



Prophecy of the Wolf

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Being a princess is hard at the best of times... but when you're the sole survivor of a plague that decimates your entire kingdom? Well, it sucks!

Alone in my kingdom with no one but my cat, Willow, for company, I endure the time in monotony and solitude. The world is over for my family line, destroyed by a plague and now there's just me. I go in search of the ancient spell books of my ancestors. If I can learn to harness magic as the great Wielder's of my blood line once did... perhaps I can change my fate? Perhaps I won't be alone forever.

Then, before I'm even prepared, everything changes.

Two injured men stagger into the grounds of my castle, shocking me to my core. Their presence means there's life beyond these walls! Life... and a danger I thought long gone. The men aren't human—they're black wolves—the very creatures I'd believed my blood line had eradicated. But these wolves are very much alive and by some cruel twist of fate... the sworn enemies of my kingdom are also my fates mates!

Be engrossed by this delicious MFM paranormal shifter romance from bestselling author, Amelia Shaw. You won't regret taking the plunge with book 1 of the Forbidden Mates series!

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Chapter 1

Aliya

THERE WAS ONLY ONE thing worse than realizing you were alone in this world, and that was knowing that fact would never change. I was the last of my line. The final princess of my kingdom.

But was it really a kingdom without people? Without staff, without villagers?

I got up from my plush seat in the library and wandered over to the window that looked out over our once vibrant town. If I closed my eyes and focused really hard, I could still see my people out there in the streets. Mothers carrying their babies as they walked along the cobblestone streets. Market stall vendors bartering their wares.

They'd all died when the plague came. First, the old and sick had left us. But then the healthy and young too. Then my parents. My strong, healthy, beloved king and queen.

I'd waited for my own death to arrive as everyone I loved crumpled around me.

They'd all died of that terrible sickness.

Everyone but me.

The brush of a fluffy tail against my leg had me looking down, happiness filling my heart. "Everyone except you, my dear one."

I picked up my closest friend, my only companion. Willow, my cat. She cuddled into my arms, nestling in and purring loudly.

“But you’ll leave me too one day, won’t you?” I asked aloud, scratching her head and pressing my cheek to hers. The idea of losing Willow also made my heart fill with dread.

Then the thought struck me...Did she really have to die also?

My jaw dropped open in shock as the question resonated inside my head. Well, did she?

None of my parents’ money nor their power had saved them. I’d been told we’d been Wielders, once upon a time. Magic users that could tap into the ether and channel it into the world. But once we had succeeded in vanquishing our enemies of the past—the black wolves—my forefathers had let their magic fall into obscurity.

By the time my parents were born, magic was a thing of the past. No one had practiced or taught the knowledge of the Wielders for a hundred years. I had no skills, no powers. Though my father had always said that my intuition skills were strong, and I’d always been taught to follow the nudge of what my mother called “the spirits”. My guides.

My gaze slid to the top of the bookshelves, where dust gathered on the ancient leather spines untouched for so long. I wasn’t even sure they were written in a language I’d be able to understand.

I couldn’t study magic, could I? Learn those things that had been left behind by my ancestors? If I could extend Willow’s life, or change my future in some way, wouldn’t it be worth the effort and trouble?

And if I didn't succeed and failed miserably, what had I lost? Nothing but time. The only thing I had in abundance.

The words were out of my mouth before I'd decided to say them. "What else have I got to do?"

I kissed the top of my cat's head and put her down on the red carpet beneath our feet. She stretched, arching her back, then jumped up onto the seat I'd just vacated, circled the area and curled up onto a pillow.

I put a hand on my hip and mock-glared at her. "Don't suppose you want to climb to the top shelf and grab those books for me?"

The cat closed her eyes and made a contented snuff as she fell asleep.

"Great. Okay. No help there. Okay... I can do this."

I walked across to the ladder that extended to the top of the twenty-foot-tall bookshelf and tugged it across the railings until it was lined up with the stack of books my intuition was pulling me toward.

I grabbed hold of the ladder railing and shook my head, calling myself all types of a fool. If I fell, there was no one around to help me. I'd lie crippled on the floor and die even slower than the plague would've taken me.

"You won't fall. Just get up there." I shook myself and started climbing.

