



Brutal Alpha

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: First, he rejects me. Then he buys me and knocks me up.

I've always been different, less than the others, worthless.

My brother's best friend bullied me for it. And after taking my virginity, he rejected me.

But when I'm kidnapped and sold at an auction...he shows up and buys my hand in marriage.

It's humiliating to be put on the auction block.

It's even more humiliating to be bought and forced into marriage.

He gets to take me home like a prize, like his new possession.

But I won't be his little slave. I refuse to be his good little wifey.

I've always thought that my body was dysfunctional and useless.

But his harsh touch brings out the magic inside of me.

He broke my heart, only to take it into his hands and crush it some more.

He hunted me down, only to force me into this marriage and knock me up.

Am I about to be broken again by the Alpha?

The Alphas of the Nightfire Islands rule their lands with an iron fist, claim their mates with a demanding touch, and kill any enemy that comes even close to the one they love...

Total Pages (Source): 56

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Prologue - Julia

Knock, knock, knock.

The familiar rap of my big brother's knuckles on my bedroom door filled my stomach with dread, and I immediately felt guilty. He hadn't done anything wrong.

Our father had been dead for three days, and I was still waiting for grief to settle in. All around me, I saw it in the faces of others; Caleb, my dependable big brother, had curled inward, feeling unsure and directionless, while the rest of our Pack mourned the loss of their Alpha. Abe Thorne had been universally respected, strong, and unwavering like the stone of Lapine's quarries. He had never met a problem he couldn't solve, which was why he had always resented me; he could not forbid my mother from dying at my birth, nor could his Alpha authority prevent me from being born half-blind. My weakness was a stain on his perfect image, one he couldn't wash off.

Since he couldn't fix me, he chose to ignore me. That might not have been so awful if he hadn't encouraged the rest of the Pack to do the same. He grudgingly allowed me to attend school in the town hall, but I was forbidden from socializing with my peers, and I could only run as my wolf under the cover of darkness. Abe Thorne had been my father, technically, but in my seventeen years, I had only known him as my jailor. Now my jailor was dead, and I was expected to cry for him.

It took monumental effort to raise my voice enough for Caleb to hear me through the door, and all I could bring myself to say was,

“Yeah?”

Caleb pushed the door open gently. He didn't come all the way in but leaned against the door frame, watching me. He looked tired; there were dark bags beneath his bright blue eyes, and his face was pale and pained.

“Uh—the guys are gonna be here pretty soon,” he said. “I'd like you to come down and meet them.”

It wasn't a demand. He could have ordered me—he was Lapine's Alpha now—but he was asking. He'd asked so little of me in the last few days despite the fact that his grief ran oceans deeper than mine, and he already had so much responsibility piled on his shoulders. He was only just twenty and suddenly being asked to fill the shoes of one of the most respected Alphas in the Nightfire archipelago.

“Sure,” I agreed, sitting up for the first time in hours. It occurred to me that I needed to pee. I was wearing stained sweatpants and one of Caleb's old t-shirts, and I hadn't washed my hair since Dad had clutched his heart and keeled over at the dinner table. “Do I have time to—?” I gestured at the general state of myself, and Caleb nodded.

“Probably. They radioed from Ferris just after noon.”

It was nearly dusk: they'd be over the bridge by now, but probably still outside of town. I had time to shower and change. Dragging myself out of bed felt like climbing a mountain, but it was worth it for Caleb's weak smile. As I brushed past him, he reached out and pulled me into a hug. He was as strong and solid as he's always been, but his breathing felt shallower, more labored, as if every inhale took effort.

“I love you,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. I might be the tallest girl on the island, but Caleb still had a good few inches on me, and that would probably increase now that he'd graduated from Heir to Alpha.

“Sap,” I muttered into his shirt. “I love you, too.”

We stood there for a few more seconds, leaning on each other, until Caleb pushed me away.

“Go on,” he said, “you stink.”

I stuck my tongue out at him as I marched down the hall to the bathroom. One day, I reminded myself that things would feel normal again, but for now, I had to shower, get dressed, and pretend I was sad that my dad was dead in front of my brother’s friends.

I’d never met most of the guys who were descending on the house that evening. Sure, I’d heard enough about Leo and Jace and Xander and Noah over the past few months to paint myself a pretty clear picture, but that was hardly the same. I tried not to think about the fifth member of their little gang as I turned on the hot water and stepped beneath the spray. Ethan Cain should have no place in my thoughts right now.

As our neighbor and our closest ally, the Ferris Alpha had visited Lapine fairly frequently during my childhood, always with his Heir in tow, and both Caleb and I had been fascinated by the straight-backed, serious boy. For Caleb, this had turned into a fast friendship, and for me, it had turned into a deeply embarrassing crush. Ethan was five years my senior and barely acknowledged me for more than a few seconds at a time. That wasn’t going to change tonight—my father had just died, after all—but that didn’t stop me from using extra conditioner, and combing carefully through my long black hair until it shone.

It took another half hour to get myself ready, drying my hair—making sure it hung properly over my face, hiding my bad eye—and picking out a pair of low-rise jeans that looked casual enough, with a pale blue shirt that brought out the color of my good eye and hugged the modest curves at my hips and chest. Not that any of that

mattered. Because my dad was dead.

The sound of commotion drifted toward me as I descended the stairs, and suddenly, our home was full of Alpha scents—so much that it was almost overwhelming. Honestly, I wouldn't have cared if they smelled of unwashed socks and jockstraps because Caleb looked happy for the first time in days. As I joined them, he slung an arm around my shoulder, ruffling my hair, because he was the worst.

“Guys, this is my sister, Julia. Julia, this is—”

“No, no, let me guess.”

Caleb rolled his eyes but acquiesced, and I observed the assembled shifters with faux concentration.

“Leo,” I said, pointing to the Alpha with a riot of auburn curls and a twinkle of mirth in his green eyes.

“At your service,” he replied with a smile. Charm was a rare quality in an Alpha—as a breed, they usually relied on respect over likability—and I took to him instantly. Moving on, I turned to the Alpha to his right. Older than the others, he was even more muscular and already carried several scars on his arms.

“Xander,” I said, receiving a nod in return. I'd been a little wary of my brother becoming friends with the Alpha (or the Heir, as he had been then) of Ensign, but Xander wasn't the hulking menace I'd imagined from the Alpha of such a place.

The other two were Heirs, only around my age, lean and rangy rather than muscled like their Alpha friends. They elbowed each other in the ribs as I appraised them, trying to figure out which was which. Jace was the Heir to Opifex, that much I knew, and Noah the Heir to Cunic.

“Jace?” I guessed, pointing to the Heir with dark brown skin and coiled black hair cropped short. He remained stone-faced, trying to make it hard for me. A weaker woman might have folded, but I stuck to my guns.

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“And Noah,” I said, turning to the final newcomer. He was the most boyish-looking of the bunch, with warm brown eyes and a jittery, irrepressible energy. Try as he did to play along with Jace’s game, he folded within a few seconds, grinning.

“You got us!” he said, and though Jace tutted in disappointment, the corner of his mouth was quirked up in a smile.

That only left Ethan. After absolutely nailing my introduction to the rest of the gang, I felt brave enough to lift my hand to my chin pensively, furrowing my brow as I took him in. With every year that passed, I swore he got better looking; his square jaw was sharper than when I’d last seen him, his face a little broader to balance the hard cut of his cheekbones and perfectly frame his slate-grey eyes.

“Hmmm,” I said, desperately thankful it didn’t come out breathless, “remind me?”

Ethan frowned, the corners of his mouth turning down.

“Ethan,” he replied, clearly irritated. For a moment, I was mortified until Xander reached over to punch him on the shoulder.

“That was a joke, buddy,” he said. “I know you’re allergic to humor, but I at least thought you could recognize it in other people.” He rolled his eyes at me while Ethan’s frown deepened.

“Oh. Right,” he said. “Hi, Julia.”

He didn’t look at me as he said it, his frame still tense. So that had gone horribly. I

wanted the ground to swallow me. I wanted to burst into flames. But alas, neither of these things occurred. Before silence could descend, awkward and consuming, I forced a smile.

“I hope you guys are hungry. The mothers of Lapine brought us enough food to feed five Packs.”

To no one’s surprise, the five shifters who’d just completed an island run were, in fact, hungry. It was a relief to make myself scarce for a few minutes to shove as many casserole dishes into the oven as was physically possible. I’d probably have to do another load before the guys were done, and I was glad of it. I’d only been slightly exaggerating when I told them how many offerings were decorating our kitchen counters.

After declaring that the sad, boring stuff was tomorrow’s problem, Caleb’s friends set to thoroughly distract him with tales of their various misadventures since they’d last seen him. They carried on in the same manner throughout dinner and were still going when I excused myself to bed. At the bottom of the stairs, I turned back, taking a moment to watch my brother’s laughter. It was good to see him like this, and I was thankful for this raucous band of brothers he’d found on his travels.

Sleep came easier that night than it had done in the last few days, but when I opened my eyes again, it was still dark, and I was desperately thirsty. My bare feet were quiet on the cold wooden floors as I crept down the corridor, though I didn’t know why I bothered: Caleb slept like the dead.

In my half-asleep state, I didn’t remember that the two of us weren’t alone in the house until I walked into the kitchen and came face to face with Ethan, who was in the middle of pouring himself a mug of tea. The scent that filled the kitchen was soothing and floral, but it did nothing to stop the deep blush that stained my cheeks. I was wearing nothing but an oversized tee, the garment barely covering my ass and

leaving every inch of my long legs on show.

“Uh,” Ethan said, “hello.”

“Hi,” I managed. “Just, um, getting a glass of water.”

He nodded, stirring his tea as I tried to open the cupboard door without flashing my ass. Unfortunately, I was so focused on not exposing myself that I wasn’t as cautious as normal about the cupboard doors and opened it straight into my face.

The wood bounced off my eyebrow ridge with a dullthunk. I swore, and then Ethan was beside me.

“Watch yourself,” he growled, apparently annoyed that I would do something as inconsiderate as hurting myself.

“I can’t,” I pointed out. “My depth perception sucks ass.”

That brought him up short.

“Right. Sorry.” Then he reached past me to grab a glass from the cupboard, pushed the door closed, and filled the glass, pushing it directly into my hands.

“Thanks.”

He only nodded once, curtly, before returning to his tea. Considering myself dismissed from my own kitchen, I turned to leave.

“How’s Caleb been managing, really?” Ethan asked, and I stopped.

“I mean, as well as he can, I think,” I told him. “I wish he didn’t have to—to keep it

all together like this, y'know? I think he's worried that the Pack will like... completely destabilize if he allows himself to feel his feelings."

Ethan took a sip of his tea, apparently immune to the scalding heat of the water.

"He's not wrong, though," he said, placing the mug back on the counter. "I know Abe had some pretty ambitious Betas; if Cal falls apart, if he doesn't assert his right as Alpha, then one of them is going to decide they could do a better job, especially since he's still so young."

I know Ethan was speaking from experience; he had been Alpha on Ferris since he was my age. At twenty-two, the authority sat easy on his shoulders, but it hadn't always been that way. I knew my father had been instrumental in helping Ethan secure his power over Ferris, and now he was returning the favor for Caleb. I only wished the truth were easier on my brother.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

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“Yeah. Stay out of the way. He doesn’t need any more burdens right now.”

The words were like a gut punch. Surely I had misheard, had misunderstood.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, expecting him to backtrack, to clarify, to say it was a poor choice of words, but he only stared back at me with those cold, slate-grey eyes.

“It means that an Alpha isn’t only judged on his own qualities,” Ethan said as if he wasn’t tearing into me with freshly sharpened claws. “Abe might have been able to smooth over that business with his mate, but you’re his sister. He can’t distance himself from your weakness.”

The business with his mate. I had watched my father banish Alyssa Graves for the crime of claiming to be Caleb’s mate—for the crime of being half a witch—and she’d walked straight-backed out of town with nothing but a duffel bag and what was left of her pride. Was that what Ethan wanted for me? Did he wish he could give me my marching orders, have me disappear from my brother’s life?

“No one cared when I was the Alpha’s daughter,” I tried to argue. I wanted to sound strident and unbothered, but I only sounded so, so young. Weak, just like he said I was. “Why does it suddenly matter that I’m his sister?”

“Because Abe had already earned the Pack’s respect,” Ethan explained, as if I were a child. “People overlooked it. Now, they’re looking for any weak spots, and you’re right there. Stay home. Don’t act out. Don’t bother him until he’s settled and stable. Got it?”

It was lucky I had plenty of practice with orders like that. I'd thought my days of swallowing back tears and standing to attention had died with my father, but here I was, standing in the kitchen with their ghost.

"Loud and clear," I said.

There would be no more sleep that night. Instead, I tossed and turned until dawn began to peek through my curtains. I didn't want to get up, didn't want to go downstairs and face Ethan, but I wasn't a coward. I wasn't going to hide up here until he was gone. Pulling on a clean t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, I had my hand on the door handle when I paused. Lying on my bedside table was an elastic hair tie; I only really used them for showers when I didn't want to wash my hair, but suddenly, that unassuming black band was calling my name.

Snatching it up, I crossed to the mirror on my vanity. I leaned down until I could clearly see my face; it was a familiar sight, pale skin and severe bone structure, and that single bright blue eye—the other, the white one, the embarrassment, hidden beneath a curtain of shiny black hair. With my heart in my mouth, I pulled that hair back from my face, brushing it up into a high ponytail.

The girl who stared back at me in the mirror was entirely new: with her mismatched eyes proudly on display, this girl didn't care what anyone thought.

Least of all, Ethan fucking Cain.

Chapter 1 - Julia

Four Years Later

Knock, knock, knock.

I had to leave for my shift at the elders' cottages in five minutes, and Caleb knew that, so why my brother was currently knocking on my front door was a fun little mystery for the ten seconds it took me to open it. When I did, he was standing twenty feet back, off my porch, and halfway down the path.

"Why are you so far away?" I yelled, and he visibly winced. On a second look, even I could see that his clothes were rumpled, his usually neat black hair in disarray, morning stubble decorating his chin. He looked like he hadn't slept a wink.

"Emmy and Jack have the stomach flu," Caleb said, his voice hollow and haunted in the manner of war veterans. Twin three-year-olds could do that to the strongest of men.

"Yikes. How's that going?" I asked, although I feared I did not want to know.

"Well, Jack refuses to leave Alyssa's side," Caleb told me, "which makes him a little easier to manage, but Emmy decides she's all better after every episode, so I've cleaned up throw-up off the floor in four different rooms."

That made sense. Emmy was an absolute ball-buster on her best days, and I couldn't imagine that changing a huge amount when she was at her worst.

"Disgusting. I'm so looking forward to motherhood."

"You'll have to find a guy who can put up with you first," Caleb teased, the hint of a smile beginning to play at the corner of his mouth.

"Jackass," I shot back instinctively. "What are you doing here, anyway? You shouldn't leave Alyssa alone with them." Caleb's mate was the strongest woman I knew, but this would test even her resolve.

“I know,” Caleb said, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the Alpha’s residence. No doubt he could feel her anxiety through their bond. “But it’s the Solstice tonight, and I need a favor.”

“I am not looking after your vomit-covered children while you and Alyssa go and party it up on Ferris,” I said immediately, and Caleb shook his head.

“It’s not that. It’s, uh, the opposite, actually. I was hoping you could go to Ferris in our place.”

“Actually, I’ll take the vomit-covered children,” I said quickly. “No problem.”

“Please, Julia. It’s just one night; you’ll barely even have to see him.”

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We both knew that was a lie, but I appreciated him trying. The whole point of the event was to encourage friendship between the Packs. I couldn't ignore the host all evening, and worse, Ethan couldn't ignore me.

"Why do you need a stand-in at all?" I argued. "It's not like he's some prickly Alpha who'll take it as a slight if you don't show. He's your best friend; he'll understand if you have to stay home and look after the kids." Ethan was an asshole, but he wasn't that kind of asshole. Even I had to admit he'd always been a good friend to Caleb.

"But the other Alphas won't," Caleb replied. "No matter what Ethan tells them, it'll start some rumor that we're on the outs, and then they'll be trying to pick up new alliances like vultures on a corpse and get pissed when they're rejected."

I hated that he was right. Caleb and his friends were the Alphas and Heirs to some of the most powerful Packs in the archipelago, and the lesser islands were keen-eyed in their search for any cracks in that alliance. Someone from the Lapine Alpha family needed to make an appearance on Ferris this evening, and that person was going to be me.

"Fine," I agreed, and Caleb sighed with relief.

"Thank you," he said. "Ethan will meet you at the Ferris Bridge at seven."

"You think I can't walk by myself?"

"There have been rumors about Arbor snatching up females to sell to humans," Caleb insisted. "All we know about Lowell Axton is his name—he's not exactly

encouraging trust.” He wasn’t wrong; I’d heard the whispers as well; I simply didn’t put much stock in them. Sure, Arbor was in disarray after having most of their high-ranking males taken out in the battle with Lapine the previous winter, and their new Alpha was being suspiciously cagey, but they surely weren’t going to risk more inter-Pack conflict by snatching up females from other Packs.

“Yeah,” I replied, “rumors. Just fear-mongering and scary stories around the bonfire.”

“Julia. This is not a negotiation.” Caleb had never and would never use his Alpha authority on me, never bend my will to his, but he would use his Big Brother voice. Reminding myself that he was only doing this because he cared, I held up my hands in surrender.

“You owe me big time,” I told him.

“I owe you big time for making you go to a nice party,” Caleb agreed. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must return to my beautiful, vomit-covered family.”

I blew him a kiss, waving as he turned toward home.

“Give them my love,” I called after him, “and tell them not to come near me for at least five days!”

I was, predictably, late for work. Luckily, my first appointment was with Agnes Cunningham, who was easily distracted from her complaints about my tardiness with news of the twins’ illness. She loved to give advice, particularly where children were concerned, and I made a show of writing down all the different remedies she suggested, promising to pass them on to Caleb and Alyssa. While other females were designated to meal prep or cleaning for the elders, my responsibility was companionship. Sure, if there was laundry that needed folding or dishes that needed doing, I’d do them happily, as long as I could chat while I did it.

As challenging as some of them could be, particularly the older males who had staunch opinions about a female's place, I genuinely enjoyed my job. Like me, the elders had more to offer than a lot of people thought. Packs like Ensign might consider it a sign of weakness to even reach old age—death in battle was, according to them, the only honorable death—but they missed out on the wisdom the elders had to offer. Sure, it wasn't all wisdom. A lot of it was, in fact, bullshit, but I found that the more you took them seriously, the less bullshit there was.

The morning passed horrendously fast, and after sitting down for lunch with Gerald while he told me all about his granddaughter's first shift, it was time to go home and get ready for the evening's party. I dragged my heels on the way home, regretting my earlier benevolence with every passing minute, arriving at the cottage with only a few minutes left before I had to leave. I hadn't been joking when I told Caleb I'd rather spend my evening with a pair of sick toddlers than attempt to be polite to Ethan.

Maybe it was petty of me to still be mad about something that happened four years ago, but Ethan hadn't changed during that time either. As I shoved my pajamas and a clean set of underwear into my duffel bag, I tried not to think about that condescending tone he would undoubtedly bring out just for me tonight. Ethan still dismissed and patronized me and generally acted like my existence was a burden. In the years since my father's death, I'd managed to carve out a respectable life for myself; I had my own cottage, a job, and the grudging respect of at least a quarter of the Pack. I wasn't a burden to anyone, and yet he still made me feel that way every single time.

I took a little more care with my party dress, rolling it up so it wouldn't crease as I slipped it into the bag beside the other stuff. The methodical action calmed me a little, pulling me out of my angry spiral. I wouldn't have to see Ethan for at least another couple of hours—the run to the Ferris Bridge was pretty long, even for a wolf.

With my bag packed, there were no more excuses to dawdle, and I stripped before

slipping out of the house and giving myself over to my wolf.

Shifting was a relief. My wolf had no space in her mind to worry about others' opinions; there were too many smells, too many sounds, and too much energy coiled in her body for that. Picking up the handles of my bag with my jaws, I set off running. The stretch and pull of my muscles was exhilarating, and I gave in to the joy of the exercise, my mind blank as the landscape flew past me, the soft grass tickling my paws.

As I approached the bridge, I could make out the familiar shape of Ferris's black truck. Ethan was leaning against the driver's door, arms crossed, glaring at me. Stupidly, I had hoped that Ethan would simply forget to come get me or be delayed enough that I had an excuse to start making my own way. I should have known better: Ethan was nothing if not punctual and reliable. The bastard. Still in wolf form, I dropped my bag and sat down, tilting my head at him.

"Get in the car," he said. "The other Alphas are gonna start arriving in half an hour."

Of course, I was inconveniencing him. Irritated, I shifted to give him a piece of my mind, but the moment I became human again, he turned his face away, cleared his throat, yanked the driver's door open, and all but fled into the car.

Right. I was naked. Crouching down to unzip my bag, I pulled out my party dress, thankfully not too ruffled from its rough transportation. Pulling it over my head, I briefly questioned the wisdom of my choice. It was pretty, certainly, and summery enough for a Solstice celebration, but as with all my clothing, it was short on me. Reminding myself that I was supposed to be having fun and letting loose tonight, I zipped up my bag and threw it into the bed of the truck.

"You know you didn't have to pick me up," I said as I opened the passenger door, hopping up to reach the seat. Inside the cab, Ethan's steel and leather scent was

overpowering; it irritated my nose and made my skin hot. I rolled down the window.

“Hello to you, too,” said Ethan as he started up the truck, the pair of us bouncing in our seats as we moved from the gravel path and onto the bridge.

“Hello,” I said, already annoyed. “You know you didn’t have to pick me up.”

“You’re not as familiar with the Ferris paths. You could have gotten lost or hurt yourself.” From anyone else, this might have been a touching expression of concern, but from Ethan, it was a condemnation.

“I can run a few miles on my own,” I reminded him. “I’m not a child.”

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“I never said you were,” he said, checking his mirrors. The casualness of the motion pissed me off in a way I could articulate even if I tried.

“You don’t need to say it,” I muttered, hoping that would be the end of it, but apparently, Ethan had more to say.

“Maybe I do. You’re acting like a child right now.” Ah. So he was going for the cool and collected approach today, saying things he knew would make me mad in that even tone, and then acting shocked when I started a fight. I should have ignored him, but inevitably, he made me so angry that I became stupid.

“Right. Sorry,” I snapped back. “I forgot you’d never done anything wrong in your life.”

Crossing my arms, I resolved to say nothing more, but Ethan wasn’t going to have that.

“No, please, carry on,” he said. “Get it all out of your system.”

“Get what out of my system?”

“You’re clearly in one of your moods, and I’m gonna need you to get over it by the time we reach town,” he said, still using that awful, calm tone. “If you want to yell at me this whole ride, that’s fine, as long as you shut up when we arrive and don’t make a scene.”

“I’m sorry, make a scene?” I hissed, but he continued as if I hadn’t spoken.

“Tonight is supposed to be about promoting positive relations. It doesn’t look good if you’re needlessly combative.”

“I am not needlessly combative,” I insisted, but Ethan only paused for a pointed moment before he replied,

“You’re arguing with me right now.”

“Because you’re insufferable! Have you ever noticed that I’m not like this with other people?”

That seemed to strike a nerve because his voice was quiet when he replied,

“I’m not blind.”

“Good for you,” I shot back, pleased to see him flinch as he realized his error. “Did you ever consider that maybe the problem is you?”

Ethan’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel, and I flushed with victory.

“I just came to pick you up instead of making you run through unfamiliar territory alone, and you ripped my throat out about it, but I’m the problem?” he said through gritted teeth, and I grinned.

“Yes.”

“Sure,” was the only reply I got. “Whatever.”

It was going to be a long drive.

Chapter 2 - Ethan

The rest of the A-Team had already arrived by the time Julia and I made it to Ferris town. It was tradition at this point: if the Solstice was taking place on one of our islands, the others would arrive early to help set up. We had it down to an art at this point, and when I pulled into town, they were busy building up the bonfire.

Julia was out of the truck before I'd even cut the engine, racing toward the guys with a grin. They greeted her with equal fervor, and I tensed as Xander swept her up in his arms.

"Hey, squirt! Long time, no see."

It shouldn't bother me that they touched her freely. None of us had sisters of our own, and my friends had adopted her as their honorary little sister. None of them thought of her as anything more, but we were stricter about touch between males and females on Ferris. If a woman wasn't family or your mate, you didn't touch her unless it was absolutely necessary, and the liberties my friends took with Julia made me uneasy.

The moment she was out of Xander's arms, Leo's arm was around her waist, and he pressed a kiss to her temple.

"You're looking lovely this evening," he told her, and she beamed up at him, slipping out of his hold to give him a spin. The movement caused the light cotton of her skirt to flare out, revealing even more of the pale skin of her legs. My jaw clenched; she might be my responsibility for the evening, but she wasn't my sister or my mate or a member of my Pack. I had no say in how she dressed or who she showed herself off to.

Jace, at least, was more reserved, opting for a fist bump and a simple,

"Hey."

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It was only then that I realized we were missing someone.

“Where’s Noah?” Julia said, just as I opened my mouth to ask the same question. My friends’ faces darkened.

“His dad says he can’t come this year,” Jace told us. “They’re getting worried that he won’t mate in-Pack. There’s talk of marriage.”

In a rare moment of absolute agreement, Julia and I both grimaced. Cunic was known to be a secretive Pack—unlike the rest of us, they didn’t allow freedom of movement through their land, so protective were they of the rich seam of coal that ran through their land and powered the entire archipelago. Noah had mentioned before that mating out of the Pack wasn’t an option for him, but I’d never thought his father would go so far as to arrange a marriage. Shifters didn’t marry often; it was a ritual for those whose mates had died or rejected them or for those who had given up on finding their mate at all. Noah was only twenty-two, though. He should have had plenty of time.

“He said to have fun tonight,” Jace added, attempting to lighten the mood. “He’s with us in spirit!”

“He’ll get a blow-by-blow of the night the next time we see him,” Xander promised, punching Jace in the arm. I didn’t always appreciate Xander’s reckless, carefree attitude, but I was glad of it now.

With wood for the bonfire piled up higher than I’d imagined possible, the guys moved on to carrying tables out of the hall for food and drink while I was pulled

away by one of my Betas to greet the Alphas from other islands as they arrived. As we walked through the town, there were a hundred delicious scents in the air; every mother on Ferris would be in her kitchen now, preparing something to offer for the Solstice party.

The following hours passed in a blur. Between welcoming the arriving Alphas—no representatives from Arbor or Cunic, as expected, but everyone else was in attendance, even the First Pack—and the ceremonial lighting of the bonfire, it was getting to be dusk and the celebration was in full swing before I had the chance to check in with the guys, and with Julia. Thankfully, she'd stayed close to them, cracking jokes in between sips from a bottle of beer.

I tried to tell myself that I didn't care as Julia chatted animatedly with our friends. It wasn't that I was desperate for her affection—far from it—but it was frustrating not knowing why I was singled out as the subject of her ire. I supposed I could ask her, but after four years of hostility, I wasn't about to prostrate myself at her feet and beg forgiveness for something I didn't know I'd done. I was an Alpha. I didn't need her approval or her friendship.

I did, however, need her to behave herself. I might be her guardian tonight, but I had other responsibilities as Solstice host. I needed to talk with other Alphas, tend to established relationships, and manage the ones I knew didn't care for one another. I simply did not have the mental energy to be worrying about where Julia was or who she was getting into trouble with. It was, however, what I spent most of my evening doing.

In the middle of my discussion with the Alpha from Telaxis—he'd been hosting the First Pack for the last two years, and was full of wisdom regarding their customs and ways to ensure a successful stay—I heard her scream with glee from somewhere to my left, and when I looked over she was doubled over with laughter at something Xander had said, one hand resting on his bicep and the other holding the neck of her

now-empty beer bottle. I wondered how much she'd had to drink so far. The night was still young, and I didn't need to take care of a sloppy drunk girl who hated me for the rest of the evening.

The Telaxis Alpha had only smiled indulgently when I explained my distraction; he was one of the older Alphas on the islands, nearing sixty and preparing to step down when the First Pack moved on so that his son could take his place. His Heir was here somewhere, too, and I made a mental note to seek him out as I excused myself from the conversation with his father.

I couldn't find the Telaxis Heir, but I did find the Alpha of Tritica lingering on the edge of the improvised dance floor, watching two of his Betas try and fail to flirt with a couple of Ferris females. We laughed together at their audacity, but that didn't last long. Not far from where the Tritica Betas were striking out, Julia was dancing. Her hair had come loose from her signature ponytail and now ran in a smooth black river to her waist. Leo turned her under his arm while one of his Betas looked on, and I didn't miss the way the Beta's eyes traveled up and down her body as she danced. I tamped down a growl that wanted to grow in my chest, not wanting to give the Tritica Alpha the wrong idea, holding up my empty cup instead to let him know I was going for a refill.

At the drinks table, I took a second to collect myself. Julia was only having fun, and the guys were with her. They wouldn't let anything happen to her. Unbidden, that Argent Beta's face filled my thoughts, his eyes hungry as they scanned the smooth length of her legs, and my fist closed around my paper cup. Shit. I was going to need a new one.

As I reached for a fresh cup, I reminded myself that—despite her many flaws—Julia was a beautiful woman. I couldn't stop males from looking at her, and I couldn't stop her from returning those looks if she wanted to. I simply would prefer that she do so on her own island. If something happened to her here—if she looked too long at some

good-for-nothing male who took it as permission—then it was my fault, and how would I face Caleb knowing that I’d allowed his sister to get hurt?

And there went the second paper cup. Sighing, I reached for a sturdier bottle of beer, taking a long swig before heading back toward the party. The bonfire was really raging now, and shifters danced, laughed, and drank in the heat and light it gave off. The summer evening was already balmy, and sweat was shining off the dancers’ skin as they moved together. I spotted Leo again, doing some silly moves with Jace, but Julia was gone.

I certainly didn’t panic as my gaze swept over the party. There were too many shifters here to be able to pick out any particular scent, so I was dependent on sight alone, and I hated it. When my eyes finally landed on her, the growl that I’d been suppressing roared to life in my chest. She’d moved to stand next to one of the cottages, leaning on the side of it away from the heat of the bonfire, and the Argent Beta was standing next to her, a shit-eating grin on his face and a hand on one of Julia’s hips. He might have thought he’d won the lottery tonight, but he was about to lose his teeth.

Hardly aware of the rest party around me, I stormed through the throng of celebrating shifters until I was standing in the shadow of that same cottage.

Julia’s eyes widened as I approached, and she stood up straight—no doubt preparing to dismiss me—but I paid her no mind, going straight for that upstart Beta. My hands were balled into fists at my sides, but I couldn’t use them now. Not even Leo would forgive me for attacking one of his guys unprovoked.

“Scram,” I said through gritted teeth. “Now, before you regret it.”

My voice was thick with Alpha authority and unbridled aggression, and the Beta wasn’t dumb enough to miss it. He made himself scarce pretty quickly, not dumb enough to square up with a furious Alpha for the sake of some girl he’d just met.

The girl he'd just met, however, was exactly dumb enough to start a fight.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she hissed.

"You didn't see the way he was looking at you," I told her through gritted teeth, but she only squared up to me, stepping into my space so that I couldn't miss it when she said,

"Maybe I did. Maybe I liked it."

I wanted to grab her, shake her, and tell her it was dangerous to wander off into the dark with males she barely knew, but I was better than that.

"Make whatever stupid decisions you want on your own island," I said, "but not while I'm responsible for you."

That made her step back, eyebrows raised.

"I'm sorry, responsible for me?" she said. "I'm a full-grown woman, Ethan. I'm responsible for myself."

She didn't understand, she would never understand, but I was trying to make her anyway.

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“If something happens to you on my watch—”

“God forbid I have a good time.”

“If something happens to you—”

“Like what, Ethan?” she snapped. Her voice was full of venom, and her blue eye flashed with loathing. “Like I have fun? Like I get fucked?”

The word hung in the air between us, and it was all I could do not to picture his hands on her naked flesh, his lips on her bare skin.

“Don’t be crude,” I bit back, unable to summon anything else.

We were both saved from whatever her response was going to be by the arrival of Leo. His usual smile was absent, replaced by a concerned frown.

“Cody said you nearly bit his head off,” he said to me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Julia, at the same time as I growled,

“He had his hands all over Julia.”

Leo’s face fell, his eyes scanning Julia for any sign of injury.

“What? You okay? That’s not like him at all, I’ll—”

“I am fine,” Julia insisted, putting a gentle hand on his arm. “Or I was until this psycho showed up and spoiled my perfectly nice conversation.”

“He was looking at you like—”

“Like I’m an attractive woman who can choose who she wants to spend her time with?” Julia interrupted. That wasn’t the point, though. The point was—the point was that she shouldn’t be doing it here.

“You can spend time with as many men as you want once you’re no longer my responsibility,” I told her. We were going in circles, and I didn’t know how to end it or make her see. Clearly, she refused to understand because her face was flushed with anger, her eyes red with frustrated, unspilled tears.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not your responsibility!” Julia replied, her voice finally cracking into a shout. It was only the music, the laughter, and the noise of the party that prevented anyone else from hearing. “You’re not my Alpha, you’re not my brother, and you’re not my fucking father! You’re just some asshole who doesn’t know how to mind his own business.”

She had stormed away before I could retort, and Leo caught me by the arm as I made to follow her. My wolf growled at the imposition, but he graciously ignored it.

“Let her go,” he said quietly. “We don’t need a scene.”

