearfully while reaching for my stomach. He’d been doing that a lot more lately, reverently running his fingers over the small pudgy that contained a supernatural force greater than anything I’d ever experienced.

I rested my hand over his. “One Elderling child mixed with a werewolf.”

“Don’t worry. Raven and Rynar would be happy to teach our child the ways of being a hybrid.”

“What if they get picked on or something?” I worriedly stared at the lake. “What if they can’t fly? Or can’t shift? Or get picked on?”

He chuckled. “You already said that, Macy.”

“Yeah, but what if?”

“What if everything goes right?”

Well, that was just rude. He didn't have to posit that kind of thing on me when I was on a spiral into the worry pit I was used to occupying. But I had to admit that it was nice for somebody to give me another perspective for a change.

Even if it irritated me. “*Fine*. Maybe things will be alright.”

“That's the spirit.”

“How are you able to be so positive? Like a week ago you were talking about disappearing into the mountains to pray or something.”

He laughed.

“Meditate,” he corrected. “It's hard to be sad or feel guilty around you, Macy. You make me so happy.”

Hearing that just turned me into a puddle, a lot like the way he did in the privacy of our bedroom. No more couch sleeping for the man who could hardly fit on the couch.

I threaded my fingers with his while looking up at him. “You don't think I'm damaged goods?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means all my trauma and stuff makes me unattractive or something.”

He huffed with amusement. “I thought you would think the same thing about me until I told you about my past.”

“That's why I feel comfortable telling you now. Because you shared that with me.”

“So, it was the right thing to do.”

I liked how comforting that sounded coming from him. It wasn't a question. It was a statement, a confident realization that he had put his trust in me.

That felt so good. “I have something else to tell you, Juriah. I don’t know how it’s going to make you feel, but I just want you to know that it’s from another time in my life.”

He held my hands loosely in his lap. “Whatever it is, I’ll listen, little wolf.”

I hesitated.

This was the hard part about opening up to someone. Even though Juriah hadn’t given me any sign of going back on his word, there was always the feeling of the other shoe about to drop. How many more years would I have to spend in the hell of my memories before I got to really living?

I had to start trying to live or else I would end up like the living dead.

I swallowed my fear and closed my eyes again. “The last time I tried to leave the Baneridge Hounds was by trying to kill myself.”

His voice was washed with horror. “Macy...”

“It was just a bottle of pills I found in Percy’s bathroom one time. Ugh, it was disgusting too. I hated myself the whole time,” I explained. “And then when I thought I was in the clear, Percy found me. He had one of his witches bring me back to life.”

Juriah remained silent for so long that I opened my eyes just to make sure he hadn’t left me on the edge of the lake.

My throat clicked when I swallowed again. “I was forced to take a potion that would keep me alive for as long as I belonged to Percy. I guess that magic ran out when you bought me, huh?”

He laughed and then he frowned. And then he yanked me into his arms. “I’m so glad you’re not dead.”

“I’m glad too. I mean, I was mad back then. And then I was forced to enter that stupid auction with that dumb dress —”

“That dress looked ravishing on you.”

Bitter chuckles rose from my gut. “Ugh, I hate and love that you said that. I was self-conscious.”

“But you’re so beautiful, Macy. How can you be self-conscious?”

“You just don’t get it yet with this realm. People can be mean.”

He nuzzled his nose into my neck and inhaled me. “I won’t let them near you.”

“I can’t imagine why I’d go near anybody when I have you.”

“Don’t you want to travel with me?”

My eyebrows practically launched into space. “Travel?”

“Galanthia and Izdor—we’d been planning to travel the world. I want to go to Paris. I want to take you with us.”

“But...what about your friends? The baby?” I looked at my stomach. “Won’t I just slow everything down?”

He chuckled huskily. “You never slow me down, little wolf.”

“Juriah!”

“Yes, that’s my name.”

I shook my head as giggles took me over. “You’re such a strange man. How did I end up with you?”

“As I recall, I bid approximately four million dollars on your head.”

“Alright, we’re going to have to come up with a safe word or something because that seems to be going to your head.”

Confusion struck his features. “What’s a safe word?”

“Did your dear friend Izdor ever explain the many varied kinds of sex we have in this realm?”

Blush crept into his cheeks. “He might have mentioned some things.”

“Finally, you’re getting bashful about something,” I teased. “Well, if you want to hear more about it...”