When I was younger, I would have scaled this ladder in moments, then ridden it down like a slide. But my fears had increased with each passing day that I'd been alone. And there were too many to count now.

“Who are you kidding?” I told myself, having a two-way conversation with my thoughts. Another silly habit I’d picked up. “You know exactly how many days it’s been. Four hundred and twenty-two.”

I lifted my legs slowly, climbing higher and higher. My heart banged in my chest as an unreasonable amount of fear pulsed through me.

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I got right to the top and didn't look down. I took some steadying breaths and stared at the dusty shelves of books. Huge books, in fact. I'd never seen such thick, leather-bound tomes before, or at least had never looked up at these to notice their size.

I had no way of truly knowing if any of their pages held the history or secrets of wielding magic. But I'd scour through every single one until I found out. It wasn't like I had anything better to do.

I reached out, letting my intuition guide me.

At first, I went to grab one with gold writing on the spine, but at the last minute, I grabbed the book next to it. That one was slightly thinner and had no writing on the spine at all.

I pulled it out, then gripped it hard.

Now it was time to get down. "Shit. I didn't think this through properly."

I didn't want to throw the book down to the floor. It was old and probably wouldn't survive the fall. But neither would I. How the hell was I going to get down in one piece now?

Feeling defeated, I went to put the book back on the shelf, but my intuition began to sing. I couldn't push it back in. Everything in me tingled and told me to take the book. Hold it. Read it.

Don't put it back.

“Okay, okay,” I hissed at the voice in my head.

So how the hell was I going to get down with it?

I decided to try descending one-handed, clutching the book tightly to my chest with my left hand. That idea worked surprisingly well, and after a short minute or two of shaky, hesitant steps, I had my feet back on solid ground.

“Oh, thank God.” My knees wobbled, and happily, with no one around to witness my ridiculousness, I sank onto the plush carpet at my feet. “Whoa, that was intense.”

I knew that talking to myself was strange and probably a sign that I was losing my mind. But with not a single human for company for over a year, I’d go insane without some noise to break the incessant silence. On the bright side, I hadn’t begun imagining that Willow talked back, and I took that as a good sign.

I crossed my legs and pulled the book closer to me, studying the front cover. There was no image, only large cursive letters embossed with gold paint.

“Wow. That’s so pretty.”

My voice was a little high and chirpy today, which was a welcome change. After my parents died last year, I’d sunk into a pit of despair that I never thought I’d climb from. If I hadn’t needed to get out of bed to feed Willow, I wasn’t sure I would have eaten myself.

It had taken a lot of conscious energy to stay alive and awake. I’d had to maintain the vegetable garden after going through most of the food stores, and though I had yet to attempt slaughtering one of the chickens in the royal coop, I kept them fed and watered and collected their eggs every day.

It would have been so easy to just let myself go. Not get up to eat or drink water. Hope and pray for the moment I could join my family in death.

Why I'd survived the plague, I still didn't know. Before they died, the elders had said I was blessed. Immune. Strong.

Special.

Alone in a huge castle filled with nothing but memories and empty rooms wasn't what I considered blessed.

I shook myself, pushing away all the horrible feelings that threatened to drag me down. "Let's see what we've got here."

I began to read the book in front of me. The first few pages seemed to be mostly about the history of Varinya, our once great kingdom. About the black wolves, our enemy. How they'd torn through the woods and attacked our home, again and again for generations.

I'd heard those tales since I was a small child. My bedtime stories hadn't been of princesses falling in love, but instead of kings and queens beating the black wolves back from the borders of Varinya.

Quite literally. My great-grandparents had been warriors. They'd been magical and powerful and had hunted the wolves to extinction. It seemed so strange to me that after all their efforts and sacrifice, the greatest threat had come from an organism that was so much smaller.

I sighed as I picked the book up and walked over to a corner couch. I shook the dust off a pillow and flopped down onto the cushions. Time to get reading.

After the preface on the history, the book turned into a magical guide. Each page revealed a new spell, ranging from trivial and mundane tasks to complicated and deadly spells.

The details and instructions were written in the modern tongue, but the incantations were in the old language. Some words were complete gibberish to me, while others glowed and sang to me in a strange way. Almost like reading music, if notes jumped off the page.