That brought me up short. In the car, I’d warned Julia about making a scene, but here I was about to cause one. I took a deep breath, reining in my furious wolf.

“Cody’s a good guy,” Leo tried to reassure me. “He wouldn’t hurt her.”

I couldn’t find the words to articulate why that didn’t matter, why the thought of his

hands on her body made me want to rip his arms off.

“She’s Cal’s sister,” I managed. “It’s not—he shouldn’t be—she shouldn’t—you saw—”

To my surprise, the clouds drew back from Leo’s expression, and his sunny smile reappeared.

“Got it,” he said. “Look, give her a minute—maybe a few minutes—and then go apologize.”

“But—”

“Just do it, idiot.”

Then he left me. I should have followed him, should have returned to networking with the other Alphas and keeping an eye on the festivities, but I couldn’t bring myself to move. Standing in the shadows, I could scarcely believe what I’d just done; the others might consider me “old-fashioned,” but I wasn’t a dinosaur. I’d never gotten between a male and a female who was clearly interested. I’d been out of line, but my wolf was still growling and slaving in my chest; I didn’t know what it was, but something about that woman made me feral.

Chapter 3 - Julia

I’d been so determined to have a good time, and I had almost accomplished it. I laughed, I drank, I danced, and I flirted with a cute guy. Maybe I would have let him kiss me, but Ethan fucking Cain had to shove his nose where it didn’t belong. If I were being charitable, I might have thought he was just being protective of his best friend’s little sister, but I wasn’t feeling charitable as I sat next to the dying bonfire, watching the celebration wind down.

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The darkness had crept up on us all, with the dusk so long and the night slow to set in, but the sky was now pitch black, the only light coming from the low flames of the bonfire. Orange tongues cast dancing shadows from the leaves and twigs lying on the scorched grass. There was no rhythm to it, no music, but it was beautiful all the same.

When I was a child, I'd always wanted to stretch out a hand and try to catch the shadows cast by the flickering flames, but my father had always pulled me away. I'd been convinced, then, that I could catch them if only I were allowed near enough. With a wry smile, I reached forward, closing my fist around a jumping shadow, and for just a moment, I felt a sliver of something cool brush against my palm.

A twig snapped close by, and I jumped. Beneath the smoke of the bonfire, I could smell a familiar steel and leather scent, bristling as Ethan took a seat beside me. I couldn't see him—he'd sat on my bad side—but perhaps that was for the best.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked, too late.

"You're already seated, so I think you've answered your own question."

"Right."

The night seemed even quieter after the hubbub of earlier; a few shifters were still hanging around by the food tables, but they were far enough away that the conversations were nothing more than a quiet murmur. Ethan and I were the only ones near the fire, listening to the crack and pop of the logs. Did he think it was dangerous for me to be over here on my own or something? Was I too far away from the festivities, a prime target for the Arbor hunters and the bogeyman? Before I could

ask, he spoke:

“I’m, uh—I’m sorry about earlier.”

That was absolutely not what I expected to hear, so much so that I wasn’t even certain I had heard it.

“You’re what?” I said, incredulous, and Ethan sighed.

“Don’t make me say it again,” he muttered. That was all I needed to confirm that I had heard him right the first time, but I couldn’t resist teasing him.

“No, you’re going to have to,” I said, grinning. “I could swear I only had a couple of beers, but—”

“Very funny. I said I’m sorry about earlier. I was out of line.”

This was the first apology I’d ever received from Ethan, and as much as I enjoyed it, I also had absolutely no idea how to respond. With Caleb, I would have just told him I loved him and punched him in the arm. That definitely wasn’t the way forward here.

“I wasn’t really gonna fuck him,” I blurted. “I just said that to piss you off.”

It was true. I might have been a little starved for male attention—between being the Alpha’s little sister and the Pack’s resident Bad Omen—but I wasn’t going to lose my virginity to some random Beta at a party, no matter how cute he was.

“I mean you can... You can do whatever you want,” Ethan replied, although it sounded as though the words physically pained him. I appreciated the effort.

“I know that,” I told him, gently, “but I’m glad you’ve caught up.”

He didn't reply to that, but the quiet that grew between us this time was almost companionable. Again, my attention turned to the fire, and it was easier to get swept up in the dance of the flames now that my anger had subsided. For a couple of seconds, the flames flickered in something almost like a beat, the pattern of their movement reminding me of a song that I'd liked as a child. I sang the tune in my head, imagining the flames dancing to its melody, the shadows they created dancing along with them.

I was so caught up in my imagination that for a moment I really saw it: the shadows dancing in time with the music in my head. They elongated and contracted steady waltz—one two three, one two three—for a few beats, and then a few beats longer, and then I could really see it. The shadows were dancing to my tune, utterly out of sync with the crackling fire whose light created them.

I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut, blocking out the memory of music. I was just tired. I'd had a couple of beers. It had been a long, emotional day.

When I opened my eyes again, the world had changed entirely. It was fuzzy and indistinct, but it was far wider than I was used to, and I flinched as I saw something moving to the left: something on my blind side.

I immediately closed my good eye, narrowing my field of vision once again, but it didn't disappear. Instead of the three-dimensional, colorful world I was used to, there were only different shades of grey, different shadows shifting and moving in the darkness. I could see the shadow cast by the large oak tree just a few yards away, along with the long shadows of the chairs and logs assembled around the edge of the bonfire. Strangest of all, I could see Ethan beside me; his shape was slightly stretched but still recognizable.

My heart was in my throat, my stomach doing somersaults. I had to say something, to do something, to prove to myself this wasn't all just a strange and cruel dream.

“Hey, Ethan?” I ventured.

“Yeah.”

This was a terrible idea. I wasn’t really going to tell Ethan I was seeing things that might not be there. Then again, I supposed if anyone was going to tell me to pull myself together, it would be him.

“I might be going crazy,” I continued, “but I think I can see you.”

“What do you mean?” I didn’t have to see Ethan’s frown to hear it in his voice, and I realized that he’d never known I couldn’t see him in the first place.

“You’re sitting on my blind side,” I explained, and I felt him tense beside me.

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“Shit, I’ll move—”

“Don’t!” My arm shot out to stop him from rising, and he sank back slowly onto the log. I kept my head determinedly forward, refusing to turn my head the ninety degrees that would be required to see him out of my good eye.

“Alright, talk me through it,” Ethan said softly. “What do you see?”

Wow. Okay. He was taking me seriously.

“I can see—not you, not fully, but like... your shadow?” I tried to explain. How did you tell someone you could see their shadow just floating in space, not seemingly attached to anything? Ethan clearly didn’t quite understand either, because he prompted,

“Describe it to me.”

“I don’t know, it’s your shadow!” I said. “It’s you, but all flat and black. It’s stretching out behind you and like to the left? It’s long.”

For a while, Ethan said nothing. Then his shadow moved.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” he asked. There was a note of teasing in his voice, but I could clearly see the dark shape of his hand out of my blind eye.

“Dickhead. Three.”

The shadow shifted.

“And now?”

“Two.”

He didn’t move.

“And now?”

“Still two! Stop trying to trick me.”

The hand went down, and Ethan let out a long breath.

“Well, shit,” he said. “Have you ever—has this happened before?”

I shook my head.

“Never.”

There were so many thoughts racing through my head that I couldn’t catch one, couldn’t make sense of the absolute insanity that this night had become.

“What were you doing just now?” Ethan asked, breaking the wild spiral of my thoughts. “Before you saw me?”

Right. Start from the beginning. That was a good idea.

“I was just—I was looking at the fire and the shadows the flames made, and I thought... what if I could move them?” I told him. When I turned to face him properly for the first time, he was looking at me intently, and I continued, “I wanted

to make them dance—the shadows. I was thinking of this song, and I was imagining the shadows dancing to the tune.”

I’d thought he would laugh at the childishness of it all, but he only continued to stare at me, utterly concentrated.

“And how did that go?” he asked.

“I made them dance.”

“You made them dance?” he parroted.

“Yeah.”

There was silence again. His strong brows furrowed together, his mouth twisted, and my heart sank.

“You think I’m insane.”

“No, no, I’m just thinking.” Ethan stood suddenly, the unexpected movement making me jump. Raising his fist in the air as if giving a salute, and said,

“Make my shadow hold a finger up.”

“Don’t tease me, Ethan.”

“I’m being serious. Do it.”

Taking a deep breath, I closed my good eye again, plunging the world into shadow. It was still a surprise to see anything at all, and Ethan’s shadow was clearly defined, his right arm held up in an L shape, his fist closed. I concentrated on that closed fist, exploring it with my mind. The longer I explored it, the more I could make out its real shape: I could feel the fingers where they were tucked into the palm, invisible but there.

I imagined one of the fingers coming to stand to attention. Nothing changed. Irritated, I tried again. Nothing.

“You can do it,” Ethan said, low and gentle. “Take a breath. Try again.”

I didn’t respond to him, but I did take a breath as he instructed, concentrating on the feeling of the air dropping in and out of my lungs. I made my mind completely blank and tranquil, and I reached for the hand again, lending my energy to the shadow of Ethan’s hand.

A single finger unfurled, reaching up like a sapling reaching toward the sun. Ethan's shadow was now giving me a tenebrous middle-fingered salute.

"Am I doing it?" I asked, my heart jumping as I heard Ethan's surprised snort of laughter.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're doing it," he confirmed. Then, incredulous: "Julia, that's—that's magic!"

"I know that, idiot," I said, but I could scarcely believe it myself. My good eye flew open to see him staring at me as if I were something entirely new, something fantastic and wondrous.

"You can do magic," he said, and maybe it hadn't sunk in the first time because this time the words sent sparks flying through my veins. I gasped as I sprang up from my seat, covering my mouth to stop the hysterical giggle that emerged.

"I can do magic!" My voice trembled with excitement, every limb thrumming with energy so intense that I couldn't stop myself from throwing my arms around Ethan's neck, utterly jubilant. To my surprise, he responded immediately, wrapping his arms around my waist and lifting me into the air, twirling me around once, twice, three times before he set me back on the ground. Dizzy and grinning, my arms fell away from his neck, fingers tracing the bare skin of his arms, and the world stopped.

The feeling in my belly was insistent, a tug that refused to be ignored, and I'd heard about the pull of a mating bond before, but this couldn't be it. This didn't make sense. Mating bonds formed the first time a male and female touched after they'd both reached Shifting Age. Ethan and I had touched in a hundred small ways since my wolf first took my skin when I was fifteen. It couldn't be the bond, and yet it was. I'd never been more certain of anything in my life.

My hands fisted in the material of his shirt, and I risked looking up to meet his gaze. The joy and amazement in his eyes were gone, replaced with a hunger that sent heat rushing between my thighs. His hands on my waist gripped me tight, not letting up even as he growled,

“You should get inside. Get some rest.”

I didn’t want to get some rest. I couldn’t sleep if I tried. Somewhere in the back of my head, a part of me was insisting that I listen to him; I wasn’t going to let Ethan Cain fuck me in a field. That was ridiculous. The other part, though—the louder part—was insisting I do exactly that. I’d never known a need so intense, and I was going to get what I needed.

“I don’t want to go inside,” I breathed, tugging at his shirt. I needed him closer. Needed his scent all over me.

“Julia—” he started, his voice rough and desperate, his hands glued to my waist as if he didn’t trust himself to move them.

“Don’t think about it too hard,” I said, and then I kissed him.

It felt like I had released him from his leash. Crushing me against the hard muscle of his torso, Ethan kissed me like a starving man, and I could do nothing but allow myself to be consumed. In a matter of minutes, he walked me backward, away from the fire and into the darkness. No one was paying attention; no one would care. It was the Solstice, and we probably weren’t the only couple enjoying the balmy evening. I gasped as my dress was lifted, and Ethan pulled away from my mouth to say,

“Tell me to stop.”

I didn’t reply. I kissed him again.

Chapter 4 - Ethan

This couldn't be real. I couldn't be lying on the cool, damp grass beneath the old oak, completely naked, with Julia Thorne passed out on my chest, my knot still buried inside her. I would never have done something so astronomically, unbelievably stupid. She was my best friend's little sister, the same little sister I'd fought with every time we'd been in the same room for the past four years.

If I'd only fucked her, that would have been stupid enough, but I'd knotted her. I didn't know what the hell had come over me; I never knotted the girls I was with. That shit was reserved for mates, and I respected that. Or at least, I thought I did. I also thought that I had a hard rule about not fucking girls who were virgins, but I'd thrown that one out of the window, too. If it hadn't been obvious from the clumsy, trembling way she'd touched me, I would have known the second I pushed into her and her face pinched in pain for a few gentle strokes before it faded into pleasure. I'd knotted my best friend's little sister, taken her virginity in the grass on the outskirts of a party because—because what? I'd wanted to?

Yeah. I'd wanted to. Julia Thorne might be infuriating, but she had grown into an undeniably beautiful woman, and my wolf had never been good at differentiating between all the ways she made my blood run hotter. With her eyes closed and her breathing even, her expression soft, it was difficult to imagine the absolute devil of a woman she was while awake. She'd collapsed, breathing hard, onto my chest in the wake of our shared climax, and a few heartbeats later, she'd been dead to the world. It was a blessing I didn't deserve, but one I would gladly take. Once the urgent, insistent hunger had subsided, it would have been mortifying to meet her eyes and tell her we had at least twenty minutes to wait until my knot went down and we could separate. Better that she sleep through it and leave me to my self-flagellation.

It seemed like hours passed before the swell of my knot was reduced enough for me to slip out of her, but when I did, she stirred.

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“Shit,” she murmured. “I drooled on you.”

Blinking up at me, sleepy and fucked out, she smiled. I had to leave. Rolling her off me as gently as I could manage, I got to my feet, scanning the grass around us for our clothes.

“Get dressed.” I scooped her dress up from the ground where I’d discarded it, throwing it in her direction. If I looked at her sitting naked in the moonlight, her pale skin glowing and her hair already mussed from where I’d buried my hands in it and tugged, I was going to make another bad decision.

“So we’re not going to talk about this?” Her voice was small and oddly vulnerable, and I sighed. All the girls I’d ever been with had asked that, but I honestly hadn’t expected the same from Julia. I had assumed she would recognize this for the mistake it was and be keen to move on. Clearly, I had overestimated her.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said. It was the same thing I’d said to every other girl, and it felt wrong even as I said it. Julia wasn’t every other girl: she was my best friend’s little sister and a pain in my ass.

“Nothing to talk about?” she echoed, and I moved on to the next stage of the hook-up aftermath response: changing the subject.

“I mean—your magic. Obviously. That’s great.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Julia said. I should have known that wasn’t going to work on her. Every other woman I’d been with knew when she’d been dismissed, and she

wasn't going to question the Alpha. Julia had never respected my rank, and there was plenty of fight in her.

"Look, this isn't exactly my ideal scenario either," she continued as I pulled my pants back on. "Contrary to what I'm sure you think, I haven't been wandering around these past few years thinking, 'gee, I wish Ethan was my mate.' But you are, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise just because the truth is inconvenient."

I froze. Her mate? Surely she didn't really think that. It made no sense.

"I'm not your mate, Julia," I said because there was nothing else to say.

"Then what the fuck just happened?" she replied. "Because that sure as shit felt like a newly-formed bond to me."

Had things been different, I might have agreed with her. The sudden onset of desire, the need I had felt for her, like water in the desert, might easily have been mistaken for the tug of a newly formed bond. I'd certainly never felt that way about any of the women I'd been with before, but I'd never felt as much for those women as I had for Julia. I hadn't felt protective of them the way I always had her, even if that feeling was buried beneath several layers of frustration.

"You don't know how a newly formed bond feels," I pointed out.

"Neither do you!" Julia retorted. It hadn't taken long for her attitude to make a return, and there was a terrible part of me—a part getting louder by the minute—suggesting that I simply hadn't fucked her well enough, that maybe I should try again.

"Maybe not, but I know how sex can make people feel," I said, shoving my shirt back on and trying desperately to smother that awful, hungry voice. "Females, especially if they're... not as experienced, tend to mistake simple attraction for something more."

You get attached.”

For a moment, Julia said nothing, only fixed me with a long, flat look.

“You’re right,” she said, for the first time. Then, “I’m pretty attached to the idea of kicking you in the balls right now.”

I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. I should have known better than to get myself into this position in the first place.

“Please don’t be difficult,” I started, but even as the words left my mouth, I knew they were wrong. Julia’s eyes narrowed, and her voice was sharp and furious as she hissed.

“Difficult?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, taking a deep, calming breath.

“We can talk about this in the morning, Julia,” I said. We were clearly both too emotional to get anywhere tonight. I could only hope that a night of sleep might give us enough distance to be rational.

Julia, of course, had no interest in being rational.

“We’re talking about it right now, asshole,” she insisted. “You knotted me. Do you do that with every quick fuck or am I just special?”

There was nothing I could say in my defense. It was a lapse in control that I was far too experienced to have made.

“I got carried away,” I admitted, and Julia gasped, clutching her heart in mock

delight.

“Wow, so I am just special,” she exclaimed, breathy and fake. “Or—”

“We’re not mates, Julia,” I snapped. “We can’t be. It’s been years since you first shifted, we would have known before now. It’s impossible.”

“More or less impossible than me seeing out of my blind eye?” she shot back. It was a stupid argument: those two things weren’t connected. Magic had always been unpredictable and wild, but shifter biology was as predictable as the sunrise. No matter how strong the urge had been between us, no matter how insane I’d felt when she touched me, it simply could not be the bond. It was high emotions and hormones. That was all there was to it.

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“Why are you so insistent about this?” I asked. “You clearly don’t want to be my mate, and I don’t want to be yours.”

I was a bachelor, and I liked it that way; I had enough responsibilities as it was; I didn’t need a mate to worry about. My wolf had other ideas, howling and clawing at my insides, and I hoped Julia couldn’t see the effort it took for me to hold him down. She’d only think that made her right. In reality, it made my wolf a twitter-pated idiot.

“I’m not some hysterical girl with a crush, Ethan,” Julia insisted. “You didn’t make me fall in love with you through the sheer power of your dick. I’m not trying to like—trap you.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“What are you saying, then?” It was a familiar challenge: I’d seen her right eyebrow twitch upward and her arms cross in exactly that manner a hundred times before. A hundred times before, she’d listened to my explanation and found it wanting.

“I’m saying that—that sometimes attraction is just attraction. You don’t like me, and so you’re trying to find a justification for... this,” I said. I might not be too proud to admit that I’d noticed Julia’s beauty years ago, but she was certainly not going to admit she’d only kissed me because she wanted to. Sure enough, she only scowled back at me.

“So you don’t think there’s anything weird about this at all?” she said. “We’ve been at each other’s throats for years, and suddenly we’re so horny for each other that we decide to go to town in the middle of a field at the Solstice celebration? Be real,

Ethan.”

“I am being real.” I was so tired of saying the same thing, of her refusing to listen. “It’s been an emotional evening, and it’s far more likely that after the fighting and the making up and the excitement of the revelation about your magic, we both just got... carried away in the moment.”

“So carried away that you knotted me. I remember.” That was the second time she’d mentioned it, and I couldn’t help but feel guilt twist in my stomach.

“Do you want me to apologize?” I said. “Fine, I’m sorry I knotted you. I’m sure you wanted to save that for your real mate.” Even as I spoke, my wolf roared inside me. He didn’t want anyone else knotting her; she was ours, as far as he was concerned. Easy for him to say—he didn’t have to deal with her.

“You’re insufferable,” Julia hissed through her teeth. She offered no other rebuttal, though, so I took my chance to press pause on this god-awful conversation.

“Well, you won’t have to suffer me after tomorrow,” I said. “I’m taking you home first thing in the morning. Do you need me to find you some witch tea before you leave, or do you have some at home?”

Even in the dark, I could see the way her cheeks darkened. For a moment, she looked vulnerable, caught off guard, and my wolf whined. He wanted us to go to her.

“I’ve got some at home,” she said. “Or Alyssa does, anyway.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. If Alyssa found out, there was no way she’d keep it from Caleb.

“You’re not gonna tell her—” I started, but Julia cut me off.

“I’ll tell her I made a mistake with a knot-happy blockhead. It won’t be a lie.”

Relief curdled in my belly. I didn’t have any right to be relieved. Caleb had trusted me with Julia’s safekeeping, and I’d thrown that trust back in his face. Now, I wasn’t even man enough to admit what I’d done.

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine,” she echoed. Most of the fight seemed to have leaked out of her, and she looked so small, so goddamn young. I held out my hand.

“Are you coming back to the house with me, or—”

“Fuck off,” she snapped, and I took a step back. Tired and defeated and vulnerable as she was, her eyes still blazed with defiance, and my fingers twitched with the desire to touch her again. My wolf yipped in agreement, but I pushed the instinct away.

“I’ll leave you to cool down,” I said.

“You do that.”

My wolf snapped and growled as I turned my back on her, walking steadily back toward the fire, and the party, and the town. This time, he was right: we shouldn’t be leaving her out in the dark on her own. There were rumors of Arbor hunters taking females from islands all over the archipelago, and even if those were nothing more than idle stories, there were plenty of strange shifters still roaming Ferris in the aftermath of the party. It was madness to walk away from her, but if I’d stayed—if I’d stayed, then I didn’t know what I’d do.

Chapter 5 - Julia

I couldn't find my underwear. I'd been searching for at least twenty minutes because combing the grass for my discarded panties was a far better use of my time than staring at Ethan's retreating back. The problem was that the activity that had started off as a desperate attempt to distract me from the gut-wrenching feeling of being rejected by a mate I didn't even want had become a fresh source of frustration all on its own. It was supremely stupid to be tearing up because I'd lost my underwear, but it was less stupid than tearing up because of Ethan fucking Cain, so I let it happen.

That made the fourth thing I'd lost in this godforsaken field. The first thing that had, of course, been my virginity. Not how I'd imagined that going, but whatever. The second thing was my mate, which was more concerning. Did I want to spend my life with Ethan? No. I despised him. I was not, however, stubborn enough to refuse what fate had clearly set out for me. Which led me to the third thing I'd lost: my dignity. Ethan had rejected me wholesale, and despite that, I'd still tried to make him see sense. He must think I was desperate for him, the way I'd insisted that he accept our bond.

How was I supposed to face him in the morning, after all that? I'd need to have underwear on, for starters, but mine was currently lost in the dark grass somewhere between here and the bonfire. I was pretty certain my dress had come off first, and Ethan had found that pretty fast, so theoretically, they should be close by, but current evidence had proven that this was untrue. Had a gust of wind blown them further away? Had some critter picked them up and scampered away with them? Would some random Ferris shifter find them in the days to come and wonder what careless female they belonged to?

Why had I even let it happen? I knew the pull of the bond was strong, but it wasn't strong enough to force me to do anything I really didn't want to do. In that moment, I wanted it, and that was the worst part. For a stupid, thoughtless hour, I'd allowed my seventeen-year-old self to take over, the one who'd thought Ethan was so handsome and honorable and found his utterly humorless demeanor mysterious and charming. I

should have known better. Of course, he didn't want me: I was only a burden.

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Well, I wasn't going to be a burden to him any longer. I wouldn't eat his food or sleep under his roof. I was going home, underwear be damned. I brushed the tears from my face, tugging my dress down in an effort that was as pointless as it was fruitless. No one was going to see me wandering across the Ferris Bridge in the middle of the night. I briefly considered shifting: I'd get there in less than half the time, and I wouldn't be worried about flashing anyone I might meet on the road. I was not, however, going to carry this dress in my mouth. It was made of light, delicate, pretty material that had to be shipped over from the mainland. My bag was still in the back of Ethan's truck, and I was not about to risk bumping into him to go retrieve it.

Perhaps it was a stupid decision (it was definitely a stupid decision, and my wolf growled with every step I took), but I was stubborn and angry enough to do it. I was going to walk back to Lapine, barefoot in my party dress in the dark. At least it wouldn't be dark for long; I guessed it was about two in the morning, which meant I only had two hours or so before the sun rose. I'd watch it from the bridge. That would be nice.

I could still hear the occasional burst of laughter and the clink of bottles being collected from the remnants of the party, and in a saner world, I would be there, too. Xander would probably have us all competing to see who could get a bottle into the trash can from furthest away, and we'd tumble exhausted into bed, ready for a late morning and a sizable breakfast. That wasn't the world we lived in, though. In this world, Ethan was my mate, and he didn't want me, and I was slipping away in the dead of night out of sheer humiliation.

Ethan was my mate. The thought looped endlessly in my head, drowning out every

other thought. That asshole really managed to ruin everything he touched. Hell, I'd discovered I had magic this evening, yet all I could think about was how his rejection made me feel like I was going to throw up my own heart. I had magic, and here I was, fixated on some full-of-himself Alpha who wasn't worth my time even on his best day.

As I walked, I tried to remember how it had felt to watch that single strip of shadow bend itself to my will: the joy, the excitement. What would Alyssa say when I told her? What about Caleb? I had so many questions, and I managed to distract myself well enough with them for an hour or so. I imagined Alyssa's excitement and playing shadow games with the twins. I thought of other islands I could visit or witches I might meet who shared my powers—would they have a blind eye like me?

By the time the bridge came into sight, I was almost in a good mood. Almost. Sure, my feet hurt and I was tired as all hell, and I was desperately trying not to think about why I was sore between my legs, but I had magic. I wasn't an omen or a burden. I was a witch.

I was a witch, and witches didn't need anyone. They were wanderers, nomads. They made their home on any island that would have them for a few months, and then they were off on the open road again. Sure, the thought of having no home, of leaving my family behind, might make my stomach twist, but I was sure I'd get used to it. I'd be completely independent—not even Ethan could claim I wasn't.

Shit. I wasn't supposed to be thinking about Ethan. I was thinking about my glorious, independent future. I was watching the sunrise from the bridge.

The bridge between Ferris and Lapine was a fairly new one, built from a combination of strong Lapine stone and ropes of Ferris steel. Caleb had explained to me once how it didn't need arches beneath the bridge to support it because the structure was held up by nets of steel rope attached to a tower at each end. I may not understand the

physics of it, but I could appreciate the beauty of the thing, and by the time I sat down in the middle of it, the sun was already peeking over the horizon, lighting the sky in pink and purple.

In the weak dawn light, shadows were beginning to form. The bridge was striped with them, and I held out my hand to try to catch one of the dark lines. After a few fruitless attempts, I sat back and closed my eyes, the world slipping from pink-tinged light to utter darkness. Taking a deep breath, I tried to clear my mind, pushing all other thoughts away. Nothing mattered now—not Ethan, not half-formed plans for my future—nothing but me and the shadows.

They came to me slowly, the darkness behind my closed eyes seeming to separate into shadows and space. I could see the elongated shape of the bridge, the shadows of steel ropes fanning out like the strings of a huge instrument. I wondered if I could pluck them. Would they make a sound, like the strings on a guitar? There was only one way to find out.

Reaching out into the void, I let the tip of one finger come to rest on the shadow of a single string. I could feel the coolness of it, and I couldn't tell if it was real or a phantom feeling caused by my magic. It didn't matter. Breathing out, slow and controlled, I crooked my finger, pulling at the shadow. To my delight, it bent beneath my touch, springing back into place as I released my hold. I let out a joyful huff of laughter. As little as I wanted to admit it, I had been a little afraid I would never be able to replicate the magic I had done by the campfire.

I tried again, this time allowing my fingers to skip from one string to another, plucking one, then two, and watching them bend and snap back into place. Again and again, I plucked those strings, as captivated as a child with a new toy. So captivated, in fact, that I didn't notice the sound of someone approaching.

“Hey!” The shout came from somewhere behind me. A male voice, unfamiliar and

harsh, broke my concentration as I scrambled to my feet, hoping that the movement didn't give away my pantyless state. Shifters might not be precious about nudity, but there was a difference between seeing each other naked pre—or post-shift, and a lone female hanging out with no underwear beneath her short skirt.

“Hi,” I said, hoping I didn't sound too breathless as a pair of figures approached. Both were male, both built like Betas—I recognized neither of them, and my guard went up. Standards varied across the archipelago, but many islands considered an unaccompanied female to be fair game. Hopefully, I still had enough of Ethan's Alpha scent on me to put them off.

“You come from the party?” One of them asked. His speech was slightly slurred, which was either a point in my favor or a point against me. A drunk male might have fewer inhibitions, be pushier and more aggressive, but he was also slower and less coordinated.

“Yeah,” I replied, pretending nonchalance. “You know this is the Lapine Bridge, right?”

The first guy's eyes widened, but his smile was sharp as he exclaimed,

“Oh shit, really? Hey, Gary, this is the Lapine Bridge, idiot!” He shoved his companion, Gary, who only mumbled something about having gone east out of town.

“How drunk are you guys?” I asked.

“Not too drunk to know a pretty girl when we see one,” said the first guy, and I knew I was in trouble.

“Well, this pretty girl is going home,” I said. “Hope you guys find your way.” I gave them a half-hearted wave, but Gary lurched forward—way too fast for a guy who had

seemed completely out of it ten seconds ago—and grabbed me by the wrist.

“No, don’t leave. We’re lost. We need help.” He was way too close to me, but there was no alcohol masking the rancid stink of his breath. I had to get out of here, but I couldn’t run—they’d only chase me, and I wasn’t certain I could win that race. I smiled, keeping my voice as sweet as honey as I said,

“You’re big boys. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

Wrenching my wrist from his grip, I turned to leave, but I hadn’t even taken a step before I stopped in my tracks. A third man stood in front of me, his smile yellowed and threatening. He was older than the other two and not even attempting to pretend he’d been at the Solstice party. He was dressed only in dirty sweatpants, with no shirt to hide the multitude of scars decorating his chest and face. I pretended not to notice, rolling my eyes.

“Really funny, guys,” I said. “I’m going home.” This time, I made it a couple of steps before the newcomer moved to block my path again.

“Not before you tell me about that neat little trick you were doing,” he growled, his voice deep and rough. My heart gave a terrified leap behind my ribcage.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. “Please—”

“Your little trick with the shadows. That’s a rare kind of witchcraft.”

He was still pretending at affability, but he couldn’t hide his disgust as his mouth rounded out the final word. Suddenly, I knew exactly what Pack these males were from. My blood ran cold, but I excelled at nothing if not pretending to be unbothered.

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“I’m not a witch,” I laughed, looking over my shoulder to address the first two men. “Hey, fellas. Take your friend home, will you? He’s so drunk he can’t see straight.”

That was a mistake. The moment my eye was off him, the third male grabbed me around the waist, pinning my arms to my sides. I thrashed wildly in his grip, but his arms were like iron bars around me. Throwing my head back, I felt the back of my skull make contact with his nose, and something hot dripped onto the back of my neck. Despite the fact that I’d likely broken his nose, he only tightened his grip on me, and I gasped as the breath was driven out of me. I was completely trapped, and the other males were closing in.

“Careful, man,” Gary was saying. “Alpha doesn’t want the goods marked.”

“Then hurry the fuck up and knock her out—she’s like a feral fucking cat.”

That was when I saw the first guy pull out a bottle and a dirty rag. Shaking something from the bottle onto the cloth, he advanced toward me, and I kicked out hard with my legs. He dodged my flying feet, but then someone was grabbing my legs from my blind side, holding them together at the thigh. I cringed at the feeling of his hands on my bare skin, but that was the least of my worries. As I took a deep breath, ready to scream, the rag came down over my nose and mouth, and there was an awful, chemical smell, and everything went black.

Chapter 6 - Ethan

Every step away from the bonfire was torture. My wolf growled and snarled within me, urging me to go back. For some reason, he’d latched onto her—probably because

I'd never fucked a girl I really cared about before, and as much of a brat as she was, I couldn't deny that I cared about Julia. I didn't like leaving her alone in the dark any more than my wolf did, but I also knew it was for the best. Given a few hours to cool down, I was certain she'd see sense, let go of this ridiculous idea she had that we were mates. She'd be embarrassed in the morning, but I had no intention of teasing her about it—I'd much rather forget she even suggested it—so that would work out for both of us.

It had been coming up on one o'clock when I'd bid goodnight to the last of the visiting Alphas and made my way down to the bonfire to apologize to Julia, so it must be at least two by now, and my friends and Betas had already made a start on collecting the discarded bottles and paper cups left by our guests.

"Look who finally appeared," Leo teased, dropping his trash can to lean against the nearest table. Xander followed his lead, adopting a stern expression that was completely foreign on his normally smirking face.

"Dodging the cleanup, Ethan?" he said, in a disconcertingly good impression of his late father. "I'm disappointed in you."

"Nah," said Jace, who had snuck up behind me, poking me in the side with an empty bottle. "He found himself a girl."

I couldn't fault him for his conclusion, but this was the last path I wanted to go down. I tried not to be indiscreet about my hook-ups—I wouldn't give names or talk about specifics—but I'd never exactly been shy with my friends when I'd made a conquest. This, though—this was nothing to boast about.

I stayed silent, hoping they'd let the matter drop, but I had no such luck.

"So, was she cute?" Jace prompted, and Xander draped an arm around his shoulders.

“You know Ethan’s a man of exacting tastes,” he said, his fake posh accent grating on my nerves. They might not know they were talking about Julia, but I did, and my wolf was spitting mad.

“Piss off,” I said, trying to sound casual, and failing entirely. Leo gasped.

“Has Ethan Cain struck out for the first time in living memory?”

“No.” This time, I couldn’t keep the growl from my voice, and my friends exchanged loaded looks.

“So what, she wasn’t impressed with your moves?” Xander needled.

“You weren’t impressed with hers?” suggested Jace.

They were both so wrong, but now was not the time to think about the softness of Julia’s skin beneath my fingers, or the beautiful little hitches in her breath every time I hit that spot deep inside her. It was never, in fact, the time to think those things about my best friend’s little sister.