But he didn’t give me time to get into details as he tackled me gently to the ground and pinned me with a kiss.

It was just a kiss, but it was the sweetest kiss of my life.

When he was through, he pulled me onto his lap while holding my waist. “So, will you travel with us?”

“I guess I wouldn’t mind traveling.”

“You guess?” He snorted. “I’ve never known you to be hesitant.”

I laughed. “Did you just learn sarcasm? I feel like that’s sarcasm.”

“It might be sarcasm.”

“I’m glad to see you adjusting.”

A faraway look crossed his face until he focused on me with an even bigger grin. “I’m trying. It’s been hard.”

I kissed him lightly and then slid from his lap, choosing to stick my feet back into the water. Though it helped to have him by my side, old habits died hard. Cold water was just my thing, especially being pregnant in this heat. “I understand.”

“Raven and Rynar have been working night and day trying to find Percy. I offered them help, but they don’t want it.”

“They sound stubborn.”

He chuckled. “You would know.”

“Alright, now you’re just being plain mean.”

“I’m sorry, little wolf. I won’t tease you like that if you don’t like it.”

I grinned. “Actually, it’s nice. It makes me feel like we have a real relationship.” I sighed as I snuggled deeper into his side. “No sign of Percy anywhere, huh?”

“We suspect he took advantage of his ties to the Mafia.”

“Oh, I can guarantee that he definitely did that.”

He stroked my hair. “Would you be willing to help Raven and Rynar with that?”

“Will they let me help?”

“I think they need it, Macy. We need to make sure he doesn’t come back to hurt you. We need to protect you.”

I squeezed his hand. “I don’t think he’s coming back, Juriah. He’s lost. He’s running off with his tail between his legs. I don’t even think any pack members have stuck around.”

“Can you sense them?”

“Not really. But then again, I never felt connected with them. I just don’t think they would linger if Percy wasn’t here.”

While it made sense in my head, it did make me worry slightly. Percy had left town. That meant the Baneridge Hounds were no longer around here.

But would they ever come back?

His hand returned to my upper back, as dedicated as ever to providing comfort. “Yeah, I think traveling would be nice.”

“Galanthia and Izdor will be happy to provide us with more glamors if you’re worried about going overseas.”

“Actually, I think we’ll be just fine. I’m nervous about flying though.”

He leaned back. “Why? You fly with me all the time.”

“Oh, that’s different. But I’ve never been inside a plane.”

“I suppose the two of us will be experiencing something new together then.”

I smiled. “That sounds nice.”

“Everything feels nice with you, Macy. Don’t you know that by now?”

“I suppose I do,” I joked. “But I could go for hearing it more often.”

“I’ll tell you as many times as you like.”

And I sure did like the sound of that.

Chapter 24 - Macy

Three Months Later

Hell had no fury quite like a woman pregnant with an Elderling child. My belly stuck out ahead of me, announcing my presence in every room before I got a chance to say hello. Juriah found it useful. I found it irksome.

Boxes sat all over the living room floor. Carpet the color of a clear blue sky decorated the floor up to the point where it reached the kitchen. From there, it was clay tile of varying red shades, cream lines separating each of them. Juriah had insisted on marble counters, and I'd begged him for a large yard.

And that was exactly what we got.

I planted my hands on my hips while staring at the unlabeled boxes. "Juriah?"

"Yes, little wolf?" He poked his head over the landing above my head where the ceiling vaulted past the second floor. "Something the matter, dear?"

"It's hot in here. Is it hot in here?"

He shuffled back, poked at something, and then reappeared. "How about now?"

Cold air tickled the back of my neck. As it washed over me, my body relaxed, muscles unclenching that I didn't know were clenched. Moving was such a hassle. So was being pregnant.

Ugh, why did I agree to do this?

"Juriah, could you come down here?"

"Yes, darling."

Well, that's one reason, I thought with a grin. It helps that he's so hot.

Juriah approached me with a mischievous grin. “Are you imagining me naked again?”

“I don’t need to when I could just ask you to take off your clothes.”

“Would the lady like a dance?” He teased the waistband of his gray sweatpants—which I had to say were making his package look incredible today. “Or does she need assistance with something else first?”

Lust warped my original intention for calling him. “How about both?”

He laughed while peeling off his shirt. “I’ll start you off with an appetizer.”

“Rude.”

“You like it.”