Could I actually attempt one of these? Even if I could work out the pronunciation of the ancient words, did I have it in me to perform this sort of magic?

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Some of the spells also involved complex arm and hand choreography, like movements to a dance. Others required specific ingredients, most of which I'd never even heard of.

If I was going to try any of them, it needed to be something simple and basic, just to test if I had any magical aptitude at all. No sense in memorizing dance moves if I turned out to be a dud.

I flipped through page after page, searching for a spell I'd be brave enough to tackle while also pawing over those that were much more difficult and wondrous.

So many possibilities in this precious book. Spells for healing, spells for harming. Spells to help you remember or make you forget. Spells for bringing luck and spells for cursing. Sleeping spells, elemental spells, combat spells. There were so many!

At last, I found one that not only seemed fairly simple but would also help me with a current predicament—if it worked.

Filled with a mixture of excitement, curiosity, and foolishness, I hopped off the couch and took the book through the castle and out the kitchen exit to the garden. The damp earth felt nice on my bare feet, and I didn't care that I'd track in clumped dirt when I went back inside.

I made my way through the various vegetable plots until I reached the rather pitiful looking tomato plants. Despite my best efforts, the thick bushes wouldn't bear fruit. I had trimmed them and watered them carefully all spring, but the stalks would just fill out with more leaves.

Considering that tomatoes were a major component to most Varinyan recipes I knew, they were a vital food source to me. Sure, I could survive on potatoes, carrots and leafy greens, but tomatoes offered such rich flavor, and I really craved that small comfort.

I knelt beside the garden bed and looked down at the open book in my lap. The spell was called Fruit of the Earth, intended to tap into the magic in plants to help them thrive and bring forth fruit. It was a simple incantation.

Aste brennum vuarte.

I had no idea what the actual words meant, but I didn't think that mattered.

"Okay, here goes nothing," I said.

I looked at my tomato plants and concentrated on that place inside me where I felt the tug of intuition. Then I spoke the words aloud.

"Aste brennum vuarte."

I waited, holding my breath and staring at the plants, but nothing happened.

Sighing in disappointment, I hung my head and looked down at the page. Something tugged inside me, guiding my gaze to the instructions.

"Ugh! Idiot," I mumbled.

I was supposed to be touching the plant while I spoke. I took a long breath and flung out my fingers before putting both hands on the base of the stalk in front of me, then repeated the words, concentrating again.

A soothing yet exhilarating warmth pooled in my belly, then trickled up my chest, across my shoulders, and down my arms. I could see the faintest golden glow radiating from my hands as the warmth transferred into the stalk.

When the warmth left me, I felt oddly cold and drained. But I ignored those sensations as I stared open-mouthed at the ends of the branches, which all at once sprouted little yellow flowers, then green bulbs. To my amazement, right in front of my eyes, the bulbs grew and turned from green to vibrant red as they became plump, juicy tomatoes.

Holy shit! I actually did it! I can wield!

So many possibilities were now open to me. I could change my life for the better, could ensure that Willow and I stayed healthy and lived long lives.

Maybe I could even find a spell to help me locate survivors, if there were any. Maybe I wouldn't have to be alone for the rest of my life!

I reached up and wrapped my hand around a fat tomato, then plucked it off the stem. It felt so delightfully firm. Bringing it to my lips, I took a big bite.

Oh, sweet heavens! I couldn't remember the last time I'd tasted something so delicious. I devoured the whole thing, letting the juices run down either side of my mouth and soak into the fabric of my thin slip.

I was a Wielder, and I was going to study every inch of this book, memorize every word, and make my ancestors proud.

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Chapter 2

Aliya

BY THE TIME THE SUN had risen high in the sky, I'd gone a little overboard with the tomatoes, gorging on them until my belly was full and my slip was covered in tomato juice stains.

I had gone from plant to plant, invoking the incantation so that each one was covered in large tomatoes. Then, for good measure, I went to all the other plants, and the garden was now so full of thriving vegetables that I could hardly walk between them.

I knew there was no way I'd be able to eat them all before rot set in, and that perhaps my use of magic was a bit wasteful, but I didn't care. I was too excited that I could wield to stop at rational thoughts today.