“Just can it, would you?” I insisted. “There’s no girl.”

Mercifully, Leo and Jace seemed to get the message, and Leo placed a firm hand on Xander’s shoulder before he could push any further.

“Sure,” said Leo, “but there’s definitely cleanup left to do, and you’re lagging.”

He shoved the trash can into my hands, and I took it gratefully, letting my friends’ chatter wash over me as I held out the bin for them to throw discarded bottles into. Usually, this kind of job was far below an Alpha’s station, but I liked to make an exception on the Solstice. It was a night for the Pack to let loose and not worry about

their responsibilities. Since my Betas and I had to stay sober for the sake of diplomacy in any case, I had decreed that we would be in charge of clean-up for the evening. It had been a popular announcement, and I didn't regret it for a moment.

The rhythm of the work was soothing, and I was almost calm again by the time Leo ruined it.

"Hey, anyone seen Julia?" he asked, and the other two shook their heads.

"She was sitting by the fire a couple of hours ago," Xander offered, and Jace nodded.

"Maybe she went to bed."

Predictably, Leo wasn't satisfied with those answers. Why should he be? Julia was a lone female—and a weak female at that.

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“I’m gonna go check on her,” Leo declared. “She shouldn’t be by herself out here.”

“She’s fine,” I snapped. “She went to bed.” It was a lie—or at least it could well be. Julia could be in bed for all I knew, or she could still be sitting alone in the dark, angry and rejected. I couldn’t stand the thought of Leo finding her like that. Would she tell him what had happened? Would he figure it out on his own? The shame of it shot through me, stirring my wolf from his fitful rest.

“Sounds like you need to go to bed, buddy,” said Xander. “You’re getting real grumpy.”

Grumpy didn’t begin to cover it. I hated the pitying looks my friends were giving me, as if I was just tired, or I’d been rejected by some girl. Still, I was grateful for the out when Leo took his trash can back and said,

“It’s been a long day. Literally. Go to bed, we can get the last couple of things here.”

I was all too happy to retreat back to the house, to undress for bed—shoving my Julia-scented clothes to the bottom of my hamper—and wait for sleep to take me. Everything would be better in the morning. It certainly couldn’t be much worse.

Usually, the low babble of talk and the occasional clink of glass against glass would have been soothing, but that night my ears pricked up at every fresh sound, my wolf still on edge inside me, waiting for a sign of Julia’s return. She was probably safely in her room, already asleep, I told myself. Like I should be. Even once the sound outside died down, the last of the cleanup crew making their way to bed, I was still awake and staring at the ceiling, trying to concentrate on my breathing, to fill my mind with

anything but her.

I could go and check on her. That was an option. I would crack open the door of her room and make sure she was there, in bed, like she was supposed to be. It would be remiss of me not to. I had a duty to Caleb, and if it started another argument, then so be it. Better to be yelled at by a safe Julia than endure the silence of uncertainty.

Despite the relative quiet of the house as I made my way down the hall, it still felt strange and loud. I had become used to solitude and silence at night, so the muffled sound of Xander snoring from the couch downstairs may as well have been a revving engine. At the very least, the sound of my footsteps was not so marked—with any luck, Julia wouldn't wake when I checked in.

I stood in front of her closed door for far too long, wishing that Julia snored or talked in her sleep or something that would give an indication of her presence without having to open the door. My wolf hated the inaction. He was urging me to push open the door, to make sure she was safe. He was urging me to do other things, as well, but I was continuing to ignore him on that count.

When I could stand it no longer, I turned the handle and gently pushed open the door. I was so certain of what I would see—Julia, her dark hair spread out over the pillow, face soft with sleep—that I almost managed to trick myself into seeing it. When I blinked, though, reality imposed itself on the image I had conjured: the room was empty, the bed untouched.

“Fuck.”

A quick glance out of the window told me that the embers of the bonfire had been thoroughly doused—no one needed to be woken by a wildfire—but I couldn't make out the shape of any people even in the pale dawn light. What was Julia doing out there? Was it stubbornness, was it simply to spite me, to make me worry, to punish

me for leaving her out there? Whatever her plan was, it had worked.

I didn't stop to grab shoes or a shirt before I crept downstairs and slipped out of the house. Briefly, I considered waking one of the guys and asking them to join me, but that would mean explaining why Julia was refusing to return home, why she was out in the dark alone, and they would all react poorly in their own ways. Leo would be judgmental, Xander would be indiscreet, and Jace would ask way too many questions. Even if they'd all been perfect confidants, I could never ask any of them to keep this from Caleb. No. I had gotten into this mess on my own, and I would get out of it on my own.

The town was dead quiet as I checked every side street and the back of each cottage. Normally, at this hour, there would be at least a few people up and about—the women in the laundry starting their day's work and those who cared for our elders beginning to prepare breakfast for the early risers—but everyone slept late the day after the Solstice. Everyone, it seemed, but me.

By the time I reached the remnants of the bonfire, nausea was curling in my stomach. Where the hell was she? Had she spent the last few hours learning to cloak herself entirely in shadow, to become one with them and go unnoticed? No, that was ridiculous.

Though there was no physical sign of her, Julia's scent lingered by the bonfire. Even beneath the smell of smoke and a hundred other shifters, I could pick out berries and dark chocolate, and I followed the unsteady path where we'd half-walked, half-stumbled to the old oak tree. As I breathed in our combined scents, I couldn't keep the memories at bay: the silky feeling of her hair in my fist, the yielding heat of her mouth, the trembling, fluttering pressure of her as she came around my cock.

I couldn't think of that now—preferably, I would never think of it ever again, but I was already losing that battle. The patch of flattened grass beneath the tree should be

of no interest to me. It was in the past. What mattered in the present was finding Julia safe and then ripping her a new one for making me worry before I dropped her back on Lapine where she belonged. I sniffed the air again and realized that she was two steps ahead of me, leading away from the oak; her scent was clear and unadulterated, heading in the direction of the Lapine Bridge.

That stubborn, stupid girl. Did she really think she could walk back to Lapine on her own? There were no wolf tracks to accompany the scent, so she must have been in human form. Why she would do that was beyond me, but I'd never claimed to understand the way her mind worked. At least it meant that if I shifted and went after her now, there was no way I wouldn't catch up to her before she made it back to Lapine. If she wanted to go home, I wasn't going to stop her, but she shouldn't be going alone.

My wolf was only too happy to take my skin; he'd been frothing at the mouth since I first touched Julia earlier that evening, and for a moment I worried that I wouldn't be able to wrestle control back once we caught up to her. That would be embarrassing, but a small price to pay for how concentrated I was once I let him have control. He wanted nothing but to find her, to have her, to claim her, and he wasn't going to let us rest until we caught up to her.

I made it to the Lapine Bridge in record time, and my wolf growled, pleased, to find that her scent was fresher here. It was still an hour or so old, but I could pause to catch my breath; I was getting closer, and I'd catch up to her soon.

I'd taken only a few steps onto the bridge itself when a new scent hit my nose—no, two new scents—no, three. They were males, unfamiliar and foul-smelling, and I was running again before I knew it. I should never have left her alone. She should never have wandered away. She was supposed to stay with me.

At the center of the bridge, all four scents abruptly disappeared, and I skidded to a

halt. The scents were muddled here, strong, and joined by an awful chemical smell as well as the coppery tang of blood. A small puddle of it decorated the stone, its scent strong enough to tell me immediately that it wasn't Julia's. Whatever those bastards had done, she'd put up a good fight. Of course, she had.

It didn't lessen my worry, though. If she'd hurt them, they were going to be pissed. I pressed my nose to where the unfamiliar scents were strongest—stone wasn't as good as wood or clothing at retaining a scent, but it was good enough for what I needed. While every shifter had their own unique scent, they also carried a subtler note that was shared with every member of their Pack. Lapine wolves had a hint of petrichor, while on Ferris, we shared the same fresh rainwater undertones.

Beneath the stench of stale sweat and tobacco and rotten food, I could make out something woodsy, like fresh-tilled earth. I snarled.

Arbor.

Chapter 7 - Julia

I came around slowly. First, there were only voices in the darkness, voices I didn't recognize, talking about—about something I couldn't grasp. My eyelids were heavy, and it took effort to lift them. When I did, the world was out of focus; I could see only that I was somewhere dark. I could see figures moving around me, smell the rancid stink of them: stale sweat and tobacco ash.

That was what brought the memory flooding back. I was alone on the bridge—until I wasn't. I was trapped, struggling; there was a chemical-smelling cloth over my nose and mouth—

“Good morning, sunshine.” The voice came from my blind side, making me flinch.

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“Where the hell am I?” I croaked, trying and failing to stand up. I was still woozy from whatever they’d used to knock me out, and as I rose unsteadily to my feet, I realized that my hands were tied behind my back, and my captor was forced to step into my field of vision in order to catch me before I fell.

He wasn’t as big as most Alphas I’d seen, but no one could argue he wasn’t one. Authority rolled off him in waves, and his smirk said he knew it. He was younger than I would imagine such an Alpha to be, with dirty blonde hair and only the suggestion of lines around his mouth. He smelled better than his hunters, but not by much, and beneath it I could smell the same fresh earth that was common to all Arbor wolves.

“You’re with us,” he said, lowering me back into the rough-hewn chair I’d been sitting in. “That’s all that matters.”

He smiled as he looked down at me, trussed up and barely conscious. All right. So he was one of those males. The ones who liked their women bound and helpless. Not to be cowed, I raised my head, my good eye meeting his gaze.

“Lowell Axton, I presume.”

Lowell Axton grinned. His canines were long and sharp, like they never fully shifted back from his wolf’s, and I shivered.

“She’s smart as well as pretty,” he said. “We’ve caught ourselves a prize.”

He was clearly enjoying our little hostage situation, and I was swiftly moving from

terrified to pissed off. If they were going to do something awful to me, the least they could do was warn me first. The cryptic shit was boring.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snapped.

“Surely you’ve heard about our little enterprise. Humans are willing to pay an impressive sum for shifter brides, you know. It’s all over the islands, much to my irritation.”

Ah, shit. If I got out of this alive, I was going to have to tell Caleb he was right. I hated it when Caleb was right. I especially hated it when his being right involved me getting kidnapped and sold off by a bunch of asshole shifters who hated every member of my Pack.

“Oh, I’ve heard about it,” I said. “I just thought it was so cartoonishly evil that it couldn’t be real.”

Axton’s expression darkened at that, his eyes glinting in the meager light.

“It’s easy to call other people evil when you’re sipping out of a silver spoon,” he snarled.

“Silver is from Argent. I’m a Lapine girl,” I pointed out because I had absolutely no self-preservation instincts. This time, however, my jab didn’t land. That mocking smile was back in place, and Axton’s voice was once smoother and even when he said,

“I’m very aware of that, Julia.”

I froze—how did he know my name?

“Don’t look so surprised,” he continued. “It’s well known that the Lapine Alpha’s sister has a cursed eye—a bad omen, you know.”

“You don’t think it’s stupid to kidnap the Alpha’s sister?” I said, grasping at the offered straw. “I’m sure you remember what happened last time Arbor threatened someone he loved.” Admittedly, they hadn’t known at the time that Alyssa was Caleb’s mate, or that Jack and Emmy were his children, but surely Arbor wouldn’t risk another conflict with Lapine over one defective female.

“It’s a risk, yes,” Axton admitted, “but I’m willing to bet that your scent, and the scent of my hunters, will have faded by the time anyone thinks to look for you. For the price a female with Alpha blood will fetch? It’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

He was right about one thing: no one was going to look for me. Caleb wasn’t expecting me back until late afternoon, and Ethan was hardly going to come looking for me after the fight we’d had. He’d assume, correctly, that I didn’t want to stay on his stupid island any longer and had gone home. If anything, I could console myself with the thought that if I did get sold off to some human and was never seen again, he’d feel really fucking bad about it.

“So what?” I asked Axton. “Your predecessor started a war with a couple of toddlers, and you’ve decided to commit to the bit? Arbor’s the Bad Pack now?”

Axton only sighed.

“Connor Slade was a stupid man with very little vision,” he started, clearly ramping up to some kind of villain monologue. “He took us to war over a slight, and he got what he deserved. The rest of us, however, had to live with the consequences of his incompetence. With half our fighting males dead, we’ve found ourselves with a surplus of females—their mates, their daughters, and so on—who are no longer of worth to the Pack.”

Yep. There it was.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I said, and Axton’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re very mouthy for a female,” he observed, and I smiled.

“So I’ve been told.”

“We don’t suffer females like that on Arbor.”

“No, I imagine it’s the females doing the suffering.”

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The back of his hand cracked against my cheekbone, hard enough to throw me off balance. Without my hands to catch me, the wind was knocked from my lungs as I hit the ground. Stars danced before my eyes, and when they cleared, I was confronted by Axton's dirt-encrusted feet.

"Didn't need a demonstration, but okay," I slurred.

When he crouched down, I flinched, expecting another blow, but he only looked at me with cold contempt in his eyes.

"The only reason we spared your life, witch, is because those stupid, soft humans think it makes you valuable, and I'm not going to disabuse them of the notion." Axton hissed. I wanted to deny it, but he'd never believe me over his men, and I didn't know how much good it would do me anyway. Arbor might hate witches, but the more valuable I was to them, the more likely I was to survive.

"Run out of smart remarks, have you?" Axton sneered. "Good. Get her ready."

It took my addled brain a moment to realize that the order wasn't directed at me. Axton's hideous feet disappeared from my limited vision, and I heard a door open, then slam shut, leaving me alone with whoever was tasked with preparing me for sale. I expected another gnarled hunter to loom over me, but all I heard was shuffling from the corner of the room.

"You go." The voice was a whisper, but definitely female.

"I'm scared," another voice whispered back.

“She’s tied up. What’s she going to do to you?” The third voice was clearly the one in charge, not bothering to whisper, and there was the sound of uneven footsteps, as though someone had been pushed.

“She’s a witch,” the first voice insisted.

“She’s literally lying with her face in the dirt right now,” I pointed out, and someone gasped. “If I had the power to stop it, do you really think I’d let your Alpha backhand me?”

There was a long, loaded silence before two brand-new sets of feet came into view, and I was hoisted back into a sitting position. This time, I faced a woman who appeared to be in her mid-fifties—she might have been younger, but life in Arbor wasn’t easy for women—with a stern expression. She was dressed conservatively, her hair pulled back into a neat bun, and she observed me like a piece of meat about to be taken to market, which I supposed I was.

I could only see one of the two younger women: the one on my good side. She must have been around my age, shorter and stockier than I was, with brown hair pulled into the same neat bun. The two girls on either side of me hauled me to my feet, and I was surprised to find that I was able to stand, just.

“Off,” snapped the older woman, gesturing to my dress.

“You’re going to have to untie me if you want—” I started, but then I felt the coldness of a blade against my skin, and my pretty party dress was cut from my body. I watched it fall to the ground in tatters, blinking back absurd tears. I’d been kidnapped and beaten, and I was about to be sold to the highest bidder; I wasn’t about to be defeated by the loss of my favorite dress.

“If you’re going to act like males, why even bother sending you?” I growled. “Axton

should have just left me to the hunters.”

“The hunters like to sample the goods before they go on sale,” the woman said matter-of-factly. “Are you sure you’d still prefer them?”

The very thought of it sent shivers down my spine, and I could only shake my head, speechless, for once.

I stayed quiet as the three women bustled around the room, which I now realized was not a dank cave or the dungeon of some castle but rather the main room of a cottage not so different from my own. The structure was clearly made of wood rather than stone, but it featured the same modest kitchenette and a dining table pushed to the side in favor of a large wooden tub, into which I was unceremoniously dumped.

“Does this place not have running water?” I asked before I could stop myself, and one of the younger women—the one with the brown bun—looked at me as if I were immensely stupid.

“There’s a shower upstairs, but you can’t wash yourself, so what’s the point? Rosie, get me the shampoo.”

The third woman was clearly the lowest-ranking, and as I looked at her properly, I realized she was barely a woman at all. Fourteen, maybe fifteen at a push, she was small and round-faced, with huge blue eyes and wispy blonde curls that tumbled from her attempt at the austere Arbor bun. Grabbing an unmarked bottle, she began washing my hair, rinsing the suds with cups of water in the same way Caleb used to do for me when I was little. It might have been soothing if not for the ache in my shoulders and the burn at my wrists where they were tied behind my back.

While Rosie worked on my hair, the other two scrubbed the dirt and grass stains from my body. Their touch was neither careful nor kind, and I flinched when the older

woman shoved my legs apart, tutting as she cleaned away the remnants of my tryst with Ethan.

Was that really just a few hours ago? It felt like a completely different world. What I wouldn't give for my biggest problem now to be that Ethan didn't want me as his mate.

When the older woman was satisfied with my cleanliness, I was allowed out of the bath and brusquely rubbed down with a towel before being shoved back onto my chair. I thought they'd just leave me there, but the older woman was still scowling at me as if I'd failed to meet her expectations.

"Fetch some salve for her face, before it starts to swell," she snapped, and Rosie scuttled off to rummage in a bag next to the tub.

"Aw, thanks," I said. "I didn't think you cared."

"I don't care about you, Witch. The less marked you are, the more you'll fetch. The more you fetch, the less likely it is that one of our daughters gets sold next."

It was a bleak way to view the world, and I almost felt sorry for her—until she turned her head to snap at the little one, Rosie.

"In the brown pot, idiot!"

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“S-sorry, Ma’am,” Rosie stammered, her hands shaking as she reached for the correct pot. She brought it over with trembling hands, struggling to unscrew the lid. I tried to give her an encouraging smile, but it only made her drop the lid. Her fingers were clumsy but gentle as she applied the strong, herbal-smelling salve, and my cheek grew cool beneath it.

“Thank you, Rosie,” I said softly. She didn’t quite smile, but a little of the terror dropped from her expression as she continued to rub the salve into my skin.

Once my blooming bruises had been tended to, and my hair was once again dry and shining, I received an approving nod.

“Those humans will pay through the nose for you,” the older woman declared. “Someone will be along to collect you in an hour or so.”

With that, I was dismissed. She turned to go, the two young women at her heels, and I was so taken aback that I could only blink after her for a few seconds before I found my voice.

“Hey!” I called. “Hey, you didn’t give me anything to wear.”

All three women stopped by the door, looking back at me with three very different expressions. Rosie’s big blue eyes were pitying. The older woman looked at me as if I were profoundly stupid, but it was the other young woman who spoke, her voice full of gleeful spite:

“How does a man know what he’s buying if he can’t see all of you?”

Chapter 8 - Ethan

We'd all heard the rumors about Arbor: pushed to desperation following their defeat on Lapine, they'd started selling their females off to rich humans. It was horrific on its own, but few of us had ever really thought they'd be stupid enough to try taking females from other islands. They weren't in any condition for another inter-Pack conflict, and maybe some Packs wouldn't start shit over one or two missing females, but a member of an Alpha's family was another matter entirely. Had they not known who Julia was when they took her? Had they simply seen a lone female on her way home from the Solstice and thought no one would miss her? That was going to be a costly mistake.

I had lost Julia's scent soon after the bridge and had no luck picking it back up once I arrived on Arbor. Instead, I took a gamble and made my way to the north beach. As far as I knew, it was the only place on Arbor where you could land a boat from the mainland, and if I could catch the scent of the humans who were trying to buy shifter women, I could follow them to the site of the sale.

Fortunately, my gamble paid off: the beach was littered with boats of various sizes, and feet churned up the sand, creating a narrow path through the woods and up into the mountains. Humans didn't possess scents as strong as shifters, but they often wore synthetic fragrances, which were extremely easy to track. My nose wrinkled at the harsh, artificial odor. The back of my throat burned, but if that scent led me to Julia, I could easily endure the discomfort. The humans would be slow as they made their way up the mountain, and in my current form, I would easily catch up to them. I barely stopped to catch my breath, pushing on across the beach and plunging into the forest in pursuit of the men who believed a woman like Julia could be bought.

They were not difficult to track. There was a group of them, to start with; it was difficult to tell exactly how many from where I was skulking in the underbrush, keeping out of sight as far enough away that the shifters in the group wouldn't catch

my scent, but I guessed there were about twelve humans and three shifter escorts. None of them were bothering to keep quiet, either, and I heard them long before I got close enough to catch sight of the party.

As soon as I did, my hackles rose. I wanted nothing more than to charge at them, to rip them limb from limb for thinking themselves above us, treating our women as if they could be bought like objects. Even against twelve of them and three shifters, I might still have a chance. I was big enough. If I did that, though, I might never find Julia. Finding Julia was what mattered, if only to bring her home to Caleb and her family.

The path through the forest was winding, and the humans bitched and moaned with every step. They were all dressed in outfits I'd only ever seen in movies or on the covers of books: dress pants and starched white shirts with jackets over the top. Their shoes were shiny and hard-looking, filling me with irritation and impatience. I needed them to get where they were going, needed them to lead me to where Julia was.

Once they arrived, they were fair game, I reminded myself. I could spring forward and take out as many as I could, hoping that there weren't more hunters inside. It was far from a perfect plan, but I didn't have time to think of a better one, because it wasn't long before the party stopped in front of a narrow cave opening. One of the shifters led the way inside, while the humans began to file in behind him. The other two shifters were clearly waiting to bring up the rear, and I was about to spring forward and take my chances against them when one of the humans spoke up.

"You guys go in," he said. "I've gotta use the little boys' room. Say, buddy—where is the little boy's room?"

The shifter he'd addressed only laughed.

"It's all around you. Go wild."

The guy looked a bit put out, but he waved the others in and headed into the forest alone. Suddenly, I had a better plan. I followed him a few yards into the forest, where he set down the expensive-looking briefcase he'd been carrying and unzipped his fly to relieve himself against one of the trees. I let him finish—I wasn't a monster—before I shifted back to human form and made my presence known.

It was easy work to grab the human from behind, slapping a hand over his mouth. Their senses were so dull, how did they even function?

“When I take my hand off your mouth, you aren't going to make a sound, got it?” I growled into his ear, and the human nodded frantically. I cautiously removed my hand from his mouth, and true to his word, he didn't make a sound. That was a good start. When I released his hands, he immediately put space between us but didn't attempt to run. His eyes were wide with fear, darting around for escape routes that were all equally useless to him.

“Take your clothes off,” I demanded, and the human's eyebrows almost disappeared into his hairline. He scrambled a few feet further back.

“Hey, man, you're uh—you're a fine specimen and all, but I'm really not into—” he garbled, clearly not understanding that this was not a request. Alpha authority might not work on humans, but I didn't need it. Humans, as a rule, were terrified of shifters—even the ones who had come to Arbor to buy themselves a bride would no doubt drug or cage the females once they returned to the mainland. I only needed to throw my weight around, growl a little, and he'd be putty in my hands.

“Your clothes, I need them. Take them off,” I repeated. He made no move to try to get away this time, but nor did he begin to strip.

“Oh. Right, yeah,” he said. “I mean I'd prefer to—”

“Now,” I growled, flashing elongated fangs, and he finally jumped to attention.

“You got it, buddy,” he yelped as he shucked off his jacket and began undoing the buttons of his shirt with trembling fingers. I took the garments as he handed them to me, pulling them over my nakedness. The fit wasn’t good—the guy was tall for a human, but still a couple of inches shorter than me, and I strained out of his no-doubt expensive suit. The shoes were definitely too small—it hurt to squeeze my feet into them—but I reminded myself that I wouldn’t be wearing this ridiculous get-up for long.

“Where’s your false scent?” I asked, once I was dressed, and the human stared back at me, naked and confused.

“My what?”

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“Whatever stuff you have that makes you smell different,” I snapped. “Artificial.”

“Oh, my cologne?”

“Sure.”

“In my bag,” the human said, pointing to the leather briefcase he’d left propped up against a rock. “You like it? You can take it, man, be my guest.” He scuttled over to the briefcase, rifling through it and picking out a glass bottle with a spray top. He handed it to me, eager to please, and my nose wrinkled.

“It smells awful,” I said, but I took it from him regardless, spraying myself generously until I was certain no shifter would be able to pick out my natural scent beneath the offensive artificial perfume. I probably wouldn’t pass in a one-on-one setting, but in a dimly lit area with a mix of humans and shifters? I’d manage for a little while, and that was all I needed.

The human put up surprisingly little fight as I tied him to a tree with his own necktie, and I might have felt sorry for the guy if he wasn’t here to buy another person. My own search of his briefcase revealed several sizable wads of cash, and a wave of nausea hit me.

“Yeah, that’s all yours, man. Take whatever you want,” the human was babbling. The idea that such a weak, spineless excuse for a man really thought he could handle a shifter woman was laughable, but I wasn’t in the mood for humor. I didn’t answer him as I picked up the briefcase and left him there—he’d wiggle out eventually, or one of the Arbor shifters would stumble across him later. What happened then was

his problem, not mine.

His cries followed me all the way to the crevice in the mountainside, but once I slipped through the opening, they faded out of my hearing. Inside, the narrow path soon expanded into a modest cavern, lit by a few torches hung on the walls. That worked in my favor—between the humans, the Arbor shifters, and the slightly raised stage taking up about a third of the floor space, the cavern felt crowded, and it was easy to slip in unnoticed at the back.

That was when I saw them. About ten females were consigned to one corner, naked, shackled at the ankles, and trembling with terror. Among them, Julia stood out like an eagle among pigeons. Refusing to make herself small or avert her gaze from the males who sought to subjugate her, she held her head high and defiant. I hoped she'd given the Arbor hunters hell.

A hushed anticipation filled the cavern, deepening as a shifter stepped onto the stage. Although I had never met Lowell Axton, I recognized him. He was clearly an Alpha, and the Arbor shifters stood ready as he raised a hand for silence.

“Good evening, gentlemen. Thank you all for making the journey out to our little island.” His smile showed too many teeth. “As promised, we have an array of potential brides for you tonight, and I’m sure they’ll make several of you very happy husbands.”

Husbands. Brides. It was all a sham. As little as marriage meant to shifters, it was still a bond in its own way, and this sick ritual made it an utter mockery.

I tried to pay as little attention as possible to the first few sales. They were all the same: a terrified girl was pushed onto the stage, the bidding began, one human emerged victorious, handed over the promised money to Axton, and was “wedded” to his prize on the stage. The crowd jeered for kisses, and my hands balled into fists at

my side as the humans groped the females, pressing slobbery kisses to their unwilling mouths. I was only here for Julia, I reminded myself. There was nothing I could do for those women until we were both safe. After that—after that, we'd find a way.

It felt like hours passed in that too-small cavern, surrounded by the scent of acrid cologne and the females' fear, until finally, the penultimate girl was pushed onto the stage. She was a small, freckled redhead, no older than twenty at best, but she was brave. When one of the shifters unlocked her shackles, she made a desperate break for the exit—there was no way she could be fast enough. A hunter grabbed her around the waist and carried her, kicking and screaming, from the cavern, followed by her dour-looking buyer.

As much as I pitied her, I couldn't spare her more thought, because we had finally arrived at the last lot: Julia.

"We've saved the best for last, gentlemen," Axton announced. "I hope your pockets are deep this evening because we won't be letting this one go cheap. Not only is she a beauty, but she has Alpha blood in her." A ripple of interest ran through the audience, and I felt sick to my stomach.

Julia stepped onto the stage like a queen greeting her subjects, even with her ankles shackled, and there was more than one wolf whistle from the audience. A pang of regret rushed through me—I should have played along with her little theory that we were mates, should have marked her where the slope of her elegant neck met her shoulder. I should have marked her as mine, so these pathetic excuses for men wouldn't even consider touching her.

"I know, I know," continued Axton, smug and slimy, "she's very exciting. So what if I told you she was also a witch?"

How the fuck did they know that? Her own family didn't know. Had they been

trailing her all night? My blood boiled, and tamping down the growl that grew in my chest was more effort than it had ever been before.

“Bidding for this beauty starts at fifty thousand,” continued Axton. It was more than twice as much as any other female had gone for, but that didn’t stop several hands going up. I didn’t know exactly how much was in my stolen briefcase, but it didn’t matter. I shoved my hand in the air, feeling dirty as much as determined.

With every price hike, I raised my hand again, barely hearing the numbers anymore. I was certain it had gone far beyond the wads of cash in the briefcase at my side, but it didn’t matter—I only needed the chance to get close to Julia, just needed them to unlock the shackles around her ankles, and we would make our escape. My fingers were itching by the time it was down to me and one other person, who was looking more and more irritated with every bid I made. Axton, by contrast, looked like the cat that got the cream, and it irked me to know I wouldn’t get the chance to rip him limb from limb today. That would have to wait.

“Two-twenty,” Axton called, and the human raised his hand.

“Two-thirty.” I raised mine.

“Two-forty.” The human was starting to look nervous.

“Two-fifty.” I raised my hand, telling myself this was nearly over.

“Two-sixty.” There was a pause. The human looked pained. He shook his head.

Despite my obvious victory, Axton took another several interminable seconds asking the rest of the crowd if they were absolutely certain they were out before he finally announced,

“Then she’s sold to the gentleman at the back. Come up and claim your bride, Sir.”

There was no triumph within me as I made my way through the throng and up to the stage. This was the riskiest part of the whole plan—there was little chance I would be recognized on sight, but there was still the possibility that the scent-masking cologne would fail me. If it was discovered I was a shifter before we had the chance to make our escape, Julia and I were both done for.

When I met her wide blue eyes, it was clear she knew that as well as I did.

Chapter 9 - Julia

Ethan.

The breath left my lungs in a great rush. He'd looked for me. He'd come for me. He was going to take me home. My legs trembled beneath me, so relieved that I could have dropped to the floor then and there, but I couldn't show that I knew him, couldn't show that I'd been desperately hoping he might care just enough to come after me. I kept my head high, and if my body shook, that was surely understandable: I was about to be married to a stranger who had bought me as a curiosity.

Ethan shoved a briefcase into Axton's arms, not making eye contact, and said,

"Keep the change."

I held my breath as Axton clicked the briefcase open, smiling at the contents. As with the other humans, he didn't count the money handed to him, no doubt assuming that the humans' fear of him would protect him from being short-changed. Nonetheless, the briefcase must have contained a shit-ton of money if Axton wasn't questioning Ethan at all.

Where the hell had he gotten that money? And where had he gotten that suit? It didn't fit him well, and as I approached, my nostrils were assaulted with an overpowering artificial scent. He didn't address me, didn't touch me, but made a show of examining me, leaning in close so he was close enough for me to speak without anyone else hearing.

“You reek,” I told him, because he did, and because I was too shocked to say anything else. Graciously ignoring that, he scanned me from head to toe, his eyes lingering on the slight bruising on my ribs and the redness on my cheekbone that Rosie’s salve hadn’t entirely prevented.

“Who hurt you?” he whispered. I could hear the fury in his voice, and my wolf preened.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied—I couldn’t risk him going feral on Axton right now. Getting out had to be the priority, and I hoped to hell he had a plan for that.

“Later,” he promised, his grey eyes dark with violence. I nodded. Later, I would tell him everything. Later, when we were free. For now, we were being watched by dozens of eyes, and Ethan’s show of inspecting me was coming to its close. I needed us to be gone, to be away from the hungry eyes that never left my naked body and the envious jeering of the crowd.

“Are you pleased with her?” Axton’s voice made my skin crawl, and Ethan instinctively put his body between us.

“I see one of your men took some liberties,” Ethan said, his voice tight and angry. Axton only shrugged, smirking in a way that made it abundantly clear who was responsible for my bruises.

“She’s feisty, what can I say? You might have to give her a few bruises yourself.”

Ethan’s whole body tensed, and I tilted my body away from the audience, hoping they didn’t see me brush my fingertips against his wrist. He might not have marked me, might not even accept that a bond existed between us at all, but I knew the shock of my touch would be enough to distract him. Sure enough, he startled at the brush of my skin against his, momentarily distracted from his rage.

Mercifully, Axton liked the sound of his own voice too much to let silence lie.

“Shall we go ahead with the ceremony, then?” he asked. “I’m sure you and your Packmates are keen to get your new brides back to the mainland.”

It was a nice touch, suggesting that the humans were a part of their own Pack. They might look down on us, calling us savage and backward, but they all wanted to be like us. Why else would wealthy human men spend their hard-earned money on illegal shifter brides?

Ethan nodded, clearly not trusting himself to speak without a growl. God, he was a terrible actor—if the two of us got out of here undetected, it would be a miracle.

I supposed I had the easier job out of the two of us: there was no need to disguise my flinch when Axton took my hand, lifting it up to offer it to Ethan, who looked about ready to rip Axton’s arm off for daring to touch me. My heart pounded against my ribcage, willing him not to blow cover for the sake of his Pack’s old-fashioned ideas about who gets to touch a female. He’d broken those rules himself, pretty damn thoroughly, only a few hours previously.

As he took my hand, I felt the rush of the bond between us, and I knew he felt it, too. My wolf howled within me, wanting him to simply pick me up and carry me out of here, to stake his claim where everyone could see, where everyone could know I was his. I was a woman of more modern sensibilities, and I was mostly concerned with staying alive for the next ten minutes. Still, it was difficult not to squeeze his hand, to draw him close and take comfort in knowing that I was no longer alone.

The ceremony was a farce: the human buyers needed to remain anonymous, so no names were asked for or given, which worked in our favor, at least, and no rings were exchanged, no hands fasted. It was barely a wedding, but enough to scare the ignorant females into believing they belonged to the men they were sold to.

Still, even for this absolute non-event, I would have picked anyone in the world but Lowell Axton to carry out the ceremony. His presence loomed large between us, his voice slimy and venomous.