His smile grew when he winked. I tried to shake off the desire to jump his bones, but it stuck around like a bad cold. Not like it was bad to desire my mate or anything. I just didn’t know how to handle being around such an attractive guy when my hormones were all over the place.

Speaking of which—

“Juriah,” I said for the millionth time, “will my pregnancy be normal?”

He hummed. “That depends on your definition of the word.”

“Don’t pull an Izzy thing on me.”

He pointed to an unlabeled box. I nodded, inspiring him to haul it into the kitchen without so much as breaking a sweat.

Which was disappointing because I liked it when he broke a sweat without his shirt on. “What are Elderling children like?”

“They’re like any children, I believe.”

“Do they get their powers early? Should we be worried about the baby flying or something?” I shuddered as I stared at the vaulted ceiling. I just *had* to have that, didn’t I? “Should we take the fans out?”

He popped open the box and started unloading it. Dishes piled on the counter. Then pots, then pans, and then enough utensils for the whole town to use. “They develop their wings young but can’t use them until they’re older.”

“Will it be like...?” What was I trying to ask him? I’d never been pregnant in my damn life. “Oh goddess, am I cut out for this?”

“You’ll be a wonderful mother.”

I frowned. “How do you know?”

He stopped unpacking and sped over to me, wrapping his arms around my waist and rubbing my back generously. He swept his hands up my spine and then back down to the small of my back. “I know because you have a kind heart and a beautiful soul.”

“What if I make a mistake?”

“So, you’ll make a mistake.”

I swatted his arm playfully. “Come on, Juriah.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” he said through chuckles. “You’ll probably make plenty of mistakes. Just make sure you hold yourself accountable for them.”

“For the next twenty years, right?” I winked. “I’m sorry. That’s probably a bad joke.”

He shook his head while narrowing his eyes. “You are so mean when you’re pregnant.”

“Does it make you want to leave?”

“Oh, Macy. I would never want to leave you.”

He stole my lips, preventing me from trying to convince him that he had probably considered it at least twice in the past few months. I’d gotten grumpier, heavier, louder, and hornier. Didn’t that make him regret anything with me? It

was hard enough being a plus-sized woman. Now I was adding a big belly to the mix.

But it didn't matter how much I got in my head about it. Juriah worshiped my tummy. He rubbed my rolls and massaged my back. He clutched my hips when we made love and squeezed my thighs when he devoured my slit. Just thinking about the things we'd done lately made my heart flutter.

My stomach did a backflip. I pulled back from the kiss, feeling the lust return at full throttle while he continued to massage my shoulders. "You're going to turn me on again."

"When are you not turned on?"

"Sorry, I can't seem to turn it off."

He chuckled. "I'm not complaining. I love pleasing you."

Boy, did he ever.

The first time we met, he'd spent enough time between my legs to drown himself by accident. I thought it was my inexperience and trauma that had made it feel so good, but in reality, he was talented as hell with his tongue. After that, he proved to me that experience meant nothing. Commitment to mutual pleasure was what made sex feel so good.

I traced his defined pecs. "I know. I can't believe it."

"You've been saying that for months."

"It feels like I've been saying it for a lifetime."

He grinned while scooping me into his arms. That was definitely not going to help with my arousal. But I also didn't want to complain about it too much. Because then he'd put me down. And then I'd probably throw a fit.

As Juriah carried me to the carpeted stairs, I listened to the world outside the walls of our new home, the faint sound of traffic drawing my attention along with the feeling of being surrounded by people. Baneridge had dissipated officially, and Percy was gone. We didn't have to hide anymore.

And that just felt so nice.

I rested my head on his shoulder. “I’m glad we managed to travel a little bit before we moved in here.”

“Me too. With the letters Galanthia has been sending lately, it doesn’t appear that she’ll be back soon.”

“Is she still in Germany?”

He carried me across the landing to the main bedroom. “No, she moved on to Russia. Izdor is backpacking with her.”

“Why would they backpack when they can fly?”

But I knew the silliness of my question by the look he cast in my direction. To see life in his eyes and blush on his cheeks made him appear like he truly belonged in this realm. Long gone was the awkward angel who stumbled over understanding colloquialisms and sarcasm.

I smiled sheepishly. “I’m just saying.”

“I’m sure there are a lot of places in the world that aren’t friendly to Elderlings.”

That hadn’t been the case in Paris. “Yeah, I’m definitely spoiled here.”

“What? Nonsense.” He set me on the bed and joined me, wrapping his limbs around me just the way he did when I was feeling insecure. “You’re treasured here.”