But as I rose to my feet and tried to walk inside for a basket to collect my bounty, my limbs quaked and my head spun. I felt as if I'd gone without food for days despite having eaten so many tomatoes that my slim belly swelled.

This was obviously the consequence of expending too much magic too quickly. That's what my intuition told me, at least. I couldn't just go around wielding carelessly. There had to be a purpose to my magic.

That was a lesson I wouldn't soon forget.

After taking a moment to compose myself, I slowly made my way inside and took a

basket off the counter. For now, I would focus on tomatoes. They'd be the first target for bugs and birds. Tomorrow, I'd preserve them into jars of sauces and chunks. I didn't have the strength tonight.

It took longer than I'd expected to pluck and collect them all, but finally I put the overflowing bucket on the counter and stumbled to the den, where Willow was already curled up in the corner of my favorite couch.

All I wanted to do was collapse onto the cushions and relax, but a chill was creeping into the castle that would soon have me quaking. I needed heat, first and foremost. I went to the large, beautiful carved fireplace and flicked the switch that operated the firing mechanism.

The hearth burst into glorious orange flames, and I lingered there for a moment, soaking up the heat before shuffling to the couch and plopping down beside Willow.

That electricity still worked in Varinya had been my salvation. It ran on its own, collected by fields of solar panels as well as windmills. I wouldn't have survived these long, lonely months without heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer, let alone a working refrigerator and stove. Starting a fire by hand was a skill I was never taught as a princess. But then again, I'd also picked up many skills uncommon for a princess.

Chopping wood, gardening, cooking, cleaning—though, I really didn't do a whole lot of that. The extent of my cleaning was washing dishes and clothes, and even there I tended to let things pile up, or wear the same dirty dress for days, maybe even weeks.

Why wouldn't I? I had no one to impress. Although Willow would avoid me if I wore something for too long.

As she prowled closer and curled up on my lap, I realized that must not currently be

the case, even if my slip was soaked in tomato juice.

I petted her head, the purr that rumbled from her body comforting me.

“We’re going to be okay,” I said. “I can wield. Isn’t that amazing? Hopefully, we won’t be alone for much longer.”

She didn’t acknowledge me, just continued to purr as I scratched behind her ear.

Bang, bang, bang!

The unapologetic slamming made me jump and scream. Willow bolted off my lap with a disgruntled hiss.

With every hair on the back of my neck standing on end, I slowly turned around and looked across the expansive ballroom floor beyond the den to the large entrance doors.

I had to be hallucinating due to fatigue. There was no way someone had knocked on that door, right? I hadn’t seen or heard a single person in over a year. It was probably just the wind.

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Or maybe... I'd finally lost it.

Bang, bang, bang!

I startled again, this time rushing towards the sound.

"Hello?" a desperate male voice called through the thick wood. "If there's anyone in there, please help us."

Us? There was more than one person out there? How? Who?

"Please!" the voice pleaded again, spurring me into action.

I scurried through the ballroom, reaching for the door handle and then hesitating. If I opened this door and there was no one there, I would know I'd finally gone mad. That would be the beginning of the end.

But if there was...

Before I could spiral into a vortex of hope and horror, I turned the bolt and pulled open the door—and my eyes widened in shock.

Standing on the doorstep were two men bathed in sunlight. One was unconscious and being supported by an arm over the shoulders of the other. Both were injured and bleeding in several places. And both were completely naked.

I just stood there, staring like a moron, for several seconds too long.

The conscious man tilted his head at me and blinked in confusion. “C-can you please help us?” he hedged, talking to me like I was crazy.

And maybe I was. Maybe this was some solitude-induced hallucination, but I doubted that my mind could fabricate such a convoluted image. If I was going to imagine two naked men, they certainly wouldn’t be injured and banging on my door in the middle of the night.

I snapped out of my stupor and decided to just play along until I knew if this was real or not. After all, if there really were two wounded men in my castle, shouldn’t I help them?

“Er, yeah, sorry, come in,” I stammered, stepping aside so he could carry his fallen friend inside.