“Do you take this woman to be your wedded wife?” he asked Ethan. “To keep her under your care and consider yourself bound to her?”

“I do,” lied Ethan. It was funny, really. He’d refused to be bound to me under the old oak, and so he was bound to me by force in a cave on Arbor. Like the elders said, fate always got her way in the end.

Axton turned to me next, and no matter how many times I’d heard the words over the last hour, they still made me sick to my stomach.

“Do you take this man to be your wedded husband? To be kept under his care and be obedient to him?”

Looking up at Ethan, I expected to see rage still simmering in his expression, but when my eyes met his, there was something almost playful there. Obedient. He knew better than anyone that I would make no man an obedient wife. Trying to keep the smile from my lips, I breathed,

“I do.”

When Axton spoke the ceremony’s final words, I could hear the triumph in his voice:

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“Then I pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

The crowd before us jeered, and it was becoming harder and harder to appear unbothered by it. I managed to keep my head high just long enough for Ethan to lean in and touch his lips to mine. The kiss was dry and quick and utterly without feeling. Of course it was. This whole thing was only a ploy to get me away from here, to get me home. It shouldn't leave me feeling hollow and humiliated. I was already naked and chained in front of a room full of humans and too many Arbor hunters, yet somehow the utter disinterest of his kiss left me feeling more exposed, more vulnerable than anything else.

I pushed the feeling away—we were so close to getting out of here, and that was what I ought to be concentrating on. All we needed was for the hunters to release me, and for the pair of us to get out of this godforsaken cave. Axton was saying something to Ethan, whose jaw was twitching with every passing second, when I felt a hand around my ankle. One of the hunters was kneeling at my feet, inserting a key into the lock on my right leg.

It fell to the floor with a metallic clank. Ethan flinched, barely pretending to listen as Axton thanked him for his patronage. A second clank and I was free of my shackles. My stomach fluttered with anticipation: we were really going to make it. All we needed was for Ethan to nod politely, thank Axton, and take me out of there.

Then, of course, it all went to shit.

“Make sure you get some good use of this one, eh?” said the hunter as he got to his feet. He smirked in Ethan's direction, landing a firm smack on my ass.

There was no time to stop it, no time to do damage control, no time to think. The sound didn't even have time to echo before a ferocious growl ripped itself from Ethan's chest, his canines lengthening as he bared his teeth at the hunter.

Voices rang through the cave. Orders from Axton warred with frightened and angry shouts from the humans, and all around us, Arbor hunters were shedding their human skin. There was no way we were getting out alone—there had to be ten Arbor wolves between us and the exit, too many for even Ethan to take, and I wished I had any kind of useful magic. Alyssa could set things on fire, could push back any attacker with the force of her magic, but all I had was a neat little shadow puppet trick.

Beside me, Ethan roared as he shifted into his wolf form, causing another ripple to run through the crowd. Ethan was twice the size of any Arbor hunter, unmistakably an Alpha, and the split second of shock was all the time we had to make a run for it. Every crevice and corner of the cave was shrouded in dark shadow, and I took a deep breath as I reached into each of those places and pulled.

Darkness covered the cave like a heavy blanket, clinging to the shadows as I shifted into wolf form, making a frantic dash toward the fresh air beneath the musk of shifters and the heaviness of the humans' false scent. Ethan was hot on my tail, and the humans instinctively scrambled out of our way, blind and panicked. It would have been an easy route to the exit if the Arbor shifters hadn't adjusted to the darkness—they relied on more than just sight, navigating by sound and scent as one, two, three of them rammed into us. I crashed to the ground, losing my grasp on the shadows as they snapped back into place, and the room was once again filled with flickering torchlight.

No. I thought. We can't fail now. The crack in the cave wall was mere feet away—we'd made it across most of the space in our first mad dash—and I was going to get out of here if it killed me. For a second, I thought it might, as the Arbor hunter who'd tackled me pressed his paws against my chest, mouth open, his teeth long and

sharp and yellow. His jaws snapped closed inches from my neck, and he gave a startled yelp as he was yanked backward and off of me, helpless in the jaws of Ethan's enormous grey beast.

Ethan threw the hunter hard against the cave wall, nudging me back to my feet with his bloodstained muzzle, and as I slipped into the narrow passageway, Ethan close at my heels, I risked a glance back at the carnage we'd left in our wake. Axton was the only Arbor shifter who hadn't given his skin over to his wolf, but the look on his face was far from human. He wasn't going to let this lie, and the remaining hunters were already looking to him for the order to pursue. Ethan and I might have made it out of the cave by the skin of our teeth, but the chase had just begun.

Chapter 10 - Ethan

There was no time to appreciate the fresh air outside the cave or the warm rays of the early evening sun. The snapping and snarling of the Arbor hunters drowned out the lazy birdsong, and my own breath rushed in my ears. Julia was just ahead of me, and I nipped at her heels to urge her on. We had just enough of a lead that the Arbor hunters weren't quite at our heels, but it wouldn't be long before they caught up to us; they knew the terrain, and they didn't earn their reputation as the best hunters in the Nightfire archipelago for nothing.

If nothing else, they'd chosen a location toward the north of the island for their auction, so it was a sprint rather than a marathon to get us to the Argent bridge. An hour, maybe less, to the bridge itself, and another half hour to cross, and we'd be home free. I could hear the hunters behind us, but they hadn't moved to flank us, weren't spreading out to cage us in, and I couldn't tell if it was their mistake or if they simply had a different strategy in mind. I couldn't afford to rely on them continuing to lag behind. We had to lose them.

Nipping at Julia's left flank, I dove into the thickest part of the forest, hoping to lose

our trail among the trees. It was hard going through the thickets and brambles, and it slowed us down, and I prayed I hadn't made a mistake. I could no longer hear the Arbor hunters behind us, and maybe that meant we'd lost them, but maybe they knew exactly where to head us off.

It didn't matter. I'd made the decision now, and we had to stick to it. We continued battling north through dense trees and thick undergrowth, and when we finally emerged, the bridge was in sight. The space between us was flat and exposed—a primitive road winding through the grass, with more vibrant green forests surrounding it. Setting off at a sprint, we raced across the grass, panting, victorious, and so, so close.

A flash of white fur in the corner of my eye. A flash of brown. Shapes were emerging from the forest at the edge of the grass: one, two, three, four, five, six Arbor hunters converging between us and the bridge, hackles raised and teeth bared. If we wanted to get across the bridge, there was no option but to fight.

Putting on a burst of speed, I left Julia behind me—I couldn't let her engage, even with her newfound magic, she was far too vulnerable for the kind of fight this was going to be—barreling toward the waiting hunters. I met them at the tree line, the first going down easily, caught between my jaws before he had time to dodge out of my path. I felt his bones crunch between my teeth, and I flung his body to the side.

My first attack may have lasted only a few seconds, but that was all the other hunters needed to prepare their own. A brown wolf charged straight at me, his muzzle scarred and teeth bared, while a pair of black beasts snapped at my back legs. I kicked out behind me, striking one in the face, before I dug in my back paws and leaped right over the brown wolf's head, landing behind him just in time to turn and sink my teeth into his hind leg. The brown wolf yelped in pain, and I hurled him aside, ready to face a new attack.

This time, the remaining four stuck close together, coming at me in a great rush—the only way to bring down a wolf as big as I was. For every slash of my claws and snap of my teeth, there were two from my attackers, and it was all I could do to keep them at bay long enough to prevent them from sinking their teeth into my jugular.

My claws slashed across the muzzle of one of the black wolves just as a set of teeth sank into my right hind leg. I whipped around, sinking my own larger teeth into the offender's flank—he released me with a yelp, and I released him for only as long as it took to reposition and bite down again on the side of his throat. This time, there was no yelp, only a gurgle as his legs gave out beneath him.

When I lifted my head, there were teeth inches from my face—and then they were gone, in a rush of black fur and a vicious snarl. The two wolves tumbled to the ground rolling over one another until the hunter was on his back with Julia above him. She had caught him at the joint of his forelimb, and he struggled to right himself as she slashed at his face and chest with bared claws.

Her wolf was like a force of nature, utterly without mercy, but there was a reason I hadn't wanted her to fight. On her blind side, one of the two remaining hunters was coiling, ready to strike, and I wouldn't reach them in time to save her the way she'd saved me. Even as I started forward, the final hunter sprang between us, blocking my path. I snapped for his throat, but he was fast, ducking low to avoid the sharp bite of my teeth.

I tried to leap over him, needing to reach Julia—she was on her back, desperately swiping up at the hunter looming over her—but the hunter beneath me was ready for it. He went for my underbelly, his claws raking long red lines down my torso. The cuts were shallow, but it was enough to slow me down, and he grabbed my back leg with his teeth as soon as I landed. Again, I whipped around to deliver a bite of my own, but he was too quick. Dropping my leg, he dodged out of range, turning to join his Packmate on top of Julia.

I couldn't let that happen. With a ferocious snarl, I leaped after him, landing on his back with both my front paws. He crumpled beneath my weight—even as my claws dug into his back, his legs were buckling and his ribcage cracking under my paws.

There was no victory in it: even as I felt the life leave the body beneath mine, I watched the last Arbor hunter pick up an already limp Julia in his jaws and throw her hard against a tree. The smack of her head against the trunk reverberated through me, and she shifted automatically as she slid, naked and bloodied, to the ground.

My vision went red. Lunging forward, I was nothing but a hurricane of claws and teeth, and when I was done with him, the final wolf barely resembled a wolf at all. My wolf was still baying for blood, but the Arbor hunters were all dead at my feet, and there were far more pressing matters to deal with.

Wrestling my skin back, I ran to where Julia was lying at the base of the tree, her dark hair covering her face, matted with dirt and blood.

“Julia. Julia, look at me,” I begged, cupping her face in my hands as I turned her face to mine. The side of her face was red with blood, her bright blue eye in stark and beautiful contrast as she blinked blearily up at me.

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“Oh, it’s you,” she said, and her frown was so familiar that I could have wept with relief.

“Disappointing, I know,” I said. Scanning her body, she had a few shallow cuts and bruises, but nothing obviously worrying other than the wound on her head. “You just need to put up with me until we’re over the bridge onto Argent, okay? You’re got to stay awake.”

There was no way she didn’t have a concussion—her eyes were barely focused—and if I knew one thing, it was that you didn’t let someone with a concussion lose consciousness.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Julia snapped, contrary to the last. It was going to be a whole different battle to get her across the bridge, but I was going to win that one, too.

“Okay,” I said gently, hoping she was just woozy enough for this ploy to work. “Okay, have a little nap. You must be tired.”

“Fuck off,” she replied immediately. “I’m not tired.”

I didn’t know whether I should be grateful that I got exactly the response I needed, or worried that she was so out of it she didn’t even remember the past thirty seconds.

“I’m going to pick you up now, alright?” I told her. I didn’t want to move her, but it was the only option. We had to get across the bridge. Predictably, she tried to fight me on it.

“I can get up,” she insisted. This time, I wasn’t going to humor her.

“You absolutely cannot,” I said. “Here we go.”

Hooking one arm under her back and another beneath her knees, I lifted her up against my chest. To my surprise, she snuggled up against me, smearing blood over my skin.

“You’re warm,” she mumbled, soft and sleepy. It made something flutter inside me, but there was no time for that. She couldn’t go to sleep.

“Hey, hey, what about that escape we pulled off in the cave, huh?” I said, louder than I would have liked to, as I picked my way around the dead Arbor hunters toward the bridge. “You were amazing.”

“I was?” she asked, groggy and confused.

“You had the whole cave in darkness, remember?” I prompted. Did she not remember the cave, either? Mercifully, she smiled.

“Oh yeah. Wouldn’t have had to do that if you weren’t such a bonehead. We were nearly home free.”

“He shouldn’t have touched you,” I grumbled. I knew I should have held it together, but even the memory of his hand coming down on her ass, the lascivious way he smiled as he hit her, had my wolf ready for fresh blood.

“Stupid,” Julia chided me, and there was no way to defend myself. If I hadn’t given us away, we’d never have had to fight our way onto the bridge. She would never have gotten hurt.

“Stupid,” I agreed, and she hummed, pleased. I could feel her trying to snuggle down to sleep again, and I squeezed her thigh as hard as I could. The resulting glare was far less piercing than usual, but it was something, at least.

“Remember when you bet me that I couldn’t climb the tree in the Lapine square faster than you?” I asked, figuring that the memory of her past victory would keep her alert. To my dismay, her reply was muted.

“Mmm. You said it wouldn’t be fair to take the bet. Arrogant.” At least she was still insulting me, I supposed.

“You had to rope Caleb in to convince me,” I prompted, and Julia huffed out a half-hearted little laugh.

“It was hard, too,” she said. “He thinks you’re always right. Good thing he has me to set him straight.”

“You tore up that thing like a little squirrel. Left me in the dust.” When she didn’t respond, I asked, “How old were we?”

“I was thirteen. You were eighteen,” Julia told me. That sounded about right. Only a year into being Alpha and barely a grown man, I’d been very conscious of anything that might be seen as “childish”. Climbing trees had definitely been off the list of acceptable activities, but Julia had always made me stupid.

“I was impressed... and a little embarrassed,” I admitted, and Julia blinked up at me, eyes wide with surprise.

“Really? I thought you hated me for that. I was—I was so sad.”

“Sad?” I echoed. That couldn’t have been what she meant: Julia didn’t care what

anyone thought of her, least of all me.

“Had a stupid, stupid crush on you,” she confessed. Her words were slightly slurred, and I knew she would never have said any of this under normal circumstances. Listening felt wrong, but there was little else I could do. “Thirteen-year-old me would be, like, so excited that we’re married.”

My wolf growled, low and pleased; I should have changed the subject, should have dropped it and forgotten about it, but instead I asked,

“What changed?”

“You’re an asshole,” said Julia, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Perhaps, to her, it was.

I looked down at her, preparing to—what, apologize? It didn’t matter what I’d been going to do, because Julia was no longer looking at me. Her eyes were slipping determinedly shut, heedless of my squeezing her thigh or saying her name.

I picked up the pace of my steps. We were nearly to safety, but if she died in my arms halfway across the bridge, it would all have been for nothing. It felt like an eternity before the Argent sentries came into view at the end of the bridge, and I raised my voice, desperate yet relieved.

“This is Ethan Cain. I need a ride to the Alpha’s residence, and I need a medic. Now!”

Chapter 11 - Julia

Everything hurt. My head throbbed, every limb ached, and there were several lines of burning pain in my midriff and across my shoulders. I supposed I should take it as a good sign: if I were dead, I probably wouldn’t feel this shitty.

Memory came back to me in wisps and half-formed pictures: the attack on the bridge—shackles placed on my bare ankles—a cavern full of jeering humans—out of nowhere, Ethan—the marriage—the mistake—then running, running, running. I remembered the battle by the bridge, the fear that had shot through me when I saw

the hunters converge on Ethan. I remembered running forward, taking out the wolf who was going for his throat, and then nothing but pain.

Even the light as it filtered through the window hurt my eyes. I opened them blearily, blinking in the morning sun. We must have made it to Argent, because as shitty as I felt, I was at least in a bed, my wounds clean and bandaged, and I was wearing an oversized tee that had traces of Leo's familiar cinnamon and sandalwood scent.

Leo himself was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Ethan was asleep in an easy chair at the foot of the bed, his head lolling to the side at an angle that must surely hurt his neck. I was far too exhausted to sort through the myriad emotions that rushed through me at the sight; relief, anger, gratitude, and an awful sort of fondness all muddled in my brain like the world's worst cocktail. He was drooling ever so slightly, his mouth hanging open and his eyebrows drawn together in a frown even as he slept. He looked vulnerable, and I couldn't stand it.

"Good morning, sunshine," I said, and he jolted upright. Rubbing his eyes and blinking blearily back at me, it took him a second to readjust.

"You're awake." An astute observation, I countered with one of my own:

"So are you."

He nodded, standing up abruptly and reaching for a bottle on the nightstand.

"Good," he said, his voice still low and sleep-rough. "Drink this. The witch said you needed to have it as soon as you woke up."

Gingerly, I shuffled myself into a sitting position and reached out for the bottle—it was rough glass with a cork stopper, filled with a vaguely green liquid that didn't look at all appetizing.

“I was kinda hoping for some coffee.”

“I’ll ask Leo. Someone will bring a cup with breakfast.”

“Hey,” I reached out to grip his wrist, shivering with misplaced desire as the bond surged, urgent, between us. “What happened?”

He snatched his arm back. I knew he’d felt that pull, too, but he’d decided to deal with it the way he dealt with everything else: by glaring at me.

“You ran off and got yourself kidnapped—” he started, and I pushed down my immediate flash of anger. We’d both been through it over the past couple of days. For once, I was willing to give him grace about his choice of words, and I cut him off before he could say anything further.

“After the fight,” I clarified. “How did you get us here?”

“I picked you up and carried you over the bridge,” he said, as if I were something he’d picked up at the market or the commissary. “You passed out just before we got to Argent, but Leo had a witch on hand to ensure you pulled through. Drink that.”

He pointed to the still-stoppered bottle in my hand, watching me like a hawk as I pulled out the cork and gave it a tentative sniff. The liquid smelled strong, herbal, and bitter, making me wince. I didn’t want it anywhere near my mouth, but if this witch had managed to keep me from dying, then I was sure she knew what she was doing.

The realization hit me like a truck: I really could have died. Suddenly, the hand holding the bottle was shaking, and I placed it back down on the nightstand next to me. It would only make a bad few days worse if I spilled my healing potion all over Leo’s clean sheets.

“Thanks for making sure I didn’t die,” I said. The words tumbled out before I could stop them, hideously earnest. Ethan must have been as embarrassed by it as I was because he only shrugged.

“I did what I had to.”

I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. The tension stretched out between us, and I grasped for the only thing I knew that might mitigate my mortification: sarcasm.

“It was pretty cool of you to jump in and save my life when I thought I could fight six guys at once, Julia,” I said, affecting a terrible, low, grumbly voice. “Thanks for saving our asses with your cool magic after I lost my shit at the crucial moment, Julia.”

I hadn’t really expected him to laugh. I knew better than to expect him to laugh at any of my jokes, ever. It still hurt when he snapped back at me,

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“You shouldn’t have done it.”

“What, save your life?” I was clinging to the last scrap of my teasing smile.
“Someone got up on the wrong side of the chair this morning.”

“You shouldn’t have stormed off in the middle of the fucking night, alone,” he said. His hands were balled into fists at his sides as he loomed over me, stormy and demanding.

“Ah, that.”

“Did you even think for a second how stupid that was?” he continued. “We all knew Arbor was rounding up stray females.”

I had no response for him. I had no defense for what I’d done, besides that I’d simply had no other option. I hated how much I had to crane my neck to meet his eye from my sickbed. It had taken him all of two minutes since waking up to make me feel small and weak and awful: it must be a new record.

“Tell me what the hell else I was supposed to do,” I said, hating that my voice came out breathy and trembling. If he noticed I was upset, he didn’t show it, merely continued lecturing me as though I was an unruly child who had stayed up past her bedtime.

“You were supposed to come back to the house and let me take you home in the morning.”

“After you knotted me and left me alone in the dark?” I shot back. Anger was beginning to course through my veins, and I was so grateful for it. “I was just supposed to come down to breakfast and joke around with the guys and let you drive me home?”

“Yes,” he said, stone-faced. I couldn’t stand that he was trying to answer with just one word to escape this situation, but if he wasn’t going to speak, then he was going to get a piece of my mind.

“I’m not one of your flings, Ethan. You can’t make me feel stupid and small and like I don’t deserve basic fucking decency,” I continued, and that must have struck a nerve.

“You don’t know anything about—”

“About how you treat the women you fuck? I think I do.”

We could have been back beneath the old oak, half-naked and awkward in the dark. He could hardly look at me then, and he could hardly look at me now.

“That’s not—that was different, and you know it,” he said, and I was so done with him telling me what I did and didn’t know.

“How so?” I needled. “Please, wise Alpha, enlighten me.”

“None of those women ever expected anything from me. They were adult enough to know when sex is just sex. None of them ever claimed we were mates.”

I never wanted to hear the word mate again. Every time it came out of his mouth it was to deny the bond I could feel like another limb. Sure, it wasn’t a limb I wanted, but it was there all the same, and every fresh rejection was a fresh hurt.

“Trust me,” I said. “I regret bringing that up.”

“That’s what you regret?” he repeated, incredulous. “I regret this whole fucking mess.”

“Why did you even come after me, then?” I cried. I wanted this to be over, I wanted to stick the knife in and twist until it hurt too much for either of us to continue. “You clearly don’t want me, and it would’ve surely saved you a whole lot of hassle.”

“You know why I came after you,” Ethan insisted, and I could have screamed. I didn’t know anything about the way his mind worked; nothing about the sad, unbending metal clockwork of his mind was even close to comprehensible to me.

“Wouldn’t it be easier for you if I disappeared off to the mainland to live in a nice cage and never bothered you again?” I asked, just to see him flinch. “Wouldn’t it be easier than having to acknowledge you were ever weak?”

“Don’t joke about that,” he growled through gritted teeth.

“Oh, I am not joking.”

“You really think I want that?”

“Nothing you’ve said has ever indicated otherwise.”

Ethan lurched forward, his hands landing heavily on the bed on either side of my body, his face close to mine and his voice thick with Alpha authority.

“I risked my life, the safety of my whole Pack, to save you from your own stupid fucking decisions,” he hissed. For all our disagreements over the years, he’d never tried to use his authority to shut me down, but he was trying now. He wanted me to

shut up, but I'd never done what he wanted me to. It was hard to keep my head up, to not bow and submit, but he wasn't my Alpha, he was my mate, and that made us equal.

"You just told me you regretted it," I pointed out, and something that might have been remorse flickered across his expression. When he next spoke, the authority was gone, and he only sounded tired.

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“You’re twisting my words, Julia. I didn’t say I regret saving you, only that I...”

I wanted him to say it. I wanted him to say that he regretted ever touching me. If he could say that, then perhaps he was right, perhaps we weren’t mates after all, perhaps I was still just a hopeless little girl, infatuated with her big brother’s best friend.

“You what?” I pressed.

“Drink your potion.”

“No. I want you to look me in the eye and tell me the truth.”

When Ethan met my gaze again, his expression was careful and blank. His voice was even and detached and far, far worse than his anger.

“I regret that my action led you to walk into danger,” he said. “I came after you because Caleb is my best friend, and he left you in my care. He loves you, and I couldn’t have lived with myself if I let you get hurt on my watch.”

It was as if a shutter had rolled down between us. There was nothing more to say.

“Right,” I choked, wrung out and hollow. “Of course.”

He nodded to the bottle, open and forgotten on my nightstand.

“Drink it.”

“Yes, Sir.” It barely even sounded sarcastic, and the corners of his mouth twitched down.

“I’ll go see about breakfast.”

He turned abruptly, and he was gone in the blink of an eye. There was no slamming door, no heavy footsteps outside to give away the thunderstorm of an argument that we’d brought down between us. The empty chair at the end of my bed, still rumpled from his occupancy, no doubt still warm, taunted me. Every moment of tenderness, every apparent act of care, was all a simple matter of duty to him.

The bottle on my nightstand beckoned, and when I reached for it again, my hand was steady. I knocked the potion back in one quick swallow, its bitter flavor lingering on my tongue.

Chapter 12 - Ethan

“And she’s lucid? No memory loss or anything?”

Caleb’s voice was fuzzy through the radio, but I could still hear the worry in it. After a lot of convincing, he’d agreed to stay put on Lapine until I could get Julia back to him. Leo had extra patrols on all his bridges, and I doubted Arbor would have the resources for another full-scale island attack. We were safe for now.

“She doesn’t remember getting to Arbor after the fight, but she was barely conscious for that, so I don’t think it’s too worrying,” I assured him. I should have been able to tell him more; I should have taken more time to ascertain how Julia was feeling before we got into another fight. I supposed it was a good sign: if she hadn’t had the energy to fight me, I would have been worried.

“You’ll radio if anything changes?” he pressed.

“Of course.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I echoed. I was reaching for the switch on the radio, ready to cut communication, but then he spoke again.

“Ethan?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.” His voice was low and earnest, and I didn’t deserve it. I had not, of course, told Caleb why Julia was on her own at the bridge between Ferris and Lapine. I had not told him that rescuing Julia necessitated marrying her. I had told him the bare minimum: that Julia had wandered off alone, that she’d been kidnapped, and that I’d rescued her, but we’d run into trouble at the Argent bridge. If Caleb knew the whole truth, he wouldn’t be thanking me.

“You’d do the same for me,” I muttered.

The radio clicked off at Caleb’s end, and I let out a long, relieved breath. I didn’t like lying to him, even by omission, but it was for the best.

“You ever gonna tell him?” Leo’s voice made me jump. I hadn’t heard him approach, and his shit-eating grin told me that had been the intention.

“It wasn’t a real marriage,” I reminded him. “It doesn’t mean anything, and it’s not relevant.”

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My wolf didn't like that statement. He was still trying to drag me back to Julia's sickbed, desperate to lick her wounds. I ignored him. He needed to get over it.

"Sure," said Leo. Then, as if he was commenting on the weather: "If you hadn't slept together at the Solstice, I might believe you."

I could try to deny it, but the expression on Leo's face told me that any attempt would be futile. He didn't look like he was about to chew me out for it—quite the opposite.

"You're not supposed to know that," I sighed, resigned.

"Her scent was all over you when you came back from the fire, buddy," he said, smug. "It wasn't subtle. Guess that apology went well."

"Until it didn't."

Leo frowned.

"What happened? We woke up in the morning and you guys were gone. We thought you'd just headed back to Lapine early."

I hesitated. Julia would be mortified to know that I'd told someone about her theory, but it was only the truth.

"After we—after we slept together, she said we were mates. I told her that it was just—that we'd just been caught up in the moment. We fought about it," I admitted. I'd expected him to be incredulous, but he only looked evenly back at me, curious

and calm.

“You don’t think you’re mates?”

“We can’t be.” Why did no one understand this simple fact of biology? I was sick of explaining it. “The bond kicks in at first touch after you’re both of shifting age. It’s been five years—six, maybe—since Julia’s first shift. We’ve touched plenty since then.”

Leo only wagged his eyebrows at me, like a child.

“Oh really?”

“Shut up. Not like that.”

“I’m just messing with you. Did she say why she thinks you are mates?”

“It was—I mean, it was pretty intense.” That was putting it mildly, but Leo didn’t need to know that. He was a romantic. He’d get the wrong idea. “I did feel... drawn to her, I guess. But why wouldn’t I be? She might be a pain in my ass, but she’s still—”

“A knockout, sure,” Leo finished for me, and my wolf’s attention was suddenly all on him, his fur bristling, a low growl building in my chest. It was a stupid reaction. Julia was a beautiful woman, and people were going to notice that. Other males were going to notice that.

Unfortunately, Julia’s beauty wasn’t all that Leo had noticed. He’d also noticed the sudden tension in my jaw, the visible effort it took me to keep my wolf in check.

“Interesting,” he said. “Well, nice chatting with you. I’m gonna go check out how

she's doing, see if she needs anything. A drink, some painkillers, another one of my shirts."

This time, the growl was in my throat and vibrating through my teeth before I could hold it back. Leo didn't dignify it with a growl of his own; he only smiled.

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

"You're delusional," I snapped. Leo knew as well as anyone that mine and Julia's relationship had been strained for years. Why he thought we could ever be fated mates was beyond me.

"I'm just saying," Leo continued, "that the last time one of my friends turned up on my island out of the blue, running from Arbor hunters with a woman in tow, he didn't really like having me close to her either. This expression right here?" He waved his finger in an irritating circle in front of my face. "It's the same expression that was on Cal's face when Alyssa first smiled at me."

I slapped his hand away.

"That's different. She's my best friend's little sister. I'm protective of her."

"And you think she needs protecting from me?" He slapped a hand against his chest in mock offense, but his green eyes did not leave mine, demanding an answer.

"No," I admitted through gritted teeth.

Leo, the bastard, said nothing. He left that response hanging in the air between us, as if he'd just presented the court with damning evidence of my guilt.

"Look—" I began, but I was allowed no more time for my defense because one of

Leo's Betas was bursting through the front door.

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“Julia,” he panted, “Julia collapsed by the orchard.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. How could she be so reckless? She had a concussion and three fractured ribs; she was supposed to be resting. I was meant to be watching over her. I should have known she would be reckless enough to try something like this. I should have been more vigilant and shouldn't have let her drive me from her bedside.

“Where is she now?” I barked, but it was Leo, the Beta answered.

“Cody's carrying her back.”

Leo nodded.

“Has someone gone for the witch?”

“Yeah. Yeah, she's on her way.”

To my relief, Julia was conscious when she was carried over the threshold. I was so relieved, in fact, that it took me a couple of moments to recognize the Beta carrying her as the same guy she'd flirted with at the Solstice. Fortunately, even my wolf knew that now was not the moment, and I only held out my arms for her, giving him a gruff,

“Thanks.”

“What am I,” Julia grumbled, “a sack of groceries?”

The Beta huffed out a laugh, but I was already leaving him behind, whisking her up the stairs and back toward her room.

“You’re an idiot, that’s what you are,” I hissed as I placed her down on the bed. “What the hell did you think you were doing?” Her body was scorching hot, and I couldn’t tell if that was simply from having been outside in the sunshine or if she was running a fever. She slapped ineffectively at my hand as I placed it on her forehead to check.

“I was going for a walk,” she protested. “Is that a crime now?”

“You were nearly dead yesterday.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” she scowled. This woman had been put on earth by a capricious god who wanted nothing but to test my patience. I would not rise to it. I would not let her make me angry. I knew I’d been unfair to her that morning—she might be wrong about us being mates, but she deserved more of my respect. She really had saved both of our asses on Arbor.

“Julia,” I said, low and controlled, “you need to take better care of yourself.”

For a moment, she only blinked up at me, momentarily disarmed. When she spoke, though, her words were sharp enough to cut.

“Don’t worry, Cal won’t blame you for my stupid decisions. You can stop pretending to care.”

“I’m not pretending—” I started, but then we were no longer alone in the room.

It was always easy to tell a witch simply by the way she dressed, and this one was no exception. Shifters, by and large, favored economy and ease with our clothing: it

needed to be easy to remove in a pinch, so things like scarves and jewelry weren't popular among our people. Witches, by contrast, seemed to dress with the intention of bucking that trend.

The woman who bustled into Julia's room wore a long-sleeved blouse in some gauzy fabric, draped over a plain camisole, her long skirt brushing the ground with every step. Her lightly greying hair was swept back beneath a patterned scarf, and she wore large earrings, several necklaces with different crystals hanging from them, and what seemed like a dozen bangles on each of her wrists. She smiled, and the lines at her eyes creased.

"Someone told me this was an emergency, but you're clearly not dying," she said. I really should remember her name, but everything had been a blur since we arrived on Argent.

"She tried to go for a walk and nearly passed out," I told... Sylvia? No, that was wrong.

She kissed her teeth.

"Not very sensible, young lady."

"It's kind of stifling in here," Julia said, shooting me a poisonous look that the witch (Sandra?) gracefully ignored.

"Usually I'm all for the freedom to roam," she said, "but you're going to have to stay in and take it easy for a few days—Julia, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Julia, can you follow my finger with this eye?" She tapped the cheekbone

beneath Julia's good eye before she brought her hand back, her pointer finger stretched toward the ceiling. Slowly, she moved her hand back and forth, watching Julia's blue eye track its movement.

"Good," she said after a few seconds. "Now, can you take a deep breath for me?"

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Placing her hands gently on Julia's ribcage, she watched Julia's face as she took a deep inhale, wincing as her lungs pressed against her fractured ribs. I held my own breath: if Julia had snapped one of her ribs entirely, she might have punctured a lung. The witch seemed competent, but I doubted she could heal something like that.

"Good," she said after a few breaths. Relief rushed through me. "I don't think you've done yourself any lasting damage, but I'm going to leave you a couple more tonics for pain and for sleep, alright?"

Julia nodded. Oh, to be a person who could give Julia orders without argument.

"Thank you, um—I'm sorry, I never asked your name."

"Sybil." Sybil. That was it. "Pleasure to meet you, and I hope I don't see you again."

She turned to leave, but Julia shot out a hand, catching her by the wrist.

"Could I ask you one more thing before you go?" Julia sounded uncertain, almost shy.

"Ask away," said Sybil, gently.

"Can you tell me about Shadow Magic?"

"Shadow Magic?" Sybil repeated, clearly surprised. "Young lady, I'm only a hedge witch. That's a little above my pay grade."

“What’s the difference?” Julia’s eyebrows crinkled in confusion, and Sybil gave a little hum of amusement.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Lapine,” Julia admitted. Her home Pack might be far more accepting of witches now that they had one for their Alpha Female, but the nomadic witches were still understandably wary of the place. Abe Thorne had barely tolerated them, and his predecessors had barred them from the island entirely.

Sybil, to her credit, didn’t look shocked or put off, only nodded as if that was exactly the answer she expected, sitting gently on the edge of Julia’s bed.

“There are three—three categories of witch, if you like,” she explained. “Hedge Witches, High Witches, and Shadow Witches. Hedge Witches like me are the most common. We deal in herb lore, healing, and a variety of other things, depending on personality. Almost anyone can become a hedge witch if they put their mind to it; we don’t possess any innate magic, you understand; we draw on the magic that exists in everything around us. Now, High Witches do possess innate magic; they’re energy manipulators, able to conjure fire from the air or move an object with just a thought. A truly powerful High Witch can stop your heart in an instant.”