“We’re both spoiled. Wolfcreek gives us a lot of protection.” I pushed my hair out of my face. “Funny to think that I never felt safe here until recently.”

He kissed my nose. “I’m glad you feel safe, little wolf.”

Silence fell over us, a comfortable layer that made me shove my face into his bare chest. The scent of azaleas exploded inside me, and then I was revved up again, totally out of control with my emotions going wild. His chuckle rumbled through his chest.

That didn’t help either.

He rubbed my back, my shoulders, my sides. His hands went to my thighs and rubbed generously, turning me into putty within seconds. The dress I wore clung to my skin, giving him plenty of space to work his fingers, and he worked them wherever he could without going for the super hot spots.

Not yet, at least.

I played with his hair. He was growing it out a little bit. “I’m so used to surviving that sometimes I still expect chaos to explode out of nowhere.”

“I feel similarly sometimes. My experience with war has left me hollow.”

I rubbed his cheek. “But not with me, right?”

He smiled warmly. “No, little wolf. Never with you.”

“I never thought about it like that, but I guess my life has been a nonstop war.”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

I pursed my lips with irritation. “I mean, I don’t want to take away from your pain. I’m not trying to say that it’s *exactly* like what you experienced—”

“I think your comparison makes me feel less alone.”

I stared into his eyes, noticing the way the pale honey color glimmered like gold whenever he was feeling intense emotions. I swept my thumbs over his cheekbones. I gave him love renewed, loving affection that trailed in shimmering lines wherever I touched.

“Really?” I whispered like it was a forbidden secret. “I thought I was being rude.”

“Ah, you’re not rude in the ways you think, little wolf. You make me feel like I’m supposed to be here.”

I chortled. “I don’t know. I don’t feel like I belong here sometimes.”

“But you do belong here.”

“This town has been...” I shrugged it off. “Well, you know how it’s been a mixed bag. Between the underground trafficking ring and Silverdawn, it’s been a wild ride. I’m not sure where I fit.”

He grinned while rubbing my thigh again. “You fit with me. You fit right here.”

“You mean here?”

I tucked myself deeper into him if that were possible. The way he welcomed me and expanded his arms just for me made it feel like I truly did fit with him. And why not? Fate had brought us together in the strangest of ways. We had climbed through several rings of hell just to get to this point.

We had bought a damn house in town, sheesh. We probably fit in more ways than I could think.

I just wished I could see all of them.

He leaned back so he could look at me. “Yeah, right here.”

“Right here,” I parroted. “Still waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Would it help if I told you about how I feel?”

I stared at him for a second. Men in movies and books spoke like that. He must have been absorbing a ton of pop culture lately because his manners were starting to get pristine and fantastical—though I guessed he’d always been like that even before we met.

I smiled. “I think that would help, yeah.”

Pale honey faded to a rusty clear yellow in his irises. That happened sometimes when he was feeling doubt. It was assuring and alarming to know what he was feeling without him saying so. But I always liked it when he was honest with me.

He sighed. “I feel like a stranger in this realm.”

I cupped his face, intuitively knowing that exact feeling. “You don’t have to be a stranger with me.”

A sense of understanding solidified between us. Never would I need to question his motives or intentions. He wore them on his sleeves. He'd proved that to me a thousand times by now, and I knew he would keep doing it if it meant that it would ease my worry.

The fact that he'd keep doing it without me asking was even better. Nobody treated me like Juriah, and I liked that his connection to me was so unique. It meant we would never leave each other.

Juriah smiled warmly. "You don't have to be a stranger either." He rested his hand on my belly. "Neither of you."

Warmth radiated through his fingers. Arousal came swift, sending tingling sensations through my core and tickling my center. My belly did backflips. Was that the baby or the butterflies? It could have been both for all I cared. And both would have been fine.

"I love you, Juriah," I whispered. "I promise I'll always love you."

"And I love you."

He smeared my mouth with a kiss so wonderful that it left me breathless. I scooted into his lap and straddled him, awakening the kind of love I'd always thought would only exist in movies and books. Every time our kiss lapsed, I drew him closer, trying hard to avoid crushing my belly and failing a few times.

While chuckling, he eased my dress over my knees. He held my lower back to steady me as he teased the front of my panties. Fluid soaked the fabric as I nudged toward him. Desire stole my focus as he skirted beneath the band and stroked my slit, taking away whatever control I might have had left.