I quickly closed the door behind them and ran to offer support beneath the unconscious man’s other arm. He felt real. And warm. And muscular!

“Over there,” I huffed through the effort of carrying him, gesturing toward the couch.

Together, we carried his friend to my favorite couch and hefted him onto it. In the light of the fire, I could see that this man’s body was covered in deep scratches, the most prominent one a gouge in his abdomen, which was oozing deep crimson blood.

My hands shook as they fluttered frantically over the wound. I had helped the staff with the sick in the castle, had tended to the plague blisters and festering sores as my parents lay dying, but this injury was so much more urgent and fatal. I was completely out of my depth.

I tore a strip of fabric from the bottom of my slip, bundled it up, and pressed it to the oozing cut.

“Hold this firmly against the wound,” I instructed the other man, who was kneeling beside me. “I need to get some supplies.”

With a fervent nod, his hand replaced mine over the cloth. In the brief exchange, the contact of his skin on mine sent a strange zing through me, almost like a shock of static electricity, but warmer, and almost...comforting.

I shook myself from the abrupt surprise of everything that was happening and ran to the kitchen, rifling through drawers and cabinets to collect the necessary items into an empty basket. Then I filled a bucket with clean water and dropped a clean rag into it before carrying everything hastily back into the den.

I dropped to my knees beside my strange visitors and got to work, cleaning the wound with the rag and bucket.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice shaky.

“We were on our way to...Rodak,” he sputtered, his eyes darting from side to side. “A group of cusith attacked us in the forest. Can you save him?”

Cusith? What the hell was that?

“I don’t know,” I said. “This wound is deep, and without better resources, I can’t tell if any vital organs have been damaged.”

His admittedly handsome face puckered in sorrow, forcing memories of my dying parents to the surface. The desperation I’d felt knowing I couldn’t do anything to save them.

“But I’m going to do the best I can,” I reassured him. “Hand me that needle and thread.”

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He nodded and passed me the spool and hook-shaped needle.

With trembling fingers, I accepted them and began to sew the wound closed. Pulling the gaping flesh together was an arduous chore, but the man helped by pinching his friend's abdomen while I worked, and I managed to seal the wound tightly. My sewing was sloppy at best, but at least the bleeding had slowed.

I taped a patch of gauze over the sewed gash, then went about tending to the other, smaller cuts across his body. The passed-out man had a muscular build, looking formidable even in this state. And naked as he was, every sculpted inch of him was fully exposed to my wandering gaze as I strived to patch him up. He looked like a warrior, his thick raven hair caked with dirt and blood.

What could have possibly defeated such a man as this?

When that was finally done, I turned to his conscious companion, getting a good look at him for the first time. He had a similar build, though slightly leaner. Where his friend had black hair and a chiseled face that leant itself to a cruel beauty, this man's hair was a soft brown, his features less harsh, pretty in a gentle way.

I peeled my gaze from his face and scanned his body for wounds, which turned out to be plentiful but less critical.

“Okay, let's get you tended to now,” I said.

He rose and let me guide him to a nearby armchair, where I poured over each cut, cleaning and bandaging them.

“Thank you,” he said as I applied the last bandage to his upper arm. “After finding the village empty, I really didn’t think I’d find anyone here.”

“Yeah, I’m... uh... I’m the last one,” I said, my voice tight. But I didn’t want to talk about that. “What did you say attacked you?”

He cocked his head at me, frowning. “A cusith.” He said the word as if I should know what that was.

I shook my head.

“You really don’t know what a cusith is?” he asked with a note of astonishment.

Again, I shook my head.

His eyebrows flared. “Wow. That means they haven’t ventured this far yet. You’re lucky.”

I cleared my throat. “Whatisit?”

He sighed, grunting as he shifted on in the chair. “The only way I can describe it is a shadow-beast, a hellish demon. They were thought to have been eradicated centuries ago, but in recent months, they’ve come out of hiding and began terrorizing inhabited areas. We didn’t expect to encounter them in your neighboring forest.”

I wracked my mind for any mention of such a creature in Varinya’s history, but the black wolves were the only threat I’d ever heard of.

“Do you think this...cusithis resurfacing because the black wolves are gone?” I asked.