“And Shadow Witches?” Julia prompted. Her eyes were wide with interest, her voice moving from unsure to enraptured. I was no less interested myself. Ferris welcomed witches, but most who passed through were Hedge Witches, like Sybil, and the others were High Witches, like Alyssa. Shadow Witches were almost as foreign a concept to me as they were to Julia, something I’d only ever heard stories about.

“I must admit I’ve never met a Shadow Witch in the flesh,” said Sybil, and Julia’s face fell. “There hasn’t been one active on the Nightfire islands for—must be getting on a century now. My grandmother used to tell me they were all blind, but more than

that, I can't tell you."

There was a pause, and my wolf whined as Julia's heart seemed to break in real-time before Sybil continued,

"If you were willing to make the trip to Ensign—once you're recovered, of course—there's a High Witch there who might be able to help you. Ask for Eve."

The change was immediate; Julia grinned, her blue eye sparkling, and she grasped Sybil's hand.

"I will, thank you."

Sybil squeezed her hand in return before she rose from the bed. Her hand was on the handle of the door when she turned one last time.

"Maybe don't tell her you're from Lapine," she said. "Eve's funny about that island."

And on that cryptic note, she left. The door clicked shut behind her, and I held up a hand to stop Julia before she could speak.

We couldn't stay on Argent forever, but I was still reluctant to return home: Ensign would be the perfect place to hide out for the time being. Not even the bravest Arbor hunters would be stupid enough to attempt an attack on the most vicious Pack in the archipelago. She didn't need to convince me.

"I'll call Xander."

Chapter 13 - Julia

After two full days of bed rest, I was going to lose my mind. The combination of my

fast shifter healing and Sybil's disgusting but effective tonics had mended my cracked ribs and rid me of my concussion by my second morning on Argent, but Ethan would have tied me to the bed if he could. My wolf's ears perked up at the thought of Ethan tying me to the bed, but I was absolutely not going to pay her any heed.

Ethan had made it abundantly clear that he did not care about me. Every cup of tea he'd brought me and every reminder to take my tonics were simply duty, as far as he was concerned. He had to keep me healthy so he could bring me back to Caleb in full working order and forget that any of this had ever happened. I would only be one in a long line of females he'd fucked and then abandoned. If he was going to insist he was nothing to me, then I was going to act like he was nothing to me.

My room had an en-suite shower—because, of course, it did, Argent was stupid rich—and I spent far too long luxuriating in the warm spray. Days in bed had left me sweaty and smelly and uncomfortable, and feeling it all wash off me was like shedding old skin. I was no longer weak and injured and vulnerable: I was me, and I wasn't going to let Ethan fucking Cain tell me what to do for one minute longer. I was going out, and no one could stop me.

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Clean, dressed, and determined, I stepped out into the sunshine, the warmth like a balm on my skin. This was what I needed, not another day of bed rest. As beautiful as Argent Town was, I slipped away from the path as soon as I could, making my way to the outskirts, where cobbled streets turned to grass and then forest. The cool grass tickled my bare feet, and I could breathe again.

“You sure you should be out here?” A voice behind me made me jump, but when I turned, it was only Cody, a teasing smile on his face. He really was cute, in a boy band kind of way. By the looks of him, he’d been on patrol; his blond hair flopped into his face, and his skin was a little flushed, a light sheen of sweat covering his bare chest.

“I’m fine; Sybil fixed me right up,” I said, giving my newly healed ribs a little poke to demonstrate. His eyes followed the movement, lingering on where my borrowed sundress hugged my breasts.

“I see that. Your Alpha gives you the all clear?”

I scoffed.

“Okay, first of all, he’s not my Alpha,” I told him. “Second of all, even if he was, he’s not the boss of me.”

“That’s literally what an Alpha is, but okay.” His blue eyes twinkled with mirth, and I couldn’t help smiling back at him. I might not really want him, but it was nice to talk to someone who didn’t treat me like a child or an inconvenience, someone who so obviously desired me.

“He doesn’t scare me,” I said.

“He scares me, though,” Cody replied. He stepped forward, voice lowered. “You sure he isn’t lurking around one of these corners? I don’t think he likes me.”

“I can take him, don’t you worry,” I assured him. Without thinking, I reached out to squeeze his bicep—part comfort, part gentle mocking. His eyes flickered down to my lips, and I realized my mistake too late.

“Oh yeah?” he said, taking another step forward into my space. “You gonna fight for my honor?”

Before I could push him playfully back and create a safe amount of space between us, my name was fired like a bullet into the calm of the morning.

“Julia! What the hell are you doing out here?”

I knew it would only be a matter of time before Ethan noticed I was gone, before he came charging after me like a bull at a red flag, but I had hoped for a little more time.

“Walking,” I said. “I can do that, you know.”

“I’m keeping an eye on her, Alpha Cain,” Cody piped up, like an idiot. Ethan’s canines flashed long and white as he turned his attention to the hapless Beta.

“I can see that,” he snarled, and I was pretty certain that it was only Ethan’s respect for Leo that was holding him back from ripping Cody to shreds.

“Ethan—” I started, but he paid me no mind.

“Get back to whatever you’re supposed to be doing,” he snapped at Cody. “Now.”

Cody didn't hesitate, didn't even spare me a glance as he jogged away back toward town, and I felt a rush of pity for him. He didn't deserve to be used as a pawn to make Ethan mad, and he definitely didn't deserve Ethan's ire. Ethan, at his own insistence, wasn't anyone who had a say in who I flirted with.

I wasn't going to let him take me back to the house. He wasn't going to confine me to bed for another day or more before he declared me well enough to make the journey to Ensign. Before he could turn his attention back to me, I began striding toward the forest. I hardly made it ten yards before I heard him yell,

"Julia—Julia, get back here."

I wanted to ignore him, but I was too angry.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I threw at him, refusing to slow my pace. Ethan caught up with me almost immediately, but I wasn't going to stop unless he made me.

"Are you trying to embarrass me?" he asked, which was not an answer. "I get that you're mad, but—"

"But what?" I snapped. "I'm not allowed to go outside? I'm not allowed to talk to people?"

"You're not allowed to talk to him."

That made me stop. At least we'd reached the tree line. I didn't want to have this argument in the open.

"Excuse me," I said, flat and emotionless. He must have realized he'd fucked up because he didn't fight back.

“You know what I mean,” he said. He wasn’t going to get away with it that easily.

“I really don’t.”

Ethan looked physically pained as he said,

“He wants to fuck you.”

“Maybe I want to fuck him,” I shot back, but Ethan didn’t even flinch.

“You don’t, though.”

Shit. I should never have told him that—I should never have done a lot of things where Ethan was concerned.

“Maybe I changed my mind. Maybe I’ll take him back to my room and spread my legs for him.” It gave me a sick thrill to see the way Ethan’s jaw tensed. I was going to make him admit that he didn’t like the idea of other men touching me, and I was going to make him admit the reason why.

“Julia—” he started, but I wasn’t going to let him talk his way out of this.

“You’re not the only one who can sleep around,” I continued. “Maybe I’ll let him knot me, too.”

“Julia. Stop it.”

“Why? I’m not your mate, remember.”

“You’re still my wife.” His hands shot out to grip my hips, his grey eyes boring into mine, and I couldn’t believe he’d tried that argument; it was stupid, so stupid. Marriage meant nothing to us—it should mean nothing to us, but seeing his mouth round out the word wife had me shivering under his touch.

“Oh yeah?” I breathed. Suddenly, I could feel my heartbeat at my throat and beneath his palms and between my legs. His eyes pinned me, pupils blown wide.

“Yeah.”

Then his mouth was on mine, and my back was against a tree. My wolf was howling in victory, because wasn’t this what we’d wanted all along? I tried to tell her no, tried to tell myself no, but that would be a lie. Ever since I’d realized we were mates—and on a few very secret occasions before that—I’d wanted nothing more than for him to touch me. To make up for my own weakness, I bit his lip hard, but Ethan only groaned, sucking my tongue into his mouth as I melted against his body.

Feverish and desperate as it was, the kiss didn’t last long before Ethan spun me around, pushing my front against the rough bark of the tree. Grinding his erection against my ass, he stepped back, pulling me with him so that I was standing at a right angle, my arms braced against the tree trunk. I gasped as he kicked my legs apart, and I should have told him to stop, that I wasn’t going to let him fuck me and run again, but my wolf was howling her approval and my body was betraying me more with every passing second. My nipples were hard beneath my sundress, begging for the attention of his broad, rough hands, and I knew that if he slipped one of those hands between my legs, he would feel how embarrassingly wet I was already.

Ethan did exactly that. Running a hand up the sensitive inside of my thigh, he cupped my pussy through the thin cotton of my underwear, growling low and pleased when he found the material hot and damp beneath his palm. Desperate for friction, I ground down against the heel of his hand for one, two glorious seconds before he withdrew

it, hooking a finger into the crotch of my panties to draw them away from my pussy.

“So wet for me,” he purred, slipping a single, tantalizing finger between my lips. “Was this your plan all along, hm? To make me crazy?”

“No,” I whimpered, unsure even as I said it.

“No?” he echoed. Then the teasing pressure of his finger was gone. “My apologies, I’ll leave you to—”

“Don’t!” I cried, a hand shooting back to grasp his wrist. My legs were trembling, my body strung out with that heady mix of fury and desire that only he could inspire in me.

“Don’t what?” he asked, and I growled, pushing my hips back into his grip.

“You asshole.”

“Don’t what, Julia?”

“Don’t stop,” I whispered, mortified. I shouldn’t be begging for his touch. I should be making him beg. I should have him on his knees, but my wolf was keening and whining inside me. I needed him more than I’d ever needed anything.

And he delivered. With a sharp ripping sound, my underwear dropped away, and three rough fingers were parting my folds to press against my clit. I gasped, dropping his wrist to support myself better against the tree, rocking my hips in time with his movements, needing more, more, more.

Then his hand slipped away, but I didn’t have time to mourn the loss before those fingers landed on my clit again, hard. The sound of my moan mixed with the sharp

slap of flesh against wet flesh, and I dug my fingernails into the bark when his hand came down again, sending a bolt of pleasure-pain shooting through my body.

“Mine.” Ethan’s voice was low and gravelly, demanding a response that I would not give. If he wasn’t going to claim me, then he didn’t own me, no matter how easily my body turned to putty in his hands.

“Mine,” he repeated, landing another hard slap on my twitching, hungry pussy. I bit down hard on my lower lip to muffle my scream, but I refused to give him the answer he wanted. Another slap, and my legs were trembling; I was so wet I could feel slick drooling out of me, dripping onto the ground beneath us, and dribbling down my thighs.

Another. They were coming faster now, his fingers rubbing my clit on every landing, and something huge and inescapable was coiling in my abdomen. Another. Another. Another.

“Mine.”

There was no defiance left in me as my orgasm rocked every inch of my body. Clutching the tree for support, my toes curled into the dirt even as my legs gave out entirely, held up only by Ethan’s strength.

“Yours,” I panted with every gasp of breath I could steal, and then he was inside me.

The stretch of him sent fresh sparks of pleasure dancing through my body, and I tumbled over a second peak, clenching and twitching around his length as he buried himself inside me, where he belonged.

Every stroke of his cock was like some divine torture; I was over-sensitive and strung out already, yet with every snap of Ethan’s hips I was building to another earth-shattering crescendo. I couldn’t control the breathy moans that escaped every time he bottomed out, morphing into a long, unbroken whine as I felt his knot begin to form. We must look like every human fantasy of shifter debauchery, rutting in the forest, uncaring of who might come across us.

“Please,” I gasped. “Please, please—”

I hardly even knew what I was begging for, but Ethan did. His hands left my hips to pull me upright, one hand clamped possessively around my neck while the other tugged down the neck of my sundress to expose my breasts, pinching and grabbing at my hard, aching nipples.

I couldn’t think. I had become something entirely carnal, wanting and wanting and

wanting. Ethan's knot was pressing against my entrance, stretching me almost to the point of pain, and I needed it so badly I could barely breathe. There were lips on my neck, on my shoulder, and then a set of teeth nipping at the skin of their junction, right where the mating mark should be.

My neck bent on instinct, granting him access to the soft skin, inviting him to sink his teeth into my flesh, to mark me as his. I felt his growl as it rumbled up through his chest, and he nosed and nipped at the offered spot, his breathing coming heavy as he continued to thrust roughly into me. Each one went deeper than the last, and then I was spread around his knot, stretched and filled until it almost hurt—and perhaps that was what brought me enough clarity to warn him.

“Only—only if you mean it. Please.” I desperately wanted his mark, but not if he was going to take it back when we returned to our senses. To be knotted and rejected was one thing—I'd lived through it once, and for the sake of the pleasure that was driving me higher and higher with every passing second, I could live through it again—but marked and rejected? It would be too much, even for me.

With a roar, Ethan's hands on my body tightened, and he shoved the rest of his knot inside me, filling me completely. The thrust of his hips didn't stop, hitting every sensitive place over and over and over, but even as I braced myself for it, no bite came, no sweet pain to push me over the edge. Instead, one of Ethan's hands came down to my clit, rubbing me in tight, fast circles until I seized and clenched and came again, pulling him with me. My pleasure stretched on and on as his hot come filled me up and his fingers stroked me through it, and by the time I came down, I couldn't tell if the tears streaking my face were from ecstasy or heartbreak.

Chapter 14 - Ethan

I had known, intellectually, that fucking Julia again was not going to solve all my problems. In fact, I was very aware that it might cause more problems, or at least

exacerbate my existing ones.

Unfortunately, knowing this did not stop me.

At the very least, the incident assured me that she was well enough to make the journey to Ensign. That was useful. It was also the best sex of my life—I couldn't stop thinking about the way she'd shuddered and come apart over and over again, on my fingers and my cock and knot—but that was irrelevant. Also irrelevant was the way my wolf had whined and howled and insisted that I sink my teeth into the tender flesh where her shoulder met her neck. I'd managed to hold the instinct at bay, but only just. I might know better, but my wolf was still convinced that Julia was my mate, and he was nipping at my heels, demanding I mark her as mine.

I wasn't going to do that. I was planning to take her to Ensign until I was certain that Arbor was no longer on our tail; we were going to find that damn witch; and then I would take her back to Lapine where she belonged.

We bid goodbye to Leo in the early afternoon, the day after our tryst, and I had the awful feeling that he knew exactly what had transpired between us after I'd chased off Cody. Far from scratching the itch and getting her out of my system, sleeping with Julia had only worsened my wolf's infatuation with her. Even thinking about that smug Beta set my wolf's teeth on edge, and it was probably for the best that we made ourselves scarce before I ripped his head off for looking at her wrong (or looking at her at all).

"You got enough food?" Leo asked, like a worried grandmother. I patted the stuffed backpack he'd given me only a few minutes previously.

"For an army, bro."

"It's a long crossing." He was right about that. The bridge between Arbor and Ensign

was nearly ten miles long, and it took the average shifter about three hours to cross in human form. It would be quicker to run as wolves, but also far more conspicuous—Arbor favored their wolf forms and tended to assume that other Packs did too. Our human forms also benefited from Julia's magic; if she could cloak our crossing, it would be harder for any lurking Arbor hunters to track us.

Either way, the whole endeavor was risky, but it was riskier to stay put where Arbor knew we were sitting ducks. Argent might be rich, but their reputation wasn't for combat—Arbor had never held them in high esteem, and while they might not risk a full-scale attack, they didn't fear Leo or the Argent hunters enough to prevent them from attempting another kidnapping, or worse. Even if they did successfully track us to Ensign, they wouldn't dare set foot on that island. I wasn't enormously keen to spend time there, either—Xander was my friend, but the culture of Ensign was pretty far removed from that of Ferris or Lapine or Argent—but it was our best bet for now.

"Don't kill each other on the way!" Leo called after us as we set off up the Ensign road.

"No promises!" Julia called back, waving enthusiastically. Her smile was bright, her black hair shining in the sunshine, and I had to stop myself staring at the length of her pale legs in denim shorts.

"You'll have to kill me if you want one of those little strawberry cakes," I told her. Leo's mother was an incredible cook, though I'd never had much of a sweet tooth, her strawberry cakes had long been a favorite of mine.

I'd expected Julia to challenge me, to needle me about hogging all the food or say something scathing about how much male shifters ate, but she only gave a disinterested little hum. As little as I wanted to admit it, she'd been subdued since yesterday. When the high of our mutual climax had faded, I'd braced myself for another fight, but she'd only tugged her dress back into place and asked which of us

should walk back to town first.

I should have been glad of the quiet as we trekked through town and then began the hike over Argent's rolling hills north toward the Ensign Bridge, but rather than peaceful, the quiet felt oppressive and wrong. When she'd been younger, Julia was an endless stream of babbling commentary on the weather and the surroundings and whatever thoughts popped into her mind. Once, when she was eight and I was thirteen, I'd snapped at her to shut up, that her constant rambling was annoying; back then, it had been easy to cow her, and she'd snapped her mouth shut immediately, tears brimming in her big blue eyes. I'd felt awful about it, but my father said that Alphas never apologized, so I didn't.

Julia was probably owed a lot of apologies from me, but now wasn't the time to bring that up. I really didn't need to get into an argument on this trip, and as much as it perturbed me, the quiet was a blessing as far as stealth was concerned.

We timed the journey, hoping to reach the bridge in the late afternoon, when the shadows were long. Sure enough, when the stone structure came into view, it was dappled with warm sunlight and the dark shadows of trees. I held out a hand to stop Julia in her tracks—concerned yet relieved that she didn't complain about it—so I could take a moment to scan the treeline. It was still and quiet, with no unfamiliar scents in the air. Either Arbor hadn't tracked us here, or they were keeping their distance until we were on the neutral territory of the bridge itself.

In any case, time was of the essence. We jogged the last hundred yards to where the stone of the bridge met the Argent road, and Julia wasted no time. As she closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, the shadows began to elongate, growing even darker and swirling around us until it seemed like the sun had set early. When I looked back across the Argent hills, they remained bathed in warm light, appearing like another world.

“Ready?” I asked, and Julia opened her eyes. Her expression was hard and determined, and she walked onto the bridge like she was walking to war. The shadows followed her. With every step, our cloak of darkness moved with us, as though we were walking through water. Ears pricked for any sound beyond the rush and crash of the water beneath us, noses twitching for the scent of any other wolf, we walked one mile, then two, then three, until I became used to the ever-present shadow that engulfed us.

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It wasn't until we were about three-quarters of the way across that I noticed Julia flagging. Her breathing was loud and labored, her steps heavy, and I thought she looked paler than usual, her usually plump pink lips drawn into a tight white line.

"You okay?" I whispered. She nodded, but only a few moments later, she tilted against the side of the bridge, sliding down the low wall until she was sitting on the road, her expression pained and tense. I had dropped to my knees before I consciously thought to do so.

"Julia, talk to me. What's going on?"

"I'm just tired. I didn't know that magic would take so much out of me, doing it for this long. I can keep going. I just need a minute."

She clearly needed more than a minute. We'd been travelling in shadow for close to two hours, and we were still ahead of schedule, just. We could make up the time once she was rested. If we tried to keep going with her in this state, we'd never make it in time.

"Take a few minutes," I told her. "You should have said something earlier. If we stay down here, you can let the shadow go for a little bit, yeah?"

She scowled but nodded.

"I guess, yeah."

"Then let it go."

With a great sigh of relief, Julia released the shadows cloaking us. They retreated slowly back to their natural positions, and I suddenly realized why she must be so tired. She hadn't merely conjured shadows around us and brought them along for the ride across the bridge; as we moved, she let go of one shadow and took hold of a new one, like climbing a tree. Only once she had grasped a new branch could she release the one she had been holding. Julia was going to need more than a rest if she was going to make it to Ensign.

"Here, let's see what Grandma Leo packed for us," I said, setting the backpack down and undoing the drawstrings to reveal a treasure trove of snacks. I passed her a sandwich of thick-cut bread, stuffed with beef and cheese and pickles. "Eat all of that, please."

"Yes, Mom," she said, rolling her eyes as she took the paper-wrapped sandwich. I didn't miss the little hum of satisfaction she gave at the first bite, and my wolf preened—we were providing for her—as I sat down beside her, unwrapping a sandwich of my own. Even the food on Argent was fancier: I'd never really had time for frivolous things like relish and pickles when bread and meat would suffice, but I couldn't say I didn't enjoy the slight tang they added.

We weren't quite relaxed as we ate—both of us still on edge, ready to jump back up at any sign of movement or any sudden sound—but it took a little of the tension out of my muscles, and when we were done with sandwiches, I found myself digging in the bag again, emerging a moment later with the cardboard box I'd been looking for. Inside were two slightly squashed but still beautiful strawberry cupcakes. I handed one to Julia, shoving the other into my mouth and savoring the burst of creamy-sweet flavor on my tongue.

It was gone too soon, but that was the point of indulgence, I supposed. It wasn't supposed to last long. When I glanced over at Julia, she had frosting on her upper lip, staring down at her half-eaten cupcake like it was more magic than she would ever

be, and it shouldn't have been as cute as it was. How was this the same girl who could shroud a mile of road in darkness?

I averted my eyes when she glanced my way, but not fast enough.

"What?" she asked, her guard creeping back up.

"Nothing," I assured her, but I should have known she wouldn't let me get away with that.

"Nothing?"

I could hardly tell her I was thinking she looked cute with frosting on her lip, so I said something else true instead.

"I was just thinking that less than a week ago, you were struggling to move a finger's worth of shadow, and now you're doing... this. It's pretty incredible."

Julia blinked at me, clearly taken aback.

"Oh," she said. Rather than preening with well-earned pride, she seemed to shrink in on herself, uncomfortable with the praise. She met all my insults and criticism with sharp wit and fire, yet a simple compliment had unmoored her. Was she really so unused to kind words from me?

The simple answer was yes. In all the years we'd been in each other's orbit, I had never once told her she was brave, clever, or beautiful. Julia was all of those things and more; I just never imagined she'd want to hear that from me. Positive or negative, Julia had made it abundantly clear that she didn't care for my opinion.

That hadn't always been the case, though. I remembered her confession, hazy and

slurred but undeniably honest, as I held her in my arms on a very different bridge. At one point, Julia had wanted my praise, my attention, but I'd been such an unrelenting asshole to her that she'd eventually given up on seeking it, given up on me.

I should have been relieved by that. If she had given up on me once, she could do so again, abandoning this whole mates theory; yet, the thought of her pushing me away again sent an unpleasant pang through my chest.

“Julia—” I started, unsure how I was even going to continue. How did one make up for over a decade of mistreatment? She was looking at me, expectant, and I could think of nothing to say to her but,

“You know you’re the bravest person I’ve ever met, right?”

This time, she frowned. At least it was a more familiar expression.

“Um. No,” she said. Then, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just—”

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“Did you hit your head?” she joked. I was glad she’d gotten a little of her moxie back, but I was trying, for once, to be nice.

“Julia—” I tried, but she was giggling now, and she barely heard me.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“I mean it,” I said, grasping her wrist. Instantly, I felt that undeniable pull, that spark that began in my chest and traveled quickly through every inch of my body, settling hot and urgent in my groin. Her eyes widened, her single pupil dilating until there was only a thin halo of blue surrounding its blackness. I felt her breath hitch, and I felt a thrill of satisfaction at the thought that she was just as affected by my touch as I was by hers.

“Ethan,” she breathed, and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward into her space. Beneath her usual bittersweet scent, Julia’s lips smelled of strawberries. I could feel her breath against my cheek, and I wanted so badly to close that space, even knowing that once I did, I wouldn’t be able to stop until I had her again.

Click, click, click. The sound of claws on stone pulled me back—I’d been so caught up in her scent that the new one had gone unacknowledged, and I whirled around to see a jet-black wolf emerging from the shadows. He was so massive that he seemed to take up the whole width of the bridge, blending into the growing darkness. When he opened his mouth, his teeth were long and sharp and white, capable of ripping me in half where I stood.

His tongue lashed out, licking a long stripe up the side of my face, and I sputtered in

protest, smacking him on his wet nose.

“Hello, Xander.”

Chapter 15 - Julia

There were no nice Jeeps, or even a beat-up truck to take us from the bridge to the town on Ensign. Using cars was, apparently, a sign of weakness, so it would have been offensive in the extreme to offer such transportation to a visiting Alpha. I personally would have preferred to be grievously offended and not have to lean on Ethan the rest of the way to Ensign town.

With every step, I was pressed more into Ethan's warm torso, his arm tight around my waist to help me along, and I knew that by the time we arrived, I would be covered in his steel and leather scent. My wolf purred at the thought, the stupid slut. Maybe we were both stupid sluts, because if he'd kissed me on the bridge, I would've let him, even after all his bullshit. A few kind words and I'd be putty in his hands. It was embarrassing.

I should have insisted that Xander helped me back to the house, but Ethan had made it clear how he felt about that option. I didn't think I'd ever seen Xander so taken aback, but thankfully, he didn't take offence at Ethan's bared teeth and harsh growl, only said,

“Don't let any of my guys see you doing that. They'll take offense.”

It seemed there were a lot of ways to offend the people of Ensign, and I got the distinct impression that offending someone meant getting ripped to shreds for your mistake. It was difficult to imagine that Xander, who was always cracking jokes and who never seemed to take anything seriously, could be the Alpha of such a brutal place.

All in all, I was grateful that it was nearly midnight by the time we reached Xander's home in the center of town: the streets were dark, and the people on Ensign had mostly retired to their homes for the night. I was desperate for a bed myself, but one thing still took priority.

"Hey, Xander?" I said as I sorted through the pile of women's clothing he'd dumped in front of me, trying to find something suitable for sleep.

"A High Witch? What do you need a High Witch for?" Xander asked, not bothering to cover his mouth as he yawned. It was late, and we all wanted to go to bed, but I was going looking for that witch first thing in the morning if I had my way.

"I... might have a few powers of my own—recently discovered," I confessed, and Xander's eyebrows shot up. He glanced at Ethan for confirmation, who nodded.

"Oh, wow."

"It's been an intense few days," I said, fishing a large, soft tee from out of the pile; that would do for a warm night.

"I bet," Xander agreed. "Look, let me check with Damien in the morning. I'm pretty sure we've got a High Witch still kicking around somewhere, but I'm not sure where. He'll know—his mate's pregnant."

"What's that got to do with the witch?" I asked.

"The females all go to her if they suspect they might be—" Xander made a motion like he was holding a big belly "—there's an energy shift or something. I don't know how it works. She's good to have around for difficult births, too. Usually, the midwives can handle it, but we've called on her a couple of times this year."

That was news to me. From what Sybil told me, I would have imagined that Hedge Witches were more equipped for stuff like that. I hoped I hadn't made the journey only to find another herbalist healer who knew nothing about Shadow Magic. I would only find out by going, and if I was going to go, then I needed to rest.

As my head hit the pillow, I found myself thankful for the exhaustion that weighed down my every limb; without it, I might have spent all night tossing and turning with nerves and excitement. Instead, I slipped quickly into a heavy, dreamless sleep, waking late the following morning. By the time I stumbled down to breakfast, Xander had already located the witch and was busy drawing me a mostly legible map on the back of a napkin, Xander watching over his shoulder like a belligerent schoolmistress.

"Thanks," I said between mouthfuls of egg and bacon. "I'll set off when I'm done and be back by dinner."

"You're not going anywhere by yourself," Ethan cut in, scowling.

"I am perfectly capable—" I began, but Xander cut me off.

"Ensign isn't the place for a lone female," he said. Traitor. "Ethan will go with you."

I never appreciated being babysat, and every moment I spent with Ethan was another moment I risked losing my entire mind because my wolf was horny. I'd have preferred to go alone, but the looks on both their faces told me that my options were going with Ethan or not going at all. I chose not to argue, instead concentrating on stuffing as much breakfast into my mouth as possible. After my huge magic expenditure the previous day, I was absolutely ravenous. Xander looked impressed as I reached for a third slice of toast, and Ethan slid me a pot of dark jam. I sniffed it. Blackberry? Blueberry? I didn't care.

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By the time I was done with breakfast, I had eaten Xander out of half of Ensign's rations and was raring to go. I would have preferred to shift and make the run as a wolf, but with Ethan accompanying me, I didn't trust myself to think clearly while she had so much control. Plus, it was probably considered rude to show up at a witch's house stark naked.

The walk through Ensign town was the worst part. It was embarrassing to admit—even to myself—that I was glad of Ethan's company as we made our way through the maze of long buildings. Unlike Lapine or Ferris, Ensign shifters did not live in family units in little cottages; instead, they shared sparse dormitories with shifters of the same sex, divided according to their rank and role within the Pack. I wasn't sure how mated pairs and their families were supposed to work—I would have to ask Xander.

Ethan stuck close to me until we were out of town, fogging my mind with his scent and the quiet sound of his breathing. I was haunted by memories of the almost-kiss on the bridge, of how he'd made me his in the Argent woods. I'd begged him, debased myself, loved every minute of it, but he still refused to mark me, to claim me, to accept what was obvious.

As desperate as I was for answers, I wasn't going to be the one to bring it up, and so we walked in silence out of town and down the path Xander had sketched out on his crude map. It took us into the woods and down a path carved only from frequent footfall until we emerged into a clearing where a sweet wooden cottage stood. Its roof was covered with moss, and the wood of its walls was tree branches and rough-hewn planks.

“Wait out here,” I told Ethan, and he made a face.

“I’m not waiting out here. What if she’s dangerous?” he said, because of course he did. I half expected him to start insisting I eat my cereal dry, just in case I drowned in the milk.

“The nice lady who helps the women of this island safely deliver their babies?” I reminded him, and he scowled.

“Maybe High Witches and Shadow Witches are mortal enemies,” he suggested, but we both knew he was clutching at straws.

“I feel like Sybil might have mentioned that, if it were true,” I pointed out.

“Fine. But if you’re not out in ten minutes, I’m coming in.”

That didn’t give me much time, but I knew the expression on his face too well to continue arguing.

“Fine,” I said. “See you in ten minutes.”

I strode across the clearing, hoping I looked more confident than I felt. With a glance to where Ethan stood watching me from the edge of the clearing, I forced myself not to hesitate before raising my knuckles to rap on the blue-painted wooden door.

“It’s open, honey.”

Inside, the cottage was as cozy as it appeared from the outside. Unlike the shifter cottages, it was all one room, with a neatly made bed in one corner, covered by a patchwork comforter, with a few other items of furniture dotted around. Everything was mismatched and handmade, the walls cluttered with drying herbs and art and

hanging textiles.

The witch herself had her back to me, bent over a small stove. She was shorter than me, like most females, wearing a simple green tunic dress, belted around her thick waist.

When she turned to face me, I knew exactly why Sybil had told me not to mention Lapine. Her mahogany curls were salted with gray, and her round face was beginning to crease, but her hazel eyes were bright and warm. I felt as though I was looking at my best friend twenty years in the future.

“Don’t get many new faces around here,” said Alyssa’s mother. “What brings you to Ensign?”

I froze. I should leave. I should return to Ethan and never speak of this again. I should go straight home and tell Alyssa where her mother had been hiding out in the years since she left baby Alyssa on her father’s porch in the middle of the night.

She’d asked me a question. She was looking at me, expecting an answer. Shit.

“It’s a long story,” I said quickly, trying not to make eye contact.

“I’ve got time. Tea?” A kettle was already bubbling on the stove, with two mugs lined up next to it, as if she’d been expecting company.

“No. Thank you. Someone’s waiting for me.” Normally, I wouldn’t care how long Ethan lingered outside—in fact, the longer I made him wait, the better—but I wasn’t about to have tea and story time with the woman who had abandoned my best friend.

Eve ignored my rudeness, only nodding with a twinkle in her too-familiar hazel eyes.

“Your Alpha is outside.”

“He’s not my Alpha,” I said instinctively. Was that true? If he were my mate, but he refused to acknowledge the truth of it, could I still call him mine? Did I even want to?

“Another story there, I think,” said Eve, as though it was her business.

“I’m not here to entertain you,” I snapped. “I’m here for information on Shadow Magic.” I should probably be more polite if I wanted this woman’s help, but being here at all felt like a betrayal. I might need Eve’s help, but I wasn’t going to be friendly with her. Fortunately, Eve either didn’t care or my question was interesting enough for her to overlook my rudeness.

“Shadow Magic?” she repeated, a little incredulous. “Well, that’s a question I’ve not been asked in a few years. What makes you so curious?”

“I think—I think I can do it.”

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To her credit, she didn't tell me it was impossible. Her gaze lingered over my blind eye, and she smiled.

"You'd be the first in a century."

"So I've heard."

Eve parked herself on a rickety wooden chair, looking up at me expectantly.

"Go on then," she said, "show me. I've always wanted to see this."

It felt strange, wrong, to do magic in front of someone who wasn't Ethan. Of course, half of Arbor had seen me do magic now, but they hadn't been watching me do it, hadn't been examining me with expectant eyes.

I breathed in, trying to calm my racing mind. I had done this before. I had cloaked whole rooms, a whole bridge, in shadow. I could do a simple trick. Closing my eyes, I let the shadows come into focus; the room was crowded with furniture and knick-knacks, so many of them overlapped, warping each other's shapes where they met physical obstacles to the shape they wanted to take.

Reaching out, I gently pulled every shadow in the room, letting them stretch out the way they wanted to. I heard Eve gasp, and I smiled, knowing that it must have worked. Sure enough, when I opened my eyes, the room was far darker than it had been before, full of long, drawn-out shadows that refused to be hemmed in by the physical space. A blink, and they snapped back into place, the room becoming warm and cozy once more.