Flames burst within me as he tugged my panties off. I heard the fabric snap, but I didn't even mind it, knowing that I could replace them. Much like I could replace most items in our home.

Except for Juriah. I would never replace him or our growing family.

While he plunged a finger into my entrance, I traced the front of his pants, outlining his cock for me to remember by muscle memory. I could practically taste him on my lips. It had been a while since we had done anything together, given how busy our lives had gotten, and I was happy to have him all to myself.

For as long as I could manage, I would try to keep it that way.

My head lolled back as he stroked my clit with his thumb. Arousal gushed around his finger, slicking his entry to make his movements faster. My hips bucked in time with him as he burrowed beneath the blouse of my dress, lapping eagerly at my hardened nipple.

Soft sighs drifted from my lips as he lapped generously at my sensitive nub. He synced his massage with his slurps, drawing out a long orgasm that caught me by surprise. I gripped the back of his head to keep him in place, rolling my hips whenever he tried to pull his fingers away.

I was addicted to him, and I never wanted to quit. He was luxury at its finest, a man committed to service and pleasure. He was a catch whom I was lucky to call mine, and who eagerly called me his. If this had happened any sooner, I would have thought it was a dream.

He eased me back on the bed. “Let me breathe, princess.”

“Sorry, it’s just...”

He silenced me with a kiss.

That was rude, but a welcome change that made me part my legs. As he positioned himself between my thighs, I hiked my dress up over my head, tossing it away from us. He threw his clothes aside and ran his hands along my busty breasts, my voluptuous curves, my gorgeous thighs.

None of these had ever been more than assets. But to Juriah, they were glorious parts of my body that he worshiped.

He kneaded my flesh, massaging me generously as he eased his cock over my slit. A few sweeping strokes sent me into a shivering fit, causing me to lose control of myself all over again.

With him, there was no need to cling to control. I could let myself go and enjoy every minute of the ride. I could lie on my stomach or my back. He never tried to turn off the lights, and actually preferred to make love with them on so he could see everything.

He bent toward me with a sly grin as he inched inside my entrance. “That’s it. Keep breathing.”

I mumbled incoherently while focusing on the pressure of his girth opening me up.

“Very good,” he praised. “You’re such a good girl.”

My brain turned to gelatin at that point. If he kept praising me, then I would just turn into a pile of limbs that sensed pleasure. Was there really any need for me to think beyond this point? I could have very well shut everything off except for my nervous system.

I smiled while he thrust into me. “I love how you feel.”

“I love how you look.”

Sublime happiness amplified the longer we held eye contact. With every pump, he fused with me, a bond unspoken growing stronger with each passing minute. He wound back and returned fiercely, gratifying me with his dedication as he searched for my lips. He kissed me deep enough to drill me into the bed—and then my lust took flight as he pounded my flesh.

Pleasure bloomed through every inch of me. I came hard enough to lose my senses, totally zoning into my body, completely grounding into the moment. When I came to, he was gasping for air, lying on the bed beside me with a silly grin on his face.

We’d come at the same time, again. We’d made that a habit lately, and I honestly couldn’t complain.

Light danced over my eyes as I threaded my fingers with his. This kind of ecstasy wasn't real, yet it was real, and I was experiencing it right now. My soul was nourished. My body was satisfied. My heart was full enough to burst.

This was real love. And I had been right all along that angels were real—because one of them belonged to me.

THE END

About the Author

Hi there! I'm Layla Silver, and I'm so happy to see you here :) I'm a mom of three adorable kids and after all these years, still wildly in love with my awesome and hard-working husband. I LOVE to write about hot shifters, whether Wolves, Bears, or Dragons, who are looking for their mates and will do anything to protect them no matter what comes their way. When I'm not writing or spending time with my family (which is pretty rare, but I'm not complaining!), I like to be in the mountains chasing paranormal dreams.

Check out [my author page on Amazon](#) and click "Follow" to get updates on new releases.

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Books by Layla Silver

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In this mysterious small town, humans and paranormal creatures alike push through the darkness until enemies turn into lovers, rejected mates get second chances, and above all, love prevails...

[**Betrayed Mate**](#)

[**Scarred Mate**](#)

[**Sold Mate**](#)

[**Damaged Mate**](#)

[**Imprisoned Mate**](#)

[**Auctioned Mate**](#)

* * *

“Beaufort Creek Shifters” Series “Wolf Inn” Series

In the small town of Beaufort Creek, people believe in arranged marriages. Because when two shifters are brought together to overcome old resentments and form strong alliances, the power of love heals all...