“You can really do it.” Eve’s eyes were wide, her ever-smiling mouth slack with shock. I didn’t know why that simple proclamation held more weight than any of Ethan’s amazement or Arbor’s accusations, but suddenly the truth of it landed on me like a ton of bricks.

“I honestly don’t know how I’m doing this,” I blurted. “I have no idea what I’m capable of, if it’s just a few tricks or—”

“Honey, you’re capable of far more than a few tricks,” Eve assured me, her voice low and calm despite her evident surprise. “A fully trained Shadow Witch is more than a match for someone like me.”

“And who’s supposed to train me, if I’m the only one?” I asked. Eve shrugged.

“Me, I suppose.”

“But you’re not a Shadow Witch.”

“I’m not,” she acknowledged, “but I do have a book kicking around here somewhere that details how Shadow Magic works. I can loan it to you so you can make sense of it yourself, or I can guide you through it. At the end of the day, magic is magic, and I’m sure I’d have something of use to add.”

She was probably right, and I hated that I wanted her help so desperately.

“Why?” I asked. “What’s in it for you?”

Eve smiled.

“Call it professional curiosity mixed with more than a touch of vanity. To be the first witch to witness Shadow Magic in a century is one thing, but training the first Shadow

Witch is quite another. I've always wanted to have my name in a niche history book."

Would Alyssa forgive me when I got home? She probably would; she'd never ask me to give up on the chance of understanding my own magic for her sake. I took the plunge.

"Fine."

"You're welcome," she said, and I couldn't help blushing a little, embarrassed by my lack of manners. "I'll come into town tomorrow at dusk."

"I'm staying at the Alpha's residence," I told her, and she raised an eyebrow.

"Friends in high places."

There were so many things I wanted to say to that: "Yes, my brother is Alpha over on Lapine. You're familiar with Lapine, right?" I wondered what would happen if I did. Would she kick me out of her little cottage, forbid me from returning, and slam the door closed on me and all my chances of developing my magic? For once, I kept my mouth shut.

"I know you'll be excited to try things out," Eve continued, "but please don't do any extra magic today, and nothing until I come and meet you tomorrow."

"Why not?" I asked. I'd been doing magic without any disastrous consequences for at least a week now. Did she really think my magic was so dangerous?

"You need to rest. I don't know what you got up to before you came here, but it clearly wiped you out. You have to be careful, in your condition."

I frowned, confused.

“What condition?”

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Eve's eyes were kind, and her hand soft where she pressed it gently against my belly.

"Honey, you're pregnant."

Chapter 16 - Ethan

Julia was pale as she emerged from the witch's cottage, staggering across the clearing like a sleepwalker. She flinched when I reached out to steady her, staring at me like a frightened rabbit stares at a wolf. Fear looked wrong on her face, and I hated that it was directed at me.

"What did she do to you?" I asked urgent, but Julia shook her head.

"Nothing. She was nice."

"You're pale," I insisted. It was an understatement, to be honest. Julia was pale and shaking; she looked worse than when we'd fled Arbor, even worse than when she collapsed on the bridge.

"Am I?" Even her voice sounded weak, as if she were barely present. "Eve just—she asked me to show her some of my magic. I guess after yesterday, it really took it out of me."

I started to ask if she was sure, but Julia held up a trembling hand to stop me.

"She didn't hurt me, Ethan. I'm fine. She's going to come to town tomorrow and help me train."

I frowned.

“Is that a good idea? If just a little demonstration wiped you out this much—”

Her eyes lost their glazed look, so she could glare at me. It was a relief: if she was too weak to fight with me, that was a sign that she was really in trouble.

“I said I’m fine. You’re not my brother, Ethan.”

“I’m incredibly aware of that,” I replied, utterly deadpan. Julia blinked at me, her expression frozen with surprise.

“Did you just crack a joke?” she asked, and I shrugged.

“I guess?”

With that, Julia abruptly turned her back on me and set off back toward town. Beneath the crunching of twigs and leaves beneath her feet, I heard her mutter,

“Now he cracks a joke.”

As we made our way back toward town, Julia seemed to improve; the hike brought a bit of color back to her cheeks, and she no longer looked haunted and shocked. She remained taciturn, though, refusing to start up a conversation or respond to any of my questions. I might only be her temporary husband, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t interested in her developing power. I wanted to know what the witch had told her, but far from being excited to share as I’d expected, Julia gave me nothing but one-word answers all the way back to town.

I tried to remind myself that she didn’t owe me any of that information. In fact, I should take it as a good sign: if she was keeping me at arm’s length, then perhaps we

were returning to normality. Perhaps she'd finally accepted that we weren't mates, and had returned to uncomplicated hatred of me. The thought sent an unexpected pang through my chest. As difficult as she was sometimes, I had been beginning to hope that this little excursion of ours would soften her attitude toward me. I knew it would take more than a couple of compliments, but I was working on something. I was working on giving her the respect she deserved, on treating her like she was a capable person and not just my best friend's little sister.

When we reached the outskirts of town, I stopped giving her space. Even a woman like Julia—especially a woman like Julia—wasn't safe walking through Ensign town. Women here were considered the property of their father or their mate, and they rarely ventured out alone. Julia, at least, was sensible about this, allowing me to lay a possessive hand on her arm as we walked. I felt the now-familiar spark of electricity at the touch of her skin against mine, but this time it didn't inspire lust. This time, all I wanted was to gather her close, to comfort her until she was no longer strange, distant, and upset. I pushed the urge away. We'd simply been together far too long, suffered too much alongside each other. It didn't mean anything.

The streets of Ensign weren't busy in the late afternoon, which was a mercy, and we arrived back at Xander's without incident.

"You should eat something," I said as soon as the front door closed behind us. "I don't know how long dinner's gonna be, and you need—"

"Do me a favor?" she asked, and I nodded.

"Anything."

"Leave me alone." Then she was gone, rushing up the stairs, and a distant door slammed.

“Trouble in paradise?” Xander said from behind me, making me jump. When I turned, he was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “Don’t tell me my favorite newlyweds are already out of the honeymoon stage?”

“Stop acting like you know shit, Xander. It only makes you look stupid,” I snapped.

“Wow, okay. Struck a nerve there.” He was grinning like this was all a spectacular joke, and maybe it was, to outsiders. Julia Thorne and Ethan Cain, who famously hated each other, getting married at an illegal auction on Arbor: it was enough to keep the gossip mill turning for a year. I gritted my teeth.

“Xander, I swear—”

“Sounds like something you might need to talk about.”

That took me aback.

“With you?”

“Rude,” said Xander. “I’m not Grandma Leo, but I have been around the block a few times. I know when my friends are suffering, and I don’t like to see it. Sit down, have a drink.”

As much as I hated to admit it, he was right. I often forgot that Xander was older than I was. While I had been forced to grow up fast, Xander had been Heir to Ensign until he was twenty-six, and he’d always joked around with our younger friends as if he were one of them. Reluctantly, I followed him into the lounge, perching on his couch as Xander poured two generous measures of whiskey. It was smokey and smooth on my tongue, and the burn of it was satisfying as it warmed my chest. I didn’t have time to savor it, because Xander cut straight to the chase.

“What’s up? I know the two of you aren’t exactly best friends, but...” he trailed off, expecting me to jump in and explain what was wrong between me and Julia. The trouble was, I didn’t know. I’d wanted to kiss her on the bridge, and I thought she wanted to kiss me back. I hadn’t—to my knowledge—done or said anything to piss her off since then.

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“Try me.”

“We slept together on the Solstice,” I admitted, “and again on Argent.”

To his credit, Xander neither yelled nor gasped nor made a face. He simply swirled his whiskey, taking a thoughtful sip.

“You’ve slept with plenty of other females,” he said. “What’s different about this?”

“She thinks we’re mates.” At any other time, I would never have told Xander that, believing he’d tease her mercilessly and make the whole situation worse. So far, though, he’d been surprisingly level-headed about the whole thing; he couldn’t be less helpful than Leo, who was just as delusional as Julia.

He certainly seemed to consider my words more than Leo had, taking another long sip of his drink before he asked,

“And why does she think that?”

I wanted to say that it wasn’t different, that she was simply young and inexperienced, reading into things that weren’t there, but that would be a lie.

“That first time was—it was intense. Even now, when I touch her, it’s like my wolf goes feral,” I said. “He’s crazy possessive, too—”

“You don’t say,” said Xander, mildly, and I remembered my outburst on the way back from Ensign Bridge.

“That was nothing,” I told him. “I nearly killed one of Leo’s Betas.” Then I’d stalked Julia into the woods and knotted her up against a tree, but he didn’t need to know that part. Even without it, Xander was giving me a look I didn’t like, and as he leaned

forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, I knew what he was going to say.

“You might not want to hear this, but—”

I cut him off.

“I know what it sounds like. If I didn’t know better, I might agree, but it’s just not biologically possible.”

I shouldn’t have to explain to my adult friends how a mating bond worked, but it seemed like I was going to have to do it for the second time this week.

“That’s what Caleb thought about the twins,” Xander said, before I could start teaching him middle-school biology.

“What?”

“I’m just saying. He thought there was no biological way that they could be his, but then he learned better. Witches are crazy, man. They work differently.”

That—that hadn’t occurred to me. I supposed it was possible since Julia hadn’t even realized she was a witch until the night of the Solstice, the same time we both felt that undeniable pull. I said as much to Xander, who smirked.

“Interesting.”

“You can’t just decide that’s an explanation,” I pointed out. Just because something was possible didn’t make it true.

“Why not?” Xander argued. “It makes sense: if shifters find their mate the first time they touch after they’ve shifted, then a witch-shifter might not find her mate until

she's also come into her magic.”

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I wanted to stop talking about this. I wanted to go back in time to before Julia had magic and before I'd ever touched her.

"That's a nice theory, but you don't know it's the answer," I insisted.

"You don't know it isn't," Xander shot back. He was a stubborn bastard, just like me, and he wasn't going to let this go, no matter how much I needed him to. I tried once more, unable to keep the crack from my voice.

"You can't just—this is mating we're talking about. It's serious."

"I am taking it seriously." Xander wasn't backing down, but his demeanor had softened. He smiled as he continued, "I don't want you to miss out on a life with an incredible mate just because you're being a stubborn idiot."

"Maybe I don't want a life with a mate, no matter how incredible she is." The words were out before I could even process them, and Xander was leaning forward again, fixing me with his impossibly black stare.

"Alright, now we're getting somewhere," he said. "Why?"

"I've already got a whole island to worry about. I don't need a mate and young to worry about on top of it. I don't need anything else to feel responsible for." The words were familiar, I'd thought them to myself so many times over the years, but in that moment they felt more like an unconscious reflex.

"Every Alpha's got a whole island to deal with," Xander countered. "You're not

special.”

He was right, but only to a certain extent. Unlike him, I’d been forced into my position of responsibility far before I was ready for it. I might have been seventeen when my father died, but the disease that took him out had been weakening him for years. I’d never had anything resembling a childhood, never had any rebellious adolescence, never had the chance to know myself outside of being Alpha.

It was a lonely existence, but I liked it that way. Better to be alone than to have someone else who always needed something from me. I hadn’t had enough whiskey to admit that to Xander, though, so I sat silently until he sighed, knocking back the last of his drink.

“You want my advice?”

“Not really, but you’re going to give it to me anyway.”

“You bet I am,” he said. “Look, I can’t say whether Julia’s your mate, but I can say that the pair of you have always had very weird, intense energy about each other. Hearing that you’re mates would be the least surprising news ever. If you’re just commitment-phobic, then pull your head out of your ass, dude. Julia deserves better than to be messed around with. Either give her a real chance or stop fucking her.”

That hadn’t been what I expected him to say, but it was what I needed to hear. If I truly wanted to improve my relationship with Julia, I had to stop acting like I had a claim to her. We might be married, but we both knew how little that really meant. I had no right to object to Cody, to her wearing Leo’s clothes, or to Xander putting an arm around her waist to help her when she was exhausted.

Julia might not be my mate, but I could no longer pretend I didn’t care about her.

“You’re right,” I told him. This time, there was no smirk, no smug expression. Xander looked deadly serious as he met my eye and said,

“Damn straight I am.”

Chapter 17 - Julia

“Concentrate.”

“I am concentrating.”

“Concentrate harder.”

That was easy for Eve to say. As excited as I was about the opportunity to hone my skills, I was more than a little distracted by the impending disaster growing in my womb. The more I thought about it, the more obvious it became. I’d let him knot me twice, and while that didn’t guarantee pregnancy, it made it a distinct possibility. I guess I’d just assumed my body was under so much other stress that a child wouldn’t take. What I hadn’t considered was that he or she might be as stubborn as their parents.

What was I going to do with a baby? What was I going to tell Caleb? What was I going to tell Ethan? Was he going to think I’d done this on purpose, that I’d failed to convince him to be my mate, and so now I was trapping him with a child? Was I about to start a conflict between two islands who’d been allied for centuries, just because I couldn’t keep my legs shut?

“You’re not concentrating.”

She had me there. I shook the nagging thoughts away and tried my best to concentrate on the long shadow of a chair that Eve had planted in the middle of Xander’s yard.

Despite the fact that few shifters would dare to come onto the Alpha's property, Ethan was lurking by the back door, keeping watch. Would he want to see the baby when it was born? Would our child split time between Ferris and Lapine, or just stay with me, waiting for their father to pay a cursory visit?

No. I wasn't thinking about that. I was concentrating on the shadow of the chair. Eve had said that re-shaping shadows was all well and good, but the most powerful Shadow Witches could actually make them corporeal, could pour power into a tendril of shadow until it was hard as a rock or sharp as a knife. If I could do that, I'd be nobody's burden.

Eve had promised that the technique wasn't all that different from what I was doing already, only that instead of pulling and pushing the shadows within the space, I was pouring my power into them, like filling a balloon up with air.

That might sound simple enough, but in practice, it was difficult as all hell. We'd already been out in the yard for almost two hours, and I didn't feel any closer to making anything corporeal. The shadow of the chair remained stubbornly intangible, consenting only to wiggle and stretch on my command. I didn't know how to fill something up with my power. I couldn't even say what my power was.

I had told Eve this numerous times, but she insisted it was only due to my inexperience. One day, she promised, I would be able to feel my power the same way I felt my limbs. She was probably right, but admitting that meant I needed to work harder, and right now, I was feeling pretty worked out.

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“Try closing your blue eye again,” Eve suggested. There had been some debate about whether having my good eye open or closed was better. According to Eve’s books, the Shadow Witches who had come before me were all entirely blind, not just partially, and the question had never come up. Generally, I thought it was easier with one eye closed—there was less to distract me when I couldn’t see anything but the creeping shadows—but I didn’t want that to be the only way I could use my power.

I was tired of failing, though, so I shut my good eye, still marveling at how swiftly the shadows came to the fore. I concentrated on the one in front of me, the legs, the seat, and the back of the chair, all casting their own pattern on the grass. I tried to push my power into it, but I only pushed the thing away from me so that it stretched out at the wrong angle.

“Try again,” Eve said gently. If nothing else, that woman had the patience of a saint.

I took a deep breath and tried again, trying to fill up the shadow, to make it solid. This time, it spread like a stain across the grass, and I heard Eve give a thoughtful little hum.

“Okay,” she said. “What do you do when you move the shadows? How do you manipulate your power then?”

“I just—I mean, I think about moving them and then... they move?”

To my surprise, she didn’t look at me like an idiot or a child, but only gave another thoughtful hum.

“Have you tried that... technique with this?” she asked. “Just thinking about the shadows becoming solid?”

“No.”

“Well, then it’s worth a shot.”

She didn’t sound confident, but I supposed it was as likely as anything else to work. I was already tired from the morning’s work, and I was willing to try anything.

Another deep breath and I closed my good eye again, honing in on the shadow of the chair. I was so sick of that chair. Instead of trying to reach inside to identify whatever nebulous part of me could be called my power, I concentrated with all my might on the shadow deepening, growing darker, so dark that it became a matter of its own.

The shadow bent to my will. Or at least, it looked that way: when I was done, I could no longer see the grass beneath the shadow, as if there was a black blanket laid over it.

“Alright,” said Eve softly, as if she was trying not to spook me, “now I want you to try to curl it up, so it’s not flat to the ground. I’m going to go and see if I can touch it.”

I did as she asked, and the shadow did the same for me. One of the legs peeled away from the whole, curving upward into the air. I could see Eve’s shadow as she approached it, and I held the position as she reached out and touched the curl with the tip of a finger.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. My eyes flew open, and my good eye saw the strange curl of shadow snap back to its usual form.

She met my gaze, her familiar hazel eyes sparkling with excitement, but before either of us could speak, Ethan was striding toward us.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. All he’d heard was the shout and had naturally assumed the worst.

“Everything is more than okay,” Eve declared. “Your girl just made her first corporeal shadow.”

“Did she?” Ethan said as if he knew what that meant. “Sounds impressive.”

“It’s very impressive,” Eve assured him, “and very tiring. I’m going to leave it there for today. Make sure she’s fed and watered, now.”

Ethan did not need to be told twice. He was striding toward the house, probably about to empty Xander’s pantry to make a “snack”. I knew he was only doing it to make sure he brought me back to Caleb in good working order, but I couldn’t help smiling after him.

“It’s sweet of him to look after the pair of you.” Eve appeared at my shoulder, and I startled.

“The pair of—oh. Right.”

“I assume he’s the father?”

“Would you keep your voice down?” I hissed. If Ethan found out, when Ethan found out, I didn’t want it to be by accident. Somehow, I was convinced that he could hear us even through the walls.

“You haven’t told him?” Eve sounded mildly scandalized, the hypocrite.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no,” I said tightly. Eve might be a great witch, but I was damned if I was going to let her judge my life choices. I flinched as she kissed her teeth.

“You won’t be able to hide it forever, you know,” she said, and I cracked.

“I was planning on just never telling him, dumping the baby on his doorstep, and then disappearing into the night,” I said, easy and conversational and brimming with anger. “How’s that for a plan?”

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When I looked back at her, she'd turned pale, and I felt a little thrill of satisfaction.

"Did I not mention I was from Lapine?" I said. She shook her head, swallowing thickly.

"You didn't, no."

Silence enveloped us. I expected her to have questions—explanations, excuses, anything—but she only stood beside me, her lips shut tight.

"Do you want to know how she's doing?" I prompted.

"Not really."

"Wow, okay."

Despite all I knew about her past, I'd never imagined that Eve was heartless. She seemed warm and kind and—well, motherly, though I supposed I was hardly the best judge of that.

"I'll be back at the same time tomorrow," Eve said, and the change of subject was so sudden it could have given me whiplash. "Now that you're managing corporeal, we can try picking something up."

I stared at her in disbelief. That couldn't be all she had to say on the subject. We couldn't just be done with that conversation.

“That’s it?” I asked, incredulous.

“Sometimes, when you love someone, it’s easier to keep them at a distance,” was all the explanation Eve gave. “When the world has been unkind to you, it feels safer to push away the people we care for, because then they can’t hurt us.”

I didn’t like how familiar that logic sounded. But Eve and I weren’t the same: I was guarding my heart from a man who had trampled over it repeatedly, while she had punished a child for being conceived.

“What if they love you just as much as you love them?” I countered. It might not be true for me, but Alyssa was sweet, kind, and strong. Any mother would be proud of her.

Eve only shrugged.

“That’s a risk, and you’ll have to decide whether to take it. I didn’t, and I regret it.”

She didn’t wait for my response to that; simply turned her back and walked away. Eve might be the only woman on Ensign who could walk through town alone without issue, and she did it as though that privilege was simply her right. In another world, I would have admired her deeply. In this one, I tried to put her from my thoughts as I went to join Ethan in the kitchen. Despite my best efforts to pretend otherwise, I was absolutely starving.

I was still trying to keep Ethan at arm’s length; the less time I spent with him, the less I spoke to him, the less likely I was to let something slip. That afternoon, though, his enthusiasm was infectious, and I munched on the veggies he’d cut up for me while he grilled me about the morning’s breakthrough. When I explained what this could mean, the possibilities for corporeal shadow, Ethan leaned back against Xander’s counter, whistling through his teeth.

“Forget Xander,” he said. “You’re the scariest motherfucker on the Nightfire islands now.”

He was genuinely excited for me; I should have basked in his admiration, but instead, it chafed at an old wound.

“Not just a burden anymore, huh?” I said, because fuck it.

“What?”

“You don’t remember?” I didn’t see why he would. Throughout my life, I’d often found that hurtful words stayed with the one who was hurt far longer than with the one who did the hurting. “After Dad died, when you guys all came over to Lapine—I asked you if there was anything I could do to support Caleb. You told me I was a burden to him, and the best way to help was to stay out of the way.”

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of me crunching on a carrot stick. I was trying, and probably failing, to seem cool about it all, to act like it was just a funny story and not a foundational part of who I was today. Ethan clearly wasn’t buying it, because when I mustered the courage to make eye contact again, he looked devastated.

“That sounds like something I would say,” he admitted. Then, “I’m sorry.”

There wasn’t much else he could say, I supposed. For years, I’d fantasized about having him on his knees, begging for my forgiveness for underestimating me. It was so far removed from the reality in which I found myself that I almost laughed. Then Ethan spoke up again.

“Is that why you stopped...” he trailed off, as if regretting the sentence he’d begun.

“Stopped what?” I pressed, and almost immediately regretted it.

“When I carried you over the bridge,” Ethan continued reluctantly, “after the fight with Arbor, you were pretty out of it, and you said—you said you had a crush on me when you were younger.”

There was nothing to be done but cover my face entirely. I simply could not look at him, nor could I bear to have him look at me. I felt like I was twelve again, and I’d just walked into a tree I hadn’t seen on my blind side.

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“I hate concussed me,” I said into my cupped hands. “She’s so embarrassing.”

“You also said that you got over it because I was an asshole,” Ethan offered, and I choked out an embarrassed laugh.

“Was I wrong?” I asked.

“No.”

We lapsed into silence again. I pushed the mostly-demolished plate of veggies toward him, and he took a stick of cucumber, bringing it straight to his mouth without even dipping it in the ranch, like a psychopath.

“The funny thing is, though,” he said. “I do remember some things about that visit. You uh—you came downstairs one morning with your hair up in a ponytail.” It was the morning after he’d told me I was a burden; it was because he’d told me I was a burden, but he didn’t need to know that. He looked suddenly vulnerable in the afternoon sun as he confessed, “It was like I’d—I don’t know, like I’d never seen your whole face before; you were so beautiful. I remember thinking that you were going to be a problem.”

His voice was soft, and the moment felt dangerous, so I did the only thing I could ever think to do when faced with danger: crack a joke.

“You perv,” I said. “I was seventeen.”

“Trust me, I was aware,” he said ruefully. “Lock me up.”

He offered me his wrists, ready to be handcuffed, and I snorted an ugly, undignified laugh. He smiled, and my heart gave a traitorous leap. I couldn't afford that now. For all that I could see, he was trying to make things easier between us, but I was about to throw a major spanner in the works. I imagined telling him the truth, could see as clear as day the way his face would fall and anger would cloud his expression. I could hear him asking me why, telling me it was impossible, and asking me what he was supposed to do with a baby.

The laugh died in my throat, and I watched his face fall as he registered my distress.

"Sorry. I'm tired," I said, able to think of no better excuse.

"Julia—" his voice followed me out of the room and up the stairs, but I couldn't turn back. I slammed the door of my bedroom behind me, only just in time. Then I was alone, and the tears came.

Chapter 18 - Ethan

The buzz of the radio distorted my Beta's voice, but the message was clear enough: come home.

"Loud and clear, Will," I said. "With you in two days."

"Roger that. Over and out."

The radio clicked off, and that was that. We were going home. My Pack needed me, like it would until the day I died. So much had happened since I'd left, and yet it felt like no time had passed at all, or that everything had happened in some kind of alternate dimension. Nothing had felt quite real since Julia moved that first shadow on the night of the Solstice, but now reality was catching up to us.

Telling Julia it was time to go home felt like shattering the glass that had surrounded us. We'd been so hemmed in, so pushed together, that the thought of our imminent separation felt wrong—not that I planned on telling her that.

Maybe I should tell her. She'd get a kick out of it, at least. Despite the excitement of her developing magic, Julia had been strange and distant since we arrived on Ensign. At first, I'd put it down to exhaustion following her near-collapse on the bridge, but she'd been eating well and getting plenty of rest since then, and she only trained with Eve a few hours each day, seeming in good enough spirits then.

I had a nagging suspicion it was something I'd done, despite the fact that I'd been making a concerted effort not to piss her off. I tried to tell myself that if she had a problem, then that was on her, but my wolf was having none of it. He pawed and whined to be with her, to make sure she was alright, and I struggled more than ever to resist the urge.

At the very least, the news that we would be returning home gave me an excuse to check in on her. While I doubted she would be happy to leave Eve and her training behind, she might be pleased to get back to Caleb, Alyssa, and the twins, eager to return home where she could roam freely without needing a chaperone.

One of the few places she didn't need a chaperone on Ensign was Xander's backyard, and that was where I found her, sitting in the dappled shade of a tree in the early evening light, playing with the shadows cast by its branches. The yard was secluded, ringed by dense pine trees, and she looked small and delicate compared to the looming foliage.

"Ow!" I whirled around, trying to find the source of the sudden, sharp pain in my left buttock. Was it a wasp? A horsefly? It wasn't burning or itching like an insect bite.

"Hey." Julia waggled her fingers at me, and a sharp-looking shadow did the same. It

was incredibly creepy, and yet I couldn't help smiling.

"Very funny," I said, rubbing my injured ass cheek as I approached her.

"I thought so," she agreed. It looked like she wanted to continue, to make some joke at my expense, but then she bit her lip, holding herself back.

With no other route of conversation, I could only say,

"We need to go home."

The shadow snapped back to its natural form.

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“Already? You don’t think it’s too risky?”

“It is a little,” I admitted. “I doubt Arbor wants either of us to make it back to our own islands, but I’m needed on Ferris.” We couldn’t stay on Ensign forever, and whenever we crossed the bridges, we’d be at risk. I imagined Julia knew that, too.

“Can’t I just—” she started, but I cut her off.

“You can’t stay here, Julia. Xander doesn’t have time to—”

“To babysit me?” Her tone was bitter, as if she had known I would put my foot in my mouth before I even got there.

“Not the word I would have used, but sure,” I said. Whatever words I was going to use probably wouldn’t have been better, but I needed to retain a little bit of dignity.

Julia sighed.

“I guess this had to end sometime.”

“What, running for our lives?” I teased, but she didn’t rise to it. She looked thoughtful and a little sad.

“No. I don’t—I haven’t enjoyed being chased across half the islands,” she said, “but it has been kind of... freeing?”

“Freeing?” It had been intense and stressful, mostly. I’d felt unmoored and out of

place, which—which was its own kind of freedom, in a way. I sat down next to her as I considered it. “I suppose so. This is the longest I’ve ever been away from Ferris, the longest I’ve ever left the island in someone else’s care.”

Julia nodded.

“It’s the longest I’ve ever been away from Lapine. I’m not the dead Alpha’s embarrassment of a daughter or the new Alpha’s curse of a sister here.” Hearing her talk about herself that way made me bristle, and she was wrong.

“You don’t think that has a little bit to do with the god-like powers you’ve come into recently?” I pointed out. “You’ll still have them when you get home. Think how excited Alyssa will be.”

“I guess,” she said, though she didn’t sound like she believed me. “I just—I don’t want to go back to being a burden.”

There was that word again, the one that had spilled, unthinking, from my mouth so many years ago, the one that had ruined everything between us.

“Julia—”

“That wasn’t a dig at you,” she said quickly. “You’re not the only person who’s made me feel that way.”

That didn’t make it better. In fact, it might have made it worse: to know that I was only one in the long line of people who had made Julia feel shitty about herself.

“No one should have—” I started, but she waved a hand at me.

“Don’t. I get it. You’re being nice to me now because you feel bad or whatever. But it

doesn't make any of it less true. I don't want to go home and be reminded that I'm just the defective daughter who killed my own mom."

It felt so wrong to hear her talk that way; Julia was confident, she didn't care what people thought. Or had that only been a front to protect herself from assholes like me? I wanted to comfort her, to promise her that no one thought of her that way, that she was brave and strong and worthy, but I didn't think she'd take that from me right now.

What would she say to someone else, I wondered? The answer came easily: make a joke.

"Hey," I said. "Don't talk about my wife like that."

That won me a surprised, unguarded smile and a gentle shove.

"You're so fucking stupid."

"Yeah. I am." As the words left my mouth, I realized how true they were. If I'd just kept my mouth shut back on Lapine that evening four years and a lifetime ago, I might have had so much more Julia in my life. Maybe I would even have allowed myself to admire the way the sun warmed her pale skin and the moonlight danced on her raven hair.

She still would have been forbidden. I didn't want a mate, and even if I did, she was my best friend's little sister. There was never any world in which I could have her, but in a kinder one, things between us might at least have been easy. We might have been friends.

"Did you mean what you said the other day?" Her voice, though soft, made me startle. When I looked over at her, confused, her plump lower lip was between her

teeth, as if she was already regretting having spoken.

“Mean what?” I asked.

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“That you thought I was beautiful?” A lock of black hair had fallen over her face. My fingers itched.

“Are you fucking with me right now?” She flinched because, of course, I’d chosen the wrong words. I tried again: “No one in this entire archipelago holds a candle to you.” Shit. That was too much. Dial it back. “You’re also stubborn, annoying, and often wrong, just for the record.” I tried to sound nonchalant, as if the question and its answer were all one big joke, but that was Julia’s area of expertise, not mine. I only sounded breathless and a little desperate.

“Just for the record,” she echoed, her voice barely more than a whisper. A tiny smile was beginning to curl at the corner of her mouth, and her blue eye sparkled. I couldn’t see the other, though—the magic one—so I reached up without thinking, brushing that loose strand of hair back behind her ear.

I felt her breath hitch, and a spark of want rushed through me. After almost two weeks of close contact, I was growing used to the pull I felt when her skin touched mine. It didn’t overwhelm me the way it once had, but I felt its presence nonetheless, and I wanted so badly to give in to it. This was our last chance. Once we were back in our respective Packs, back to normal, there would be no excuse. We’d declare the marriage null and void, and be done with it. If I wanted to be weak one last time, it was now or never.

My nose brushed hers as I leaned closer, feeling the warm puff of her breath against my lips, and I stayed there, inhaling her chocolate-and-berries scent, content to linger until she moved away or met me in the middle. For a long moment, she did neither, but her breath came heavier, a little unsteady, until she gave a low whimper and

pressed her lips to mine. She tasted of sunshine and summer and the lemonade she'd been drinking, and I couldn't get enough. It was too easy to pull her into my lap, to let her sit astride me, to push my tongue past her lips and drink in the taste of her moan. Not to be outdone, she sucked my tongue lightly, and I felt my dick twitch in my shorts.

It was a sensory overload: the weight of her in my lap, the warmth of her body, the silk of her hair between my fingers, the taste of her mouth, her lips, her skin. I kissed down the long length of her neck, nosing at the spot where it met her shoulder, where her scent was strongest. I salivated, my canines lengthening just enough to bite down, mark her, claim her.

I pulled away to kiss her again, needing the distraction of her mouth if I was going to get through this without doing something stupid and irreversible. Her hands were cupping my face, keeping me there, and it was easy to lose myself in the slide of her lips on mine and the roll of her hips in my lap. If she kept this up, I was going to be rock hard in a matter of seconds, unable to resist the sinful, sinuous roll of her body.

Dimly, I was aware that we were, once again, outside. There was a stick jabbing me in the ass, but I cared about that almost as little as I cared about anyone coming across us. They should see us here, see her give herself to me and me alone. I gripped her hip hard, fisting the linen of her sundress as I pulled it up and over her head. When she was all but bare in my lap, I could hold myself back no longer.

Rushing forward, I captured one perfect pink nipple in my mouth, and Julia whined, her hand flying to my head, tugging and stroking my hair as I suckled on her. Her tits were so small and perfect, I could probably fit the whole thing in my mouth. The idea made me harder, if that were even possible, and I opened my mouth wide, sucking the little mound of tender flesh inside. Julia squirmed and gasped, and I reveled in the overwhelm of it, the way she filled my mouth so completely, spilling out as I brushed her skin with my tongue, trying to cover every inch of her that I could.

“Ethan,” Julia moaned, rocking her hips insistently against my groin. “I need, I need—”

Reluctantly, I let go of her breast, peppering little kisses over the flushed skin of her chest.

“What do you need, beautiful?”

“Please don’t make me beg again,” she gasped. Her eyes were screwed shut, her mouth open and wet and soft, and I couldn’t have denied her anything.

I wasn’t letting her get far enough away from me to remove her underwear properly, so I resorted to pulling aside the crotch, dipping my fingers into the scorching heat between her legs. She was so wet, and we moaned together as I sank two fingers inside her to the knuckle. She pulled my face back to hers, kissing me hard and long as I pulled my fingers out and pushed them in again, curling them just so, and she whimpered into my mouth.

This time, she didn’t ask for anything, only reached between us to pull down the waistband of my shorts and boxers, freeing my cock. I was rock hard, my knot already formed, and Julia bit her lip as she looked down at it, stroking an exploratory hand up and down its length. I shuddered beneath her touch, bucking up into her hand, and she smiled: she loved to have me dancing to her tune.

The novelty of it must have worn off pretty fast, because she only spent a moment teasing me before she rearranged herself in my lap, lining me up with her dripping, hungry pussy. I gripped her hips hard enough to bruise as she took me inside, and she threw back her head in pleasure, her chest heaving and her black hair flowing like a river down her back. She was so beautiful, so tight, so hot and slick and perfect inside. This was where I belonged: inside her, surrounded by her. I needed her closer.