[**The Alpha’s Forced Mate**](#)

[**The Wolf’s Forced Mate**](#)

[**The Dragon’s Pretend Marriage**](#)

[**The Bear’s Arranged Mate**](#)

[**The Lion’s Arranged Mate**](#)

[**The Wolf’s Bullied Mate**](#)

[**The Alpha’s Pregnant Bride**](#)

[Daddy's Innocent Mate](#)

[The Wolf's Auctioned Mate](#)

[The Wolf's Secret Twins](#)

* * *

“Wolf Inn” Series

The Wolf Inn is the local hot spot of our small town. It is a place where all paranormal beings are welcome, where fierce, independent women try to deny the little sparks that fly when that annoyingly hot wolf comes around, and where ultimately, the real fire that burns inside their hearts is unstoppable, no matter the odds.

[Alpha](#)

[Mate](#)

[Lone Wolf](#)

[Forbidden Wolf](#)

* * *

“Werewolf Ranch” Series

The Werewolf Ranch has all of the best things that a shifter ranch can offer: Plenty of shirtless wolves, plenty of seductively low slung jeans, and plenty of smoldering hot evenings to relax in the hay and play the games that mates do.

[Rancher Wolf](#)

[Cowboy Wolf](#)

[Rodeo Wolf](#)

[Wrangler Wolf](#)

* * *

“Shifter Mating Agency” Series

The Shifter Mating Agency specializes in interspecies matches. It finds the hottest dates with the hottest wolves, and whether the match is made in heaven or not... ultimately, romance will win the day.

[Grumpy Wolf](#)

[Mechanic Wolf](#)

[Rejected Wolf](#)

* * *

“Werewolf Mountain Resort” Series

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[The Wolf’s Billionaire](#)

[The Wolf’s Contract Marriage](#)

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[The Wolf’s Forbidden Mate](#)

[The Wolf's Arranged Mate](#)

* * *

“Shifter Nanny Agency” Series

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[The Wolf's Nanny.](#)

[The Bear's Nanny.](#)

[The Alpha's Nanny.](#)

[The Dragon's Nanny.](#)

[The Tiger's Nanny.](#)

[The Lion's Nanny.](#)

* * *

“Werebear Creek” Series

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[Boss Bear](#)

[Bully Bear](#)

[Big Bear](#)

[Bold Bear](#)

[Broken Bear](#)

[Brave Bear](#)

[Breathtaking Bear](#)

[Baby Bear](#)

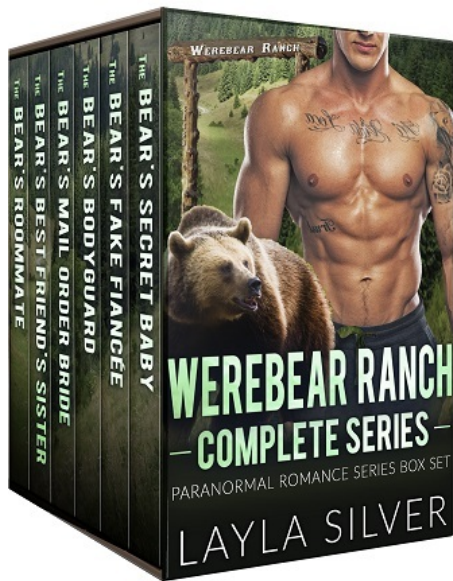
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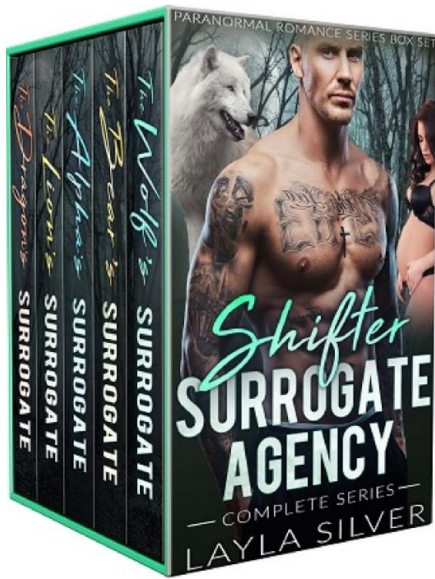
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