Fisting my hand in her hair, I caught her mouth in a fierce kiss as we began to move together. With every roll of her hips, she opened up a little more, taking my knot sliver by sliver until we were locked together again. I wanted it to last forever, to spend the rest of my life here in the dappled summer shade, with Julia's mouth on mine and my cock buried deep inside her. It wasn't long, though, before I felt her begin to twitch and clench around me, her mouth opening against mine so that we were no longer kissing, simply gasping out breaths against each other's lips.

Her nails dug into my shoulders as her peak approached, the grinding of her hips growing harder and more insistent until they lost all sense of rhythm, and I felt her clamp down around my cock, pulling me over the edge with her. Even as we rode out the high, our bodies didn't seem to know it was done, her pussy twitching and clenching around my dick like she wanted me to stay inside her just as much as I did.

We sat, wordless and spent, as the song of the cicadas started up and the sun dipped down beneath the trees.

Chapter 19 - Julia

The journey from Ensign back to Ferris was surprisingly uneventful. According to Ethan, who was paranoid, this was deeply suspect.

Xander had seen us off that morning with much pretend crying, an impassioned bro-hug for Ethan, and a real hug for me, which Ethan very bravely didn't growl about; I had bid goodbye to Eve with genuine gratitude and very little warmth; then it was just me and Ethan and a fourteen-hour run back to Ferris.

On the upside, being in our wolf forms meant that we didn't have to talk about what had happened the previous evening after Ethan had wordlessly carried me upstairs and left me in the bathroom to clean up with nothing more than a kiss to my forehead.

On the downside, our wolves were nothing but excited by the development (not that it was a real development, because it still didn't mean anything), and we both failed miserably to rein in their enthusiasm as we bounded through the forest together. My wolf's joy was irrepressible, and I found myself nipping playfully at Ethan's heels as we ran. Far from snapping a reprimand at me, he only yipped and sprinted faster: an invitation to chase.

Argent passed in a blur as we intermittently sprinted and rolled through the grassland. I'd never seen Ethan or his wolf act like this, but my wolf was delighted by it, running and jumping on him, letting him playfully nip at my haunches whenever I overtook him, rubbing her head against his neck whenever we stopped for more than a few seconds together. It was the opposite of what we should be doing. We should be keeping our distance and being careful, and not letting ourselves get caught up in the moment.

Then again, I could hardly talk. I'd been so weak when he kissed me gently in the evening light; it would have been hypocritical to deny my wolf the simple pleasure of play.

It was early evening by the time we reached Ferris, and one of Ethan's Betas was waiting for us at the bridge with a small pile of clothing and a grim expression.

Ethan wasted no time on pleasantries as he pulled on the sweatpants his Beta offered him.

"Status update?" he demanded. The Beta looked back at him, vaguely shell-shocked, as if Ethan had grown a second head since he'd last been on Ferris. His eyes darted between Ethan and me, and I realized with a sharp jolt of mortification that we must smell of each other. I pulled on the vest top I'd been given, trying not to look guilty.

"The uh—the leak in the washing cabin was dealt with, but Joe wandered into the

forest again,” he said eventually.

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“For fuck’s sake,” barked Ethan, “who let him out?”

The Beta shrugged.

“He just wandered off while Sadie’s back was turned. You know what he’s like.”

Ethan sighed as though he knew exactly what Joe was like, pinching the bridge of his nose. I personally wasn’t sure what the problem was with a shifter going into the forest. It was kind of our whole thing.

“Do you have a track on him?” Ethan asked, and the Beta nodded.

“He didn’t go far, just up to the lake.”

Ethan nodded, running a hand through his hair. I was absolutely not admiring the way it made the muscles of his arms and torso flex. That would have been tasteless. He was in distress.

“Sorry, I have to go deal with this,” he told me. “You go back to town with Harris, get settled in the house. One of our elders, his mind’s going. He keeps wandering off and refusing to come back. Says he’s waiting for his mate, but she died last year.”

It was a familiar enough scenario. Shifters were less susceptible to degeneration and disease than humans, but it became more common among the elders when their mates had passed on.

“I’ll come with you,” I said. I might not know Joe, but I had always been good at

calming Patricia Elms when she started talking in circles and forgetting her son's face.

"You don't need to—" Ethan started, but I held up a hand to silence him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Harris's jaw drop.

"Elders are my whole job back home," I reminded him. "Let me help."

"Fine. It's not far from the lake."

As we walked, Ethan filled me in: Joe was coming up on ninety, his mate Minnie having passed in her sleep the previous winter. Minnie had, according to Ethan, been something of a community pillar, warm and funny and absolutely not to be messed with. The two of them had a daughter, Sadie, with whom Joe now lived, but he was prone to wandering off in search of his mate, and this wasn't the first time Ethan had been called in to help get him back.

"The Alpha command is usually the only thing that can get him to move," Ethan confessed. "I don't like doing it, though. He's a respected Elder. He deserves better than that."

"Well, you've got me now," I told him. I wished I were as confident as I pretended, but it was clear that Ethan was uncomfortable with the task; if nothing else, I could lend him a little support.

It wasn't long before the forest began to thin out, and we found ourselves on the shore of a small lake, rimmed by redwoods. Not far from us, an elderly man sat at the base of a tree, waving as he saw us approach.

"Hey, Joe," said Ethan, and the old man gave him a little salute.

“Matthew,” said Joe. “Nice day we’re having, huh?”

Matthew had been Ethan’s father, which was about what I expected. Ethan looked uncomfortable, but I could tell he was trying his best not to show it.

“It sure is,” he agreed, “but it’ll be dark soon. Wanna come back to town?”

Joe shook his head.

“Naw, I’m meeting my Minnie here for a date.” His attention turned to me, his watery blue eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Who’s your lady friend?”

“I’m Julia,” I said, crouching down and giving a little wave of my own. “It’s nice to meet you, Joe. I’ve heard a lot about your Minnie.”

His whole face lit up, splitting into a wide, gap-toothed smile.

“Yeah, she’s a swell girl, just swell. Sometimes I can’t believe fate gave her to me, but I sure am grateful.”

“What’s your favorite thing about her?” I asked. As sad as it sometimes made me, I loved to hear the Elders talk about their mates. That kind of enduring love was something that I’d dreamed of as a girl: to have someone who loved me so entirely, for everything I was.

“Oh, her sense of humor for sure,” Joe answered quickly. “She’s whip-smart, always got something to say.”

“You must be really proud of her,” I said, “and your daughter, too.”

I’d hoped that mention of his daughter might bring Joe back to the present, but I had

no such luck. He only shook his head, looking confused.

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“We don’t have a daughter, not yet anyway. Boy, would that be a blessing.”

To my surprise, Ethan appeared at my side, crouching beside me. Adopting the same calm, pleasant tone I’d been careful to use, he said,

“Her name’s Sadie, Joe. Your daughter Sadie, with red hair just like her mom?”

Joe’s frown deepened.

“Red hair like Minnie?” he asked. It looked like he was on the cusp of something, but couldn’t quite grasp it. It was a delicate moment: we couldn’t push him too far, but the right nudge might get him moving.

“Just like Minnie,” I assured him. “You wanna come see her?”

“Where?”

“At home, back in town,” said Ethan. “Here, take my arm.”

For a faltering, uncertain moment, Joe only stared at Ethan’s outstretched arm, then he blinked. He nodded.

“Thank you, I feel turned around all of a sudden.”

“It’s a warm day,” said Ethan as he helped the old man up. “Have you been drinking enough water?”

I let Ethan take the lead as we headed back through the forest, walking slowly to make sure Joe didn't trip. As we walked, Joe asked me several questions about Lapine, telling me more than once that he'd been to Lapine for the Solstice a few years previously. He was a sweet old guy, and I enjoyed answering his questions, even when they repeated themselves, just to see the excitement on his face with every "new" piece of information he learned.

The sun had almost set by the time we arrived back in town, and Ethan led us to a homey-looking cottage, where a woman in her fifties, red hair salted with white, waited anxiously in the doorway.

"There you are, Dad," she said with a relieved exhale, dashing forward to take her father's free arm. Together, she and Ethan helped him up the ramp to the cottage door, ushering him inside and into a comfy chair in the living area. I lingered in the doorway, not wanting to intrude.

"Thank you, Alpha," said Sadie. "He just took off while I was making lunch."

"Don't sweat it, Sadie. These things happen," Ethan assured her. "Besides, Julia here did most of the work."

"Hi." I gave Sadie a little wave and received a tired smile in return.

"Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure. He's a great old guy."

"He is," she agreed. Her eyes flicked between me and Ethan, as if expecting an explanation for my presence. Ethan didn't offer it.

"Is there anything else you need before I go?" he asked. The exhaustion was plain in

his voice, and Sadie must have heard it too, because she shook her head.

“Absolutely not. Go home and take care of yourself. Good to have you back.”

Ethan gave her a weak smile, and the pair of us waved at Joe as Ethan guided me through the door by my elbow. Behind me, I heard Sadie give a little gasp, but Ethan didn't seem to notice.

“Careful,” he said gently. “There's a plant pot right there.”

I let him guide me around the pot on my blind side, uncertain of why I didn't feel prickly and defensive. His hand remained on my elbow as we moved through town, heedless of the looks it garnered us, and my wolf purred with satisfaction. It wasn't a mark, not a full claim, but she knew what the touch signified just as well as I did.

Along the way, we passed males coming home, kids playing in the street, and females bringing in laundry; every one of them received a tired but genuine smile from the most unsmiling man I knew. Once, he caught a stray ball and rolled it back to a group of kids who seemed entirely unafraid of him. It was so far removed from the Ethan I thought I'd known that by the time we reached his home, I felt dazed and unmoored.

Between that and our shared exhaustion, we were quiet as Ethan shuffled around the house. Food had been left out for us, but we were too tired to do more than pick at the cold cuts and bread and cheese.

“You want a tea?” were the first words Ethan spoke after we got inside.

“I was gonna head to bed soon, but thanks.”

“It's chamomile,” he clarified. “For sleep.”

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“You drink chamomile?” I teased, unable to stop myself. Most shifter males wouldn’t be seen dead drinking herbal tea, considering it too “girly”.

“Yeah. It’s soothing,” he replied, without a hint of embarrassment. He filled his kettle and set it on the stove, bringing two cups down from the shelf.

I had nothing to say to that, so I sat and watched him make the tea. It was clearly a ritual for him, and there was something precious in being allowed into this very private routine.

“Thank you for today,” he said as he removed the strainer from one cup, sliding it across the table toward me.

“It was nothing, really,” I said as I inhaled the floral steam. “Glad I could help.”

“We uh—we make a pretty good team when we’re not biting each other’s heads off,” he offered, and my stomach fluttered with pleasant butterflies.

“Yeah, I guess we do.”

The moment was gentle, tender, and in the silence that ensued, I wondered if maybe I was safe. If I told him now about the little life growing inside me, maybe he wouldn’t push me away. Maybe he would take my hand and tell me we’d make it work, that he’d been wrong about not being my mate, that he was ready now.

Knock, knock, knock.

We both jumped. Ethan gave me an apologetic grimace as he moved to answer the front door, and I followed him to the threshold of the kitchen, leaning against the doorframe to look down the hall.

On the porch, there was a woman about Ethan's age, petite and curvy, with tanned skin and deep brown hair curling around her shoulders.

"Lacey, everything okay?" Ethan asked.

"Everything's fine," she said. "I just wanted to swing by and welcome you home. It's been weird not having you around."

"You guys can't look after yourselves for two weeks?" His tone was light, pretending at a joke, but his posture was tense.

"We need our Alpha here with us," the woman, Lacey, replied. Her voice was high and breathy, pleading in a way that—oh. Oh. She was flirting with him. She was flirting in a way that felt familiar, sure of itself. I knew Ethan slept around, and I had to assume that included females from his own Pack. My wolf growled within me, and I had to grip the doorframe so I didn't rush forward to stake my claim.

"Well, you've got me back now," said Ethan. He sounded almost bored, without the warmth that lingered in his tone when he'd spoken to the other members of his Pack. "Thanks for checking in."

"You're not—you don't want some company?" she tried once more, but Ethan clearly wasn't interested.

"Not tonight, Lacey. Have a good one."

The door clicked closed, and I stood watching Ethan's back as he took several

measured breaths. I should have felt elated at the ease with which he dismissed her—my wolf was certainly curling up, contented, in my chest—but I only felt a sense of trepidation. These last couple of weeks had been intense, but they were nearly over now. Was that how Ethan would treat me when all was said and done? I was, after all, the only one in a long line of females who had ignored our better judgment and fallen into his bed. In my case, there hadn't even been a bed.

When he finally turned back and saw me lingering at the kitchen door, he tensed. It was stupid, so stupid, but I couldn't help asking,

“Who was that?”

Chapter 20 - Ethan

Julia's tone was purely inquisitive, with no accusation or offense in her voice, yet I still felt vaguely guilty as I turned back to face her. Why did I feel bad about Julia when it was Lacey whom I had just unceremoniously rejected? Usually, when I wasn't in the mood for a hookup, I let them down gently, but that night my wolf's hackles had risen the moment she leaned into my space, and I had to end the encounter before he started snapping.

“Just Lacey. She uh—she wanted to welcome me back home,” I said. It was true enough. I didn't need to go into the details of what her welcome would have entailed. I wasn't interested in it.

“That's nice of her,” said Julia, mildly. “Are the two of you close?”

“I mean, not really. In a certain way, I suppose.” Lacey might have spent a few nights in my bed, but she didn't know any more about me than other Pack members, besides perhaps the color of my sheets. She'd never even stayed the night.

“You can just say you hooked up,” Julia said, in the same tone she always used when she was teasing me. I’d thought she might be jealous, but there was no sign of it in her expression.

“I thought you’d be—I don’t know—bothered,” I replied. It was absolutely and completely unfair of me to be bothered that she wasn’t bothered. I had been the one to insist that what was between us was nothing more than attraction, nothing more than I had experienced with Lacey or a dozen other females. Despite myself, I was quickly realizing that I had been wrong about that from the start.

“I’m not the boss of you,” Julia shrugged.

“Can I get that in writing?” I replied on instinct, and she smiled.

“Shut up.”

I wanted to tell her that she didn't have anything to worry about, but that wouldn't make sense. We weren't together. Did I want us to be together? I knew I didn't want any other male anywhere near her. I couldn't imagine being with another female. I knew that when I touched her, I felt electric, and she'd said from the beginning that we were mates, and perhaps I was starting to believe her.

“I just—you know I'm...” The words wouldn't come. I floundered.

“A bit of a slut?”

“Sure,” I admitted. She was right, but that wasn't what I was trying to say. “I just never really—I never wanted anything long-term. I didn't want to worry about someone else's feelings when I already had a whole Pack's worth of feelings to worry about. Besides, I didn't want to get attached to someone who wasn't my mate—not that I even wanted a mate, or a family, or any of that, really.” The words were pouring out of me, but none of them were right. “I only—I only ever picked women I knew there was no danger I would fall for. Lacey's nice and all, but I don't exactly want to spend time with her when we're not—this is coming out wrong.”

“You don't have to explain yourself to me,” said Julia. “I'm not judging you.”

“I know, but—”

“I kind of just want to go to bed.”

I was surprised by the sudden bluntness of it, but she did look tired. Her voice was flat, and her gaze lacked its usual mischievous sparkle. We'd run across two islands and gone on an impromptu forest hike today; it was no wonder she needed her rest. Maybe I did, too. Maybe in the morning I'd be better with my words.

"Right. It's been a long day," I agreed. "Let me find something for you to sleep in."

She followed me up the stairs, but not quite into my bedroom, choosing once again to linger in the doorway. I wanted her to step in, almost told her to, but then she gave a wry little smile and said,

"Honestly, I can't wait to get back to my wardrobe."

"I'll bet," I said. It was always a little distressing to wear borrowed clothes as a shifter. The scents were never quite right.

"Forget the kidnapping," Julia went on. "I'm most furious with Arbor for stealing my favorite party dress."

"The blue one? It was pretty."

"From the mainland and everything," she sighed, and I hummed sympathetically as I rifled through my dresser. I couldn't say I remembered the dress particularly well, besides that Julia had looked distressingly beautiful in it. I hadn't spared it a thought once I'd stripped it from her body and tossed it into the darkness, too concerned with the soft plane of her stomach and the little hills of her breasts.

I cleared my throat, pulling out my largest, softest tee.

"Here you go. It's not from the mainland, but it's clean, I promise."

“Thanks. I’ll just—” she gestured behind her. My guest room was waiting for her just like it had been the night of Solstice, two weeks and a million years ago. It was torture to let her walk away, to retreat to that cold bedroom with her hot tea and one of my shirts to sleep in. My wolf whined with similar frustration. She should stay here, in my bed, with me.

It had been one thing to pretend I felt nothing for her when we were on Argent, or Ensign, or anywhere that wasn’t here. Back then, it was easy enough to tell myself that whatever this was had an expiration date, that it would end as soon as we returned to our respective homes and life went back to normal. Now, though—now she was in my home. She was sitting at my kitchen table, drinking tea out of my cups; she was dealing with the problems of my Pack as if it were nothing. I had always imagined having a mate as something heavy—just another responsibility for me to manage, another weight for me to carry—but these last few days with Julia had felt so light. The thought of coming home every evening to find her curled on the couch or pottering around the kitchen filled me not with trepidation, but with longing.

In the morning, I was supposed to take her back to Lapine. I was supposed to drop her off and tell her, “See you later,” and return home and carry on life as it had been before. Even the thought of it was like ripping a hole in my chest.

My legs had carried me down the hall before I had time to protest, my fist raised to knock on the door.

“Can I help you?” Julia was wearing my shirt. She was wearing nothing but my shirt—the material swamping her slender body, brushing the tops of her thighs—and her black hair was loose. Her eyelashes looked a little damp, like maybe she’d been crying, but she smiled at me.

“I just wanted to make sure you had everything you needed,” I said.

“Yep,” she replied, and suddenly there was no reason for me to be there.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay.”

“See you in the morning, then.”

“See you in the morning.”

Neither of us moved. There was no sound but our breathing, heavy in the air. I could smell the mix of our scents coming off her, and I wanted to tell her—what? That she was the most stubborn, infuriating, brilliant woman I’d ever known, and five seconds with her made me forget every other woman I’d ever been with? That I never wanted her to leave? That she’d been right all along, that she was my mate and I was hers, that I didn’t know how I ever could have denied it?

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I reached across the space, needing to feel her pressed against me, to map the shape of her body with my fingers and my lips, to remind myself she was here and she was real and she was mine. Her breath hitched as my hand found her waist, and she allowed herself to be pulled in close against my chest. This close, her scent was maddening, and the soft skin of her neck was begging for attention. Like a magnet drawn to its opposing pole, my lips found the junction of her shoulder and neck, dropping one, two, three light kisses to the spot that I was itching to mark.

Next came teasing nips, and she tipped her head to give me better access. The give of her flesh beneath my teeth was beautiful, and I lavished attention on that spot before moving up to her neck, kissing and nibbling until I reached the sharp line of her jaw, where I sucked a mark beneath her ear. Julia gasped, her hands flying up to grip my biceps, and I pulled back just enough to look her in the eye, a hand on her chin, keeping her face turned up to mine.

Her pupil was blown wide, her mouth open, and her breath already coming in soft little pants. She truly was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen: sharp, arresting, and completely captivating. Absurdly, my heart felt as though it might beat out of my chest as I leaned down to brush my lips against hers. She tasted floral, like chamomile, and when I took her top lip into my mouth, she released the prettiest little whimper. I let her go, only to return for more, pressing my lips to hers again and again. She met me with desperation, trembling in my arms, and I tried my best to soothe her, slowing the pace of the kiss and stroking gently up and down her back.

Would she calm once I got her on my knot, I wondered. Did she need me as much as I needed her? I'd give her whatever she wanted, whatever she wanted for the rest of our lives. I slipped a knee between her legs, pulling her impossibly closer and

groaning as I realized she wasn't wearing underwear beneath my shirt. For a few glorious seconds, I could feel the wet heat of her pussy against my thigh as she ground down on the muscle there, shivering with pleasure in my arms.

I was ready to scoop her up and carry her to my room, to lie her back on my bed and take my time with her, to fuck her so well she couldn't remember her own name by the time I sank my teeth into her shoulder and marked her as mine for everyone to see—then she stepped away. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips red and kiss-bitten, her breath coming fast, and I needed her back in my arms again.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I meant what I said before. I really am tired." She glanced behind her at the guest room's twin bed, and when she turned to face me again, her eyes stayed firmly on the floor. "I should probably—probably just go to bed."

I gaped at her for a moment, too drunk on lust to form a coherent thought.

"Right," I said eventually. "Yeah. Yeah, sure."

She stepped back again, her hand on the door, and it took everything I had not to follow her, not to gather her up in my arms and take her to bed with me anyway.

"Sleep well," said Julia, as she closed the door on me.

I stood in the corridor, my dick tenting my sweatpants, wondering what the hell had just happened. Perhaps she really was just tired—we'd had a long day, after all. Maybe she needed a bit of space after the Lacey thing. I tried not to think about other options—that she'd grown bored of me, that she was punishing me for rejecting her before—as I forced myself to retreat back down the hallway to my own bedroom. I wasn't owed an explanation from her right now.

In the morning, I could talk to her properly. A good night's rest would help me

organize my thoughts, and by morning, I would be able to say all the things I hadn't been able to say. In the morning, everything would feel right. I would make sure of it.

Chapter 21 - Julia

I was still awake when the weak light of morning began to filter through the window. I had lain the whole night unsleeping, imagining that I could hear Ethan's slow breathing through the wall. I could have heard it in reality, could have spent the night with my head pillowed on his strong chest, but that would only have made everything worse.

How could I have dragged myself from his bed and stolen away? I'd barely had the strength to pull myself out of his arms the previous evening. It had felt so right, and for more than a moment, I had lost myself in the softness of his touch and the insistence of his kisses. It had been almost impossible to remind myself that I was just another female he was willing to fuck, nothing more. He'd said as much to my face: there was no danger he would fall for me.

The unfortunate reality was that I had fallen for him. Sure, we were mates—no matter what he claimed, I was certain of that—but even if we weren't, I'd still be in love with him. It was oddly freeing to admit it, even just to myself: I was in love with Ethan fucking Cain. I loved his weird dry sense of humor, his rigid moral code, and his chamomile tea. I wanted to be his mate and the mother of his children, and I was both of those things; yet everything was still awful.

He didn't want a mate. He didn't want a family and didn't seek any more responsibility than he already had. As wonderful as he was with the people of his Pack, I could see how the burden of responsibility weighed on his shoulders. He didn't need any more of that.

Still, I couldn't say that my decision was entirely altruistic. I did not think only of

relieving his burden, but of my own hard-won pride. I was not going to beg for his attention; I was not going to plead for his love; I was not going to hang around until he grew bored of me. I was not going to allow this child to grow up feeling like a burden. If he wasn't going to accept me as his mate, if he wasn't going to love me and my child as we deserved, then I was going to leave him behind.

It was better this way. No confessions and no goodbyes.

Stripping off Ethan's shirt should have been the easiest part, and yet I found my eyes filling with tears as I was briefly engulfed in his familiar scent. Folding it carefully, I left it on the bed and fled the room before I could do something ridiculous and sentimental like take it with me. Naked, I crept down the stairs, grateful that Ethan's door was on my blind side, and I wouldn't be tempted to glance in its direction. A few more steps, and I would be out the door, shifted, and on my way home.

As much as the thought hurt, there was relief in it as well. I might not be able to tell Caleb the whole truth, at least not yet, but I would tell Alyssa. We would sit on my couch, have a glass of wine, and she would stroke my hair, allowing me to cry as much as I wanted. I would have my family with me, and no matter how hard things became, I wouldn't go through it alone.

Ethan would be alone when he woke, but I reminded myself that he preferred it that way. Still, it would be cruel to leave him with nothing—I'd disappeared on him once before, and while he might not return my feelings, I knew he cared for me enough to worry. Snatching Ethan's to-do list pad off the table by the door—his neat little lists were so endearing, there was something wrong with me—I scrawled a quick note, sticking it to the back of the door before I slipped out into the morning.

It was warm enough that I barely felt chilled, despite my nakedness. For a moment, I simply stood on Ethan's porch, enjoying the dawn's quiet. The gentle pink and yellow light made the town look idyllic, and I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like

to wake up to such a sight every day. I shook the thought away; that wasn't the version of my life I got to live. In this version, I was going home to Lapine to be with my family and a Pack that tolerated me.

Unable to endure my racing thoughts any longer, I shifted. My thoughts as a wolf were simpler, more instinctual, which was both a blessing and a curse. I might have stopped imagining a hundred different realities where I could be happy, but now that my wolf had control, it was much harder to leave. She wanted to stay with her mate and didn't understand why I would abandon him when he had been touching and kissing me just a few hours earlier. She wanted to go back inside and crawl into bed with him, and she was not pleased to find out that this wasn't an option.

I tried to concentrate on things I knew she liked: on being close to Caleb and Alyssa and the twins, on my soft, familiar bed, on the paths she'd worn through Lapine's forests with her running. Taking the first step away from Ethan's home wasn't easy, but I was nothing if not stubborn. My wolf could fight me every step of the way, but I was going home.

It was only once I'd muscled her out of town and onto the long, straight road that led to the Lapine Bridge that she broke out into a proper run. If there was one thing she and I always agreed on, it was the sheer joy of running flat out through an open field. Soon enough, we wouldn't be able to do this; once my baby was showing, my wolf would refuse to surface, and I'd be stuck as a human until the birth. For now, I would take all the chances I got to run until I was breathless.

Would my baby feel the same? Once they reached the shifting age, would they itch to run the same way I did? Would they possess magic like I did? Perhaps they would be more like their father, stoic and disciplined. My wolf loved the thought of that, of proudly displaying a pup just like his sire. However, my feelings were more complicated. In my mind's eye, I could see a little boy, brown-haired and grey-eyed, sitting silently at my kitchen table, studiously completing his schoolwork while I

needed him to put it down and join me for a run outside. On one hand, I longed for the reminder that my mate had once desired me, enough to plant his child in my womb; on the other, seeing the face of the man who had broken my heart staring back at me every day would be its own kind of torture.

I wasn't getting answers to that question any time soon, though, so I focused on more immediate problems as the Lapine Bridge came into view. What was I going to tell Caleb when I started to show? He'd come down hard on any shifter who knocked up a female and then abandoned her—never mind that technically I was the one doing the abandoning—and I didn't think he'd buy that I'd had a fling at the Solstice with some shifter whose name I didn't know.

I was considering the viability of just refusing to say anything on the subject when a dark shape emerged from beneath the bridge, followed by another, and another, and another. For a moment, I feared that I was about to be caught out by the Ferris patrols and marched back to Ethan with my tail between my legs, but then I caught their scent on the breeze, and I realized I was in far deeper trouble.

Smoke and booze and tobacco, undercut by that woodsy, earthy scent I had hoped I'd never smell again. In all my angst about Ethan, I'd forgotten the reason why we were in this situation to begin with: Arbor wasn't done with us. They weren't done with me.

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The wolves before me looked hungry. They weren't here to abduct me this time; they wanted my blood, and unless I could think of something fast, they were going to get it.

Against all my instincts, I shifted. I might be faster and stronger in my wolf form, but I still had no chance against three Arbor hunters, and I had yet to master magic as a wolf. At least in my human form, I had a shadow on my side.

It looked as though I had the element of surprise, too, because the hunters stopped in their tracks as I shifted. It was certainly insane, on the face of things, but Arbor didn't know about the new tricks I'd learned on Ensign. Before they knew what had hit them, a shadow had twined around the back leg of the hunter on the left, and with a yank, he was dragged backward, disappearing off the edge of the land with a distant splash.

The other two looked at each other, uncertain how to proceed. I could only pray they were neither smart nor dumb enough to simply rush me—I wouldn't be able to take out both of them before they reached me—but luckily, they were erring on the side of caution, turning quickly in an attempt to catch any approaching shadow. I could do this. I could get myself and my child over that bridge and back to safety.

I braced myself, ready for a second attack—and my heart sank as three more hunters emerged from beneath the bridge. How long would it take before they realized that I couldn't take more than one at a time? Not long, I imagined.

Panicking, I decided to try the sheer power of intimidation. Arbor hated magic, but they also feared it. They'd seen a little of what I could do with the shadows now, and

they were wary of my power. Did I have enough to convince them this was a fight they couldn't win?

There was only one way to find out. Taking a breath that I could only pray wouldn't be my last, I called on every shadow I could. They crept toward me from the trees, stretching from the bridge to shroud every Arbor wolf in darkness before they advanced across the grass to hover just ahead of me, as though waiting for my orders.

The effort of it was enormous, but I reminded myself that I'd held them for longer when we'd crossed the Ensign Bridge. I could do this. The hunters were still far enough away that they might not be able to see the sweat beading at my temples and the slight shaking of my limbs. They were certainly looking intently at me, but none made any move to attack.

Nor, however, did they back off. I needed to raise the stakes. It was a risk, such a risk, to close my eyes and turn the world entirely to shadow, but it was the only way to do what needed to be done. I sensed a change in the Arbor wolves' demeanor immediately: they stiffened, ready to spring forward, but I was faster. I ripped a tendril of shadow away from the rest, commanding it to be tangible, to be sharp, to be deadly. As the first hunter snarled and darted forward, I plunged the tendril of shadow into his chest, letting it rip through his underbelly before his legs gave out beneath him and his body hit the ground.

It had worked—fuck me, it had worked—but the shock of it, the violence, the sheer effort it had taken was too much for me, and I lost my grip. The shroud of shadow snapped back into its natural position, and this time, the Arbor hunters didn't hesitate. They were coming straight for me.

Chapter 22 - Ethan

I'd heard plenty of stories, plenty of frivolous romances I'd paid no mind to, in which

shifters were woken by their wolves because their mate was hurt or in danger. I'd considered them just that—stories—until I jolted awake with my wolf already snarling and demanding our skin. I leaped out of bed, sprinting down the short hallway and bursting into Julia's room, my stomach dropping as I saw her bed empty.

I hesitated when I spotted my shirt, folded and left so carefully on the bed. Would she have left it like that if she were fleeing, if she was taken? Surely not. On the other hand, she had little else to wear. Her shorts and vest from yesterday were still draped less carefully over the chair in the corner, and for a moment, my mind conjured an entirely different reason for my wolf's insistence on wakefulness: I would go downstairs to find her naked, waiting for me. I would kiss her in the early morning light and carry her back up to bed, or maybe just lift her onto one of the counters and let her wind her impossibly long legs around my hips.

As I descended the stairs, I knew that happy version of reality was not my own. The kitchen was empty, as was the living space, and there was a note tacked to the back of the front door. It was in my hand before I knew I'd moved, but I had to read it three times before my panicked brain would register the words contained in it.

Dear Ethan,

I'm sorry to disappear on you, but I think it's better for both of us this way. Don't follow me—I'm going back to Lapine, and I'll make sure Caleb radios you when I get there.

Thank you for everything. I'll try not to insult you the next time we see each other (no promises, though).

Yours,

Julia

My heart plummeted into my stomach. It didn't make sense. Was she so desperate to get home, to escape from me, that she would leave in the early morning, before I was even awake? I must have done something wrong, though I wasn't sure what. Whatever it was, my wolf and I were in agreement: I needed to find her and fix it. Now.

Once I was out of the front door, my wolf needed no coaxing to take my skin. He tore into being and was after her scent in a matter of moments. As she'd promised, her trail was heading toward the Lapine Bridge, and my claws dug up the earth as I sped off in pursuit.

My mind was clearer than it had been in months—maybe years. All that mattered was finding Julia, ensuring she was safe, and telling her I loved her. Nothing had ever been more embarrassingly obvious: I loved her. I had loved her since long before the Solstice, but unraveling that web of denial would require far more attention than I had right now. At this moment, I was following my mate's trail, and I would not stop until she was in my arms again.

Even as I ran, a worry itched in the back of my mind: what if she didn't want me anymore? What if I'd done such a terrible job of showing her how I felt that she'd given up on me entirely? Had the years of dismissal and cruelty I'd shown her been too much, even for the mating bond? If she truly didn't want me, could I let her go?

No. I could never let her go forever, but if she wanted space, if she wished to go home without me, then I could accept that. If it took weeks, months, or even years to convince her to give me a real chance, then I would have to learn patience. I would do it, however. For her, I would do just about anything.

I smelled blood in the air before I saw them: Julia and the hunters. Julia with four Arbor hunters standing between her and the bridge. Julia, naked and human, against four ravening wolves. I'd known that our crossing onto Ferris was too quiet, known

that Arbor must have been lying in wait for a better opportunity. Damn Julia and her stubborn streak—could she not have stood my company for another few hours for the sake of her own safety?

The blood, at least, wasn't hers. The body of a hunter lay slumped on the grass before her, and I felt a surge of pride: she was strong. I could see her gathering her strength again, the shadows lengthening and darkening under her command, but the hunters were advancing, and she wasn't going to be fast enough. I had to be fast enough.

Putting on a burst of speed, I hurtled toward the bridge, flinging my body between Julia and the oncoming hunters just in time. They'd seen me coming, but my size was enough to make them hesitate. The two in the middle came for me, while the two on the outside kept gunning for Julia, and I could only pray that I'd bought her enough time to call her power again.

For now, I had to make sure these hunters regretted ever trying to hurt my mate. One had come for my back leg, while the other was gnashing at my throat. I let the bite land on my leg so I could whip my head around and catch my other attacker in the face, my teeth leaving puncture marks in his muzzle as he backed off, whimpering and bleeding.

The other still had my back leg clamped between his jaws, and it made his body an easy target. I twisted around, slashing my claws through his chest and belly before he had the chance to run. The jaws around my leg went slack, but then the first hunter was back on the offensive, snarling and blood-soaked as he went for my neck again. I met him with another strike to his face, this time with my claws, and he fell back, fresh blood dripping onto the grass.

I whirled around, desperate to catch sight of Julia. When I did, my heart stopped: she was holding the two hunters at bay, tendrils of shadow wrapped around their legs. She was straining from the effort, her skin shining with sweat, and the hunters were

pulling against their bonds, teeth bared and claws digging into the dirt.

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Restricted as he was, the one closest to me was easy to take down—one quick bite to his throat and he was gurgling his last—but before I could see to the other, the first hunter was on me again. Even with his face cut to ribbons, blood matting his fur and staining his teeth, he was intent on taking me out, barreling into my side and rolling us over until he was on top of me, his rancid breath in my face and his eyes dark with violence.

Planting my hind paws on his lower belly, I used all my strength to push him off me before his jaws could snap closed around my throat. He went sprawling, and then I was on him. Without hesitation, I sank my claws into his belly, ripping him open and leaving his innards steaming on the ground.

When I raised my head again, Julia still had the other hunter ensnared in shadow, with a sharp-looking tendril poised and ready to strike. I shifted quickly, holding out one hand.

“Wait!” I called, and she froze. “Can you keep him bound if he shifts?”

“We’ll see, I guess,” said Julia. Her voice sounded strained, but she was holding strong.

I approached the bound hunter, stepping in front of him as I gathered all my Alpha authority. If this was going to work on a wolf from another Pack, I was going to need every drop of power that nature allowed me.

“Shift,” I commanded.

The hunter squirmed under my gaze, clearly wanting to refuse the order. Had it been a member of my own Pack, they could never have disobeyed, even for this long, but he was stubborn.

“Shift,” I repeated, and this time he could not resist the weight of my authority.

The shadows around him loosened as he shifted, but the moment he was fully human, he was once again tethered at the ankles and wrists, completely at my mercy.

“Look, m-man,” he started, stuttering with fear, “I just—just do what my Alpha tells me, I don’t—”

“Shut up,” I growled, and his mouth snapped closed. “I’m feeling generous today, so you get to keep your life, but I’m going to need something in return.”

The hunter nodded. Smart.

“You’re going to run back to your island, to your Alpha, and tell him that if he sends one more shifter after us, if he lays another finger on this woman—” I jerked my head in Julia’s direction to avoid any misunderstandings “—then between the two of us, Ferris and Lapine will wipe your entire miserable Pack off the face of this earth. Do you understand me?”

“Yep. Loud and clear.” The guy sounded like he was on the verge of pissing himself, so I trusted that he’d gotten the message.

“Let him go,” I told Julia, and she looked relieved to release the shadows that had surrounded him. The second he was free, the hunter began to sprint away, shifting mid-stride as he fled west toward the Arbor bridge.

It was torture not to go to Julia immediately, but I watched his retreating form until I

could no longer see him. I meant every word of that threat: if Arbor made one more attempt on my mate's life or her freedom, I would ensure they regretted it.

When I turned around, Julia was trying valiantly to stride away but made it only a few steps before her legs gave out beneath her. I rushed to her side, taking her arm to help her back to her feet. As I did so, I scanned her body for injuries, but none were apparent. She was just shocked. She was fine. She was whole and alive.

"Come on, come away from here," I said, ushering her away from the bodies that littered the grass. Even in her shell-shocked state, Julia shrugged me off as soon as we'd put enough distance between ourselves and the dead hunters.

"I'm fine," she said. "Thank you for—thank you for helping. I can manage the rest of the way."

I couldn't help the incredulous laugh that escaped me; she was naked and blood-splattered and still visibly shaken, yet still so damn stubborn. She was utterly ridiculous, and I adored her.

"You absolutely cannot," I said. "You nearly died."

"Well, I didn't die," she retorted, tossing her hair over her shoulder as she tried to rally herself. She took a few more unsteady steps forward—the attempt was clearly to stalk away from me, but she looked more like a baby deer taking its first steps. "I don't want to take up any more of your time, so—"

"Why are you being like this?" I insisted. She was treating me like a stranger, like some virtuous passer-by who had stepped between her and danger. She was barely even looking at me.

"Like what?" she said, as though she didn't know damn well. "I'm just trying to

make things easier for you.”

“Easier?” I parroted. It was so absurd that I could think of no retort, but I clearly didn’t need one. She continued as though I hadn’t spoken, her voice beginning to tremble with emotion.

“You didn’t have to come after me! I know you’re trying to be a good friend to Cal, but I’ll be fine on my own. You’ve made it more than clear you don’t want us, and I’m not going to hang around when—”

“Wait,” I said. She was so wrong, so utterly, utterly wrong, and I had no one to blame but myself. I was ready to correct her, but a single word was demanding my attention first: “What do you mean,us?”

Chapter 23 - Julia

I could lie. I could brush it off, say it was a slip of the tongue, or claim that I was speaking not only for myself but for every other woman he’d fucked and then abandoned. I could push him away, return to Lapine, and do my best to hide my baby’s parentage for as long as I could, but that had always been a stupid plan.

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Ethan wasn't going to stop coming over to Lapine. It was inevitable that he'd find out at some point. I'd been fooling myself if I ever imagined otherwise. With my stomach turning in sick circles, my mouth dry, my legs shaking, I raised my head to meet his gaze. I would not be ashamed.

"I'm pregnant."

The words detonated like a bomb in the quiet. Just two little words, and my world was imploding. I had never spoken them aloud before, hardly allowed myself to believe they were true.

Ethan could only stare at me, his mouth hanging open, too shocked to speak.

"I'm not asking you for anything," I continued quickly. I didn't need to hear him tell me I was stupid for not drinking witch tea after that first time, didn't need to hear that he'd already told me he didn't want a family. "I wasn't even going to—"

Ethan cut me off with a growl. His eyes were blown black as pitch, and he was staring at me with an intensity I'd never seen before. Was he so angry that he'd hurt me? He looked as if he could shift at any moment, the wolf close to his skin, glaring out at me through his eyes. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I tensed as he lurched forward—but then his arms were around my waist, his face buried in the crook of my neck.

"Ask me," he breathed against my skin. His hands were everywhere, stroking my back and kneading my ass and gripping my hips.

“For what?” I gasped. I couldn’t think, couldn’t make sense of what was happening.

“Anything.”

Then his lips were on mine, and his hands were cupping the backs of my thighs, lifting me up so I could wind them around his hips. I kissed him back, confused and relieved and increasingly aroused as I felt his half-hard dick bump against my ass. It would have been so easy to simply let him have his way, to lay back in the soft grass and take him hard and deep the way my body was begging for, but I couldn’t take any more uncertainty.

He huffed in dissatisfaction when I pulled out of the kiss, gripping my thighs harder as if to make up for the loss.

“But you didn’t—you said you didn’t want this,” I managed to say. I was dizzy with desire, my hips rocking against his abs without my permission, and I didn’t know how much longer I could hold out. In the back of my mind, my wolf was growling her displeasure at the pause, not caring about anything but getting him inside me again.

Ethan looked similarly out of it, his face blank as he processed my words, absently petting and stroking my thighs as if he didn’t know how to do anything else.

“I didn’t want it,” he rasped, his voice heavy with desire. “Not with anyone else. Only you.”

I groaned, and it was my turn to crash our lips together, burying my hands in his thick, dark hair as I licked into his mouth, trying to devour the words he’d just said. He wanted this. He wanted it with me. Only me.

We were impossibly close, skin pressed against skin, but it still wasn’t enough. I

rolled my body against his, needing friction against my pebbled nipples and my aching pussy. Whining, my hands dropped from his hair to claw at his shoulders, my wolf hungry and desperate for more.

Ethan was only too happy to oblige, encouraging the grind of my hips against the muscled planes of his stomach, his fingers digging hard into the meat of my ass, and I'd have bruises tomorrow, the marks of his devotion. It felt so good, but the pleasure only built and built, never spilling over, never peaking the way I was desperate for. I whimpered into Ethan's mouth, begging for something, but I didn't know what.

Whatever it was, Ethan knew. I jolted as his knees hit the ground, and then I was laid back on the soft grass. He hovered above me, his gaze intent and dark with desire, just as it had been that first night. In the morning light, he looked gorgeous, the sharp lines of his face softened and shadowed, and I couldn't believe he was mine. Finally, he was mine.

"I love you," he whispered, and the joy of it rushed through me, so overwhelming that I had to close my eyes, gripping his forearms where they caged my body. All the breath had left my lungs, so I kissed him instead of replying, pulling him close again and spreading my legs even further, needing him to fill me up and soothe the ache between my thighs.

My mate didn't need telling twice. He didn't need to check I was ready—I'd been ready since he first kissed me—before he lined up and pushed inside, stretching me and filling me the way I needed. My back arched up off the ground, and Ethan took a straining nipple between his teeth, tugging it just enough to make me moan.

He didn't linger there long, instead moving up my chest, leaving open-mouthed kisses in his wake. When he reached the junction of my neck, I presented the soft skin to him on instinct. I needed his mark, needed the sharp, beautiful burst of pain to bring me over the edge I was teetering on. Every snap of Ethan's hips brought me

closer, his cock hitting me deep, and his mouth on my neck was a teasing, tantalizing promise.

“Do it,” I demanded.

This time, Ethan didn’t hesitate. His canines sank into the tender flesh of my shoulder, and I screamed my pleasure to the sky as he drove his teeth and his cock deep into me. My whole body rocked with the force of my orgasm, my legs trembling and my back arching, my nails digging deep into Ethan’s back as I clenched and spasmed around his cock.

It felt like it lasted for hours, and I twitched and shuddered all the way through the comedown as Ethan licked the wound he’d left on my shoulder, his thrusts gentling but never letting up, keeping me strung out and wanting despite the wrecking power of my climax. It must have taken all his willpower because Ethan’s skin was shining with sweat, his brow furrowed, and his muscles tense from holding back as his knot formed, the bulb of it hitting my oversensitive clit with every thrust.

Then it occurred to me that I could feel his need, could feel every ounce of the restraint it took not to keep fucking me hard into the ground. I could feel adoration rolling off him in waves, and when he met my eyes, I could have cried from the intensity of it. This was what being mated was supposed to feel like. It was so perfect, so right, and I leaned up to press a long, lush kiss to his lips.

Maybe I was head over heels in love with him, and maybe he’d just given me the best orgasm of my life, and maybe we were going to spend the rest of our lives together, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to mess with him just a little bit.

Ethan melted under my mouth, going soft and pliant for just long enough that I could switch our positions. He landed, eyes wide and shocked, on his back, his cock still buried deep inside me. Snatching his wrists, I slammed them down next to his head,

lifting my hips so that only the tip of him was still inside me. I couldn't help smiling at the bewildered look on his face, affection rushing through me. His expression softened, and I realized that he'd felt my emotion just as I had felt his.

"Mine," I said, low and rough.

He could have bucked me off, could have had me on my back again in seconds and taken what he wanted—what we both wanted—but he didn't. He lay beneath me, his hips twitching and his wrists pinned, and he smiled.

"Yours," he promised.

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For a moment, everything stilled. There had been no hesitation in Ethan's voice, and I could feel nothing but certainty through the bond. For the last two weeks, it had felt like I was falling, as if I were hurtling through space with no parachute, utterly powerless to do anything but brace for impact. Suddenly, there was ground beneath my feet, firm and welcoming.

I let go of Ethan's wrists as I sat up, not dropping his gaze as I sank back down onto him, inch by inch. I was so sensitive, and he was no less affected, his newly freed hands flying to my hips, helping to guide me down onto his knot. Bracing my hands on his strong chest, I ground my pussy onto his knot, feeling myself stretch to accommodate him. I'd done this before—I should be used to the overwhelming, undoing pleasure-pain of it, but I feared and prayed that I never would be. With every roll of my hips, Ethan's knot pressed in a little deeper, and we breathed hard in tandem.

"You're incredible," he breathed, finally dropping eye contact to watch himself slowly disappear inside me. Stretched as I was around his knot, all coherent thought had fled my mind, and I couldn't offer him anything in reply beyond,

"Fuck, fuck, Ethan. You're so—fuck."

"Just like that, beautiful," he said. "You take me so well."

That was the final straw. With a drawn-out whine, I slumped forward onto his chest, my legs giving out as Ethan cradled me in his arms and flipped us over one last time. He whispered praises and platitudes in my ear as the last of his knot slipped inside me, and we moaned in unison. I was so full, so overwhelmed with the sensation that

when he started moving, the base of his knot tugging against my opening as it swelled even further inside me, locking us together, that I could do nothing but take it, my mouth slack and open as little whimpers escaped me with every rock of Ethan's hips. Even stuffed full with his cock, I was so wet that I could feel slickness dribbling out of me around his knot as he hit those points deep inside me I'd never known existed before him.

Breathless, I clung to Ethan as we approached the peak together, our shared pleasure climbing higher and higher through the feedback loop of the bond, until I felt him explode inside me, and I toppled over the edge after him. My orgasm wracked through me with no regard for how exhausted and wrung out I already was, and it was my turn to sink my teeth into the muscle of Ethan's shoulder, marking him in return.

The taste of blood burst in my mouth, and Ethan's pleased growl rumbled through my body as I held him tight between my teeth, waiting for the rolling waves of pleasure to abate. Only when I was boneless and satisfied did I release him, pulling back to examine my work. The wound I'd made was deep; it would scar up nicely, and then everyone would know Ethan Cain belonged to me. My wolf purred with satisfaction, curling up inside me, ready for sleep.

I could have followed her when Ethan gently rolled us over so that I was splayed out over his chest, his knot still inside me and my pussy still twitching around him, but I wanted to savor every moment of this. I wanted to commit all of it to memory so I could be certain it was real.

Ethan's fingers were combing through my hair, and the thump of his heart beneath my ear was steady, still a little elevated, and the silence felt so precious that I didn't want to break it. If the world would let us, I would have been happy to lie like this forever, tangled with my mate in the morning sun, full and satisfied.

Pushing myself up as far as my shaking arms would allow, I looked down at Ethan, brushing a thumb along the proud arch of his cheekbone. He caught my hand as I did so, holding it in place so he could turn his head and press a kiss to my palm. A wave of love rushed over me, and tears sprang to my eyes: this was real. Ethan loved me, and he wanted me, and it was real.

Chapter 24 - Ethan

My world had been upended so many times in the past few hours that it felt like I was still spinning, half expecting another disaster to descend on us and turn my ecstasy to agony again. My wolf was at peace, though, curled up and content in my chest as I ran my fingers through Julia's mussed hair. I hadn't allowed myself to enjoy this feeling our first time, and it was another reason to add to the long list of why I was an idiot.

Julia's body was warm against mine, her fingers soft against my face, her eyes shining. I frowned. I couldn't feel any distress through our newly-elevated bond—quite the opposite—but it worried me nevertheless.

"You're crying," I said, reaching up to wipe away a tear that rolled down her flushed cheek. Julia shook her head before pressing a kiss to my chest.

"I'm just happy."

"Okay. You're sure? I'm not hurting you?" I hadn't held back, overcome with the revelation that she was carrying my child. Even now, the thought made me twitch inside her, and she smiled.

"I can take you, Alpha," she teased, sitting up to rock a little on top of me. With my knot still locking us together, I had no choice but to let her.

“God, yeah—yeah, you can,” I groaned. She knew exactly what she was doing, and I wasn’t going to let her get away with it. Dropping one hand from her hip to the place where I disappeared inside her, my thumb started to rub small, soft circles against her clit.

“Stop it,” she gasped, her breath hitching. “It’s not like you can get me any more pregnant than I already am.”

“I can try.” I grinned, and she let out a breathless laugh as she rocked against my fingers.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You love it,” I countered, increasing the pressure of my thumb.

“Yeah,” Julia sighed, whether in agreement or pleasure, I couldn’t tell.

The next few minutes were lost to giving my mate yet another orgasm. At this rate, we might never leave this spot, but I couldn’t say I’d object to that. Never before had I been so wrapped up in something—in someone—that everything else fell away, but right now, all of Ferris could be burning, and I’d barely even notice.

“I think I’ve loved you for years,” I admitted, the words tumbling out entirely of their own accord. Julia giggled, sleepy and content, against my chest.

“Wow,” she said. “You are so bad at flirting.”

“I mean it,” I insisted. I may have been awful at showing it, but I’d loved her since our first argument: she was bold and fearless and utterly herself. I’d been hers even before fate decreed that it was so, even if I hadn’t wanted to admit it. “I think I just—I was so scared of what it would mean.”

It was shameful to admit how cowardly I'd been, but Julia only reached up to stroke my hair, her voice soft as she said,

“You didn't need anyone else to worry about, I get it. You've already got so many people to care for.”

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“It’s not a burden,” I insisted. She needed to know that. “Caring about you, it’s not a weight on my shoulders. I want you with me.” I placed a hand on her still-flat belly. “I want them with me, too.”

Julia’s hand came up to cover mine, interlocking our fingers.

“You know you don’t have to do everything alone, right?” she said. “I want to be there to support you, too. This is a two-way street, okay? You love me, I love you. We look after each other.”

“Did you just say you love me?” I said. I knew there was a wide, stupid grin on my face, but I could do nothing to make it stop, nor did I care to.

“Did I not tell you already?” she asked, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“No.”

“Well then, I love you, you asshole.” She dipped her head, planting a sweet kiss on the tip of my nose, and I tilted my head up to kiss her properly. Julia smiled against my lips, and I realized that I would get to do this every day for the rest of our lives.

“So you’re coming home with me?” I asked between kisses. Julia pulled away,

“The thing is, all my stuff’s on Lapine,” she pointed out, “and they’re still expecting me back sometime today. We should probably, you know, catch everyone up as well.”

She was right, of course. Caleb and Alyssa were expecting us this morning, and if Julia was going to make the move to Ferris permanently, she'd need at least a few of her things. It was the catching everyone up part of the plan that had my stomach churning.

"I see how it is," I joked, trying to distract myself from the anxiety growing in my gut. "This was all a clever ploy to get me murdered by your brother."

I'd really been hoping to ease Caleb into the idea of Julia and me being mates. Turning up with fresh claiming marks, not to mention Julia's pregnancy, was more like throwing him in at the deep end.

"You caught me," Julia said, smiling. Then, gently, "It'll be fine. He's your best friend; he'll come around."

"Yeah," I said, though I wasn't sure how much I believed it. Julia, however, seemed to have no such doubts.

"And if he's a dick about it, then he'll have me to deal with," she declared. Her confidence was infectious, and I stroked her bare thighs as I said,

"You are very scary."

"You're damn right."

It took another hour before we had collected ourselves enough to leave that spot. Talking turned to kisses, which turned to another round, and still, it was excruciating to separate enough to shift and make the run over to Lapine.

The morning was sunny and clear and warm, and it was so easy to let my wolf tumble and play with his mate as we moved onto Julia's home territory. There was no one to

meet us at the bridge—my plan to radio Caleb and let him know when we were leaving had gone out the window that morning—so we had a few more hours to ourselves on the run to town.

Once we drew close, though, even my wolf grew hesitant. He only knew that I was fearful, without understanding that there was no real danger. Realistically, I knew that Caleb couldn't really have objections to our being mated; fate was fate, after all. Still, anxiety thrummed beneath my skin as we entered the town proper. In an instant, Julia was at my side, nuzzling against me in silent support. Her calm washed over me, and each step became easier.

We stopped first at Julia's house, where we shifted back to human form to shower and get dressed. Julia vetoed sharing the shower, since we were purposely trying not to turn up at Caleb and Alyssa's house reeking of each other. Once clean, Julia tossed me a pair of Caleb's old sweatpants that she'd purloined, while she pulled a sundress over her own head. The mark I'd left on her shoulder was proudly displayed, and while it made my wolf give a pleased, possessive purr, it also brought a fresh wave of nerves rolling over me.

"Having regrets?" Julia asked. Her tone was teasing, but I could see the brief flash of insecurity behind her eyes, so I pulled her close, kissing her.

"Never," I said. "Just nervous."

"It'll be fine," she reassured me for the hundredth time. She was probably right, but I couldn't shake the stomach-churning anxiety that was constantly threatening to overwhelm me.

"Let's get this over with," I said, and Julia punched my arm playfully.

"That's the spirit."

The walk over to the Alpha's residence felt like it took an age and a millisecond. When we arrived, the door was open, and Julia hesitated only long enough to squeeze my hand and press a kiss to my cheek before she strode in, calling out,

“I'm home!”

The sound of tiny feet hitting the wooden floors echoed through the house, and a pair of excited screams filled the air.

“Auntie Julia!” The twins were way ahead of their parents, barreling down the hallway and attaching themselves to Julia's shins.

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“Hey guys,” she said, her hands landing on their black curls. “Have you grown while I was gone? I think you’ve grown!”

They squealed in delight, with Emmy releasing Julia so she could stand up straight and show just how tall she was, while Jack hid his smile against Julia’s leg. She was so good with them; I couldn’t wait to see what she’d be like as a mother.

“Auntie Julia’s probably tired from her journey, babies. Give her a little space, come on now.” Alyssa looked no less happy to see us as she and Caleb emerged from the kitchen. It only took a few seconds for her eyes to widen as she took in our matching marks, and she quirked an eyebrow at Julia, who shrugged, smiling.

Caleb, however, was not smiling. His stern, aristocratic features—so like his sister’s—were fixed in a frown as his gaze flicked from me to Julia and back again.

Before he could say anything, Julia decided to take charge.

“There have been some developments since I left home,” she said, reaching out to take my hand.

“I can see that,” Caleb replied. His voice was even and calm, but there was tension in his jaw. He was consciously holding back, probably for the sake of the twins. I was not above using his children as human shields, so I took the plunge.

“So uh... we’re mates,” I told him, and for a moment, I was overwhelmed with Julia’s joy. I supposed this was the first time she’d heard me say the words out loud.

“And I’m pregnant,” she added. Maybe I’d been wrong: maybe this was actually an elaborate plan to kill Caleb. He certainly looked as though he might keel over from shock at any moment.

“You’re—” Caleb started, but then Alyssa’s hand was on his belly, stroking his abs gently as she cooed,

“Deep breaths, honey. You’ve got this.”

Caleb did as he was instructed, taking several slow breaths in and out, his eyes closed. When he opened them again, he looked marginally calmer, and his voice was level when he said,

“You’re pregnant?”

“Yep,” said Julia, popping the “p” as she met her brother’s gaze, unflinching.

“And he’s...” Caleb nodded toward me. The fact he wasn’t addressing me directly was not a positive sign.

“Yep,” Julia repeated. “Oh, and we’re married.”

“What?” Caleb looked more distressed with every fresh revelation. “I thought you guys hated each other.”

“You’re the only one who thought that,” Alyssa muttered, catching my eye and winking.

“I had to marry her to get her away from Arbor,” I volunteered. “It’s not really—I mean, it’s not really relevant, but we are. Also married.”

“I’m going to need so much more information,” said Alyssa, who was clearly trying not to grin, and Julia delivered the final blow:

“I’m also a witch.”

“You’re what?” It was Alyssa’s turn to be shocked, but this time it was clearly mixed with elation. “You have to tell us everything right now. Come on, come on.”

She swept Jack up with one arm and took Julia’s hand with the other, dragging her down the hall and into their living room, Emmy toddling after them. That left me alone with Caleb, and as ever, I could not find the right words.

“Look, Cal—” I started, but he was interested in my (probably awful) explanations.

“She seems happy, and that’s all that matters,” he said. Clearly, he was trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to convince me, but that was something, at least.

“Don’t bother telling me you’ll kill me if I ever hurt her,” I told him. “Firstly, I’m really not planning on it. Secondly, she’d kill me first.”

That seemed to soften him, and he smiled for the first time since we’d walked through the door.

“You’ve got me there,” he admitted, moving aside so that I could step past him into the house. I heaved a sigh of relief as we followed the women into the living area, where Julia was already telling an enraptured Alyssa and the twins about the burgeoning of her magic.

I stopped on the threshold, just looking at her. She was animated in the telling of her tale, her blue eye bright and her full mouth smiling around every word. Everything

might not be perfect—Caleb and I would need to debrief about the ongoing threat from Arbor—but it was far closer than I'd ever considered possible.

When I finally looked away from my mate, Caleb's gaze was fixed on me, intent and searching. He gave me a small nod and a smile before going to join his family. We'd likely be here for a while; there was a lot of story to tell, and I was more than content to sit curled around my mate for the rest of the afternoon. Julia reached out for me as I approached the couch, threading her fingers through mine without pausing her storytelling. It was easy to drop a kiss on her shoulder as I sat down next to her, settling in for the long haul.

Epilogue - Julia

“You absolute bastard. You no-good knothed motherfucker!”

I paced up and down the kitchen, though I was fast approaching the point at which that would no longer be helpful. Ethan hung back like a coward, not wanting to get too close.

“I know you’re in pain,” he started, which was the understatement of the century.

“And whose fault is that?” I snapped.

“I mean, it takes two to—” he started, but I was not having it.

“I don’t want to hear it, Ethan. You did this to me, and I will never forgive you.”

Before he could attempt any retort, Alyssa bustled into the kitchen, looking far too cheerful. There were clean towels draped over her arm, and she moved the kettle onto the stove as if this were her home rather than mine.

“Sounds like someone’s ready to start pushing,” she said. “Come on, grumpy, let’s move you to your nest.”

Sitting down did sound amazing. My back hurt, my ankles had been swollen for weeks, and my belly jutted out in front of me like I was carrying a beach ball with me everywhere I went. The contractions were coming faster now, too, with barely any respite between each fresh wave of pain. I allowed Ethan to guide me through to the

living room, where he and Alyssa had set up a birthing nest for me, lowering me into the pile of blankets and pillows.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked, settling two large pillows behind my back to prop me up.

“I haven’t been comfortable for two months,” I grumbled, and Ethan tutted in sympathy. He knew full well how uncomfortable I’d been, as he was the one who’d had to rub my feet, bring me food, and arrange my pillows for the past few months. Now, he was preparing to stay by my side while I screamed, cried, and pushed our child into the world.

This was the part I had been trying not to think about. I knew it would have to happen eventually, and I wanted it to happen. I wanted to meet my and Ethan’s child, to hold them in my arms, to give them a name, to watch them grow up. The problem was that my own mother had never gotten to do any of that. This process had killed her.

I didn’t have to say I was scared; as ever, the bond gave me away, and Ethan’s hand found mine, squeezing gently.

“You’re gonna do great, beautiful,” he whispered. I squeezed his hand in return. If nothing else, I knew he would be a good father, that he would have Alyssa and Caleb to help him if the worst should happen. I tried not to think about the worst happening.

When Alyssa bustled in with her towels and a large bowl of steaming water, my heart started to beat faster. Despite how much I trusted her, how determined I was to get through this, I couldn’t help fearing the worst. The pain was growing with every second; I didn’t know how anyone survived this. Ethan pressed a soft kiss to my temple.

“You can do it,” he told me. “You’re the bravest person I know, remember?”

“Yeah. Yeah,” I said, though I didn’t quite believe him. Being brave was one thing; creating a whole new life was another. How had Alyssa done this alone? I felt like I was going to fall entirely apart, even with my mate and best friend to help keep me together.

“Open up for me,” Alyssa said, settling in front of me and tapping my knees. I spread my legs; I’d gotten over my best friend staring me straight in the vagina over the past few hours, so I did it without hesitation. Alyssa’s eyes widened.

“Yep, we’re ready to push,” she said. “Make sure you keep breathing through it, okay?”

I could only nod, and Alyssa petted the inside of my calf, soothing.

“Alright,” she continued, low and calm. “I’m gonna count to three, and then you’re gonna push, okay?”

“Okay,” I managed to reply, my voice shaking. Ethan dropped a kiss to my shoulder.

“Squeeze my hand as hard as you need to. I’ve got you,” he said. He sounded so sure, so confident in my ability to do this. I took a deep breath. I could do this.

“One, two, three, push.”

It was a whole new kind of pain. For however many seconds, minutes, or hours I pushed, I felt like I was being split open. My world narrowed to Alyssa’s voice—one, two, three, push—and Ethan’s hand in mine, along with the unceasing work of my body to push my baby out into the world.

The delivery itself was over before I knew it. One minute I was pushing with all my might, the next, I felt my child rush out of me, and then several things were

happening at once: Alyssa's hands were full of bloodstained baby, patting their little back until a wavering cry filled the room, and Ethan's voice was in my ear, telling me I'd done it, that I was incredible, but I could barely hear him. I was utterly focused on the baby in Alyssa's hands, wriggling and crying in her grip. Poor thing. That whole experience couldn't have been any more fun for them than it was for me. He was bloody and scrunched up from his journey into the world, still connected to me by the spongy cord that disappeared into his belly. He was a little miracle, and I loved him on sight.

"Oh my god," I breathed. "It's a baby."

"It's a baby," Ethan confirmed, beaming, as he cut the cord connecting us with the clean knife Alyssa handed him.

"Would you like to know what kind of baby it is?" Alyssa prompted. She was carefully cleaning my child in a clean bowl of water, rinsing away the blood and gunk to reveal the baby's delicate, wrinkly pink skin. I was captivated.

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“Yeah,” Ethan confirmed for us, and Alyssa smiled.

“It’s a boy.”

A boy. I held out my arms for my son, desperate to hold him, and Alyssa didn’t hesitate, handing him over so I could cradle him against my chest. Every part of him was perfect, from his screwed-up old man face to his tiny little fingernails. He was still crying his heart out, and the sound was music to my ears. He was healthy and whole and mine. I’d never loved anything this fiercely, and the immediate strength of it shook me.

Ethan came to sit behind me, spreading his legs to nestle me between them, letting me lean back against his chest. His arms came around mine to gently touch our son’s forehead, clearly just as enamored as I was.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Alyssa said, getting to her feet, her arms full of bloodied towels. “Keep an eye on her, okay, Ethan? If she gets pale or says she feels woozy, come get me.”

“I will,” Ethan promised. They would both be monitoring me every second for at least the next twenty-four hours, but now that the delivery was done, now that my son was in my arms, there was no way I was going anywhere.

“And make sure the little guy eats,” Alyssa reminded us. “It’s hungry work, being born.”

Then she was gone, slipping through the door and leaving our new family alone.

“He’s so tiny,” said Ethan, amazed. His chin was propped on my shoulder, his arms around me, comforting and protective. I was more tired than I’d ever been in my life, my entire body was aching, and I’d never been happier.

“Yeah,” I agreed, my eyes filling with tears. “He’s got a set of lungs on him, though.”

“Just like his mom,” said Ethan, and I sniffed out a wet little giggle.

“Shut up, you.”

Ethan kissed the line of my jaw, contrite, and I snuggled closer against him.

“What are we going to call him?” Ethan said. We’d made a shortlist, of course—what expecting parents didn’t—but had left off naming him until he was born. It hadn’t felt right to give him a name before we’d ever seen his face: what if we decided on a name that didn’t suit him?

“What’s your name, little guy?” I asked him. He didn’t answer, simply looked up at me with large, dark eyes. He probably knew the answer to every question in the universe. He was just keeping the information close to his chest.

“I think he’s an Adam,” said Ethan, to my surprise. It hadn’t been his favorite name on the shortlist, but as soon as he said it, I realized he was right.

“Hey, Adam,” I whispered, and our son gave a little shriek, banging a balled fist against my chest. I could feel Ethan smile against my shoulder.

“I think he likes it.”

“I think he’s hungry,” I said, and Ethan gave a hum of agreement.

It took some careful shifting to get Adam to eat. He was so tiny and fragile that I was

terrified I would somehow break him if I changed my hold even slightly. When he latched on, though, he ate with surprising ferocity. Clearly, Alyssa had been right: being born was hungry work.

“How’s it feel?” Ethan asked. He was staring at my breasts, but for once it wasn’t lust that filled his expression: it was amazement.

“Weird,” I said, truthfully. “I’m literally feeding this little person out of my body.”

“You grew him in your body, too,” Ethan pointed out.

“I know,” I said. “I’m amazing.”

“You sure are.”

There wasn’t much that needed to be said after that. We watched Adam eat his first meal, completely enraptured, and stroked the impossibly soft hair on the top of his little head as he drifted off to sleep in my arms. I couldn’t ever imagine moving from this spot, even if I was still covered in blood and sitting on the floor: everything was perfect. Our son was perfect.

It didn’t take long before my own eyelids began to droop. It had been the longest day of my life, and my body had seen me through it like a trooper. It was time to rest.

“Can you take him for me?” I said softly. “I think I need to go to bed.”

“Sure,” said Ethan, wriggling out from behind me to embrace Adam. Our son looked comically small against Ethan’s large frame, but Ethan held him as if he were made of glass. I couldn’t fault him for it; I understood the urge.

It took a while to get me up the stairs to the bedroom, but Alyssa managed it. Lying down in a proper bed was heaven, and I was ready to sleep for the next twelve

hours—or as long as Adam would let me sleep before he needed feeding again. Ethan laid our little boy in the bassinet next to the bed before climbing in behind me, curling his body around mine.

“Rest now, beautiful,” he said. “You did it.”

I didn’t answer him. With my mate to keep me warm and my child next to me, my eyes were already drifting shut, my breathing steady and even. Ethan and I had made it through so much together already, but as I slipped away into sleep, I couldn’t help thinking we were only just beginning.

THE END