Something flickered in his green eyes when his gaze slid to mine, seeming to assess

me for a moment. “I don’t know.”

I pursed my lips and looked down, my gaze falling on his fully nude lap. I snapped my head to the side and shot to my feet.

“I’ll get you some clothes,” I blurted out, my cheeks burning as I refused to look at him.

Skittering upstairs to my father’s old room, I hoped to find some garments that would fit my guests. I hadn’t been in my parents’ old bedroom in months, and the moonlight pouring through the windows caught the thick dust that hung in the air, forming cloudy blocks throughout the space.

Echoes of my father’s voice sounded in my head, treasured memories flashing behind my eyelids. I bitterly pushed them away and began to dig through his clothing chest. I found two pairs of trousers and two button-down white shirts that might suit the men downstairs. Then I fled the room before grief could capture me in its snare.

They were exactly where I’d left them. I went to the conscious man and handed him the clothes first while struggling to avert my gaze from his raw, masculine form.

“These should fit you,” I said as he accepted them.

I turned away as he put them on, setting the clothes for his friend on the arm of the couch and covering him with a blanket.

“I’m Aliya,” I offered, my back to him.

“Tannin,” he replied. “And his name is Jax.”

Tannin and Jax. The first people I’d seen or spoken to in four-hundred-and-twenty-

two days.

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Tannin came up beside me, fully clothed now, and looked mournfully down at Jax. “Do you think he’ll pull through?”

I hesitated before answering. “I did the best I could. Only time will tell.” I turned to look at him. “You’re both welcome to stay as long as you need to. You know, while you heal.”

A grateful albeit forced smile spread across his lips. “Thank you. For everything.”

That brief absence of pain on his face made my heart flutter and my breath catch. He was so much more handsome when he smiled.

“Would you like some lunch? Water?” I asked excitedly, wanting to see more of that smile.

“Yes, that would be very kind,” he said.

I carried the bucket and blood-soaked rags to the kitchen, and as I prepared a makeshift meal for him, hope began to sing in my chest.

For the first time in over a year, I had company. For the first time in so long that it hurt, I wasn’t alone.

I just hoped and prayed that they weren’t some manic hallucination, and that when I came back from the kitchen, they wouldn’t be gone.

Tannin

THIS WASN'T HOW IT was supposed to go down. Our orders were to make it here without issue and assess the status of Varinya. It should have been easy, simple.

Now I was sitting in an empty castle, covered in scratches and bites, staring at my best friend on a dusty couch and unsure if he'd survive.

The cusith had come out of nowhere, manifesting like wraiths from the shadows of the trees and bushes in the forest around us, descending upon us like rabid hyenas. At least when they weren't mutating and bending at impossible angles.

Our scouts had reported no signs of them before our journey, and it was alarming to know they'd spread so far. How long before they reached Varinya? How long before they destroyed everything?

I squeezed my eyes shut, pausing in chewing the stale bread I'd been given. I couldn't think like that. We weren't going to let them win. That was the whole reason for coming here. Well, one of them, anyway. Taking back our rightful place inside the kingdom would give us the power we needed to stand against the cusith, not only for our pack, but for all people.

But if Jax didn't wake up... Only the Alpha had the power of moon song. If he didn't make it through this tragedy, our pack wouldn't know it was safe to come, and this journey—his sacrifice—would all be for nothing.

I glanced at the girl curled up on the armchair across from me. Aliya. She was staring at me with a sort of awe, like I was fascinating to behold. Her honey-brown hair was messy and tangled around her heart-shaped face, and her torn slip that did little to hide the curves of her body and perked nipples beneath was stained and tattered.

How long had she been alone here? What happened to this once flourishing kingdom?

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“What happened here?” I asked, setting my bread back onto the plate in my lap.

She folded her legs against her chest and wrapped her arms around them, hugging herself into a ball and casting her sad gaze to the floor.

“There was a plague. Little by little, everyone died. Everyone but me. They said I was immune.” She shrugged and let out a nervous giggle. “It’s lonely at the end of the world.”

When I offered her a sympathetic frown, her attempt at amusement fell like a dead fly, and she returned to staring at me.

“H—” I paused for a moment, debating on the most delicate way to phrase the question. “How long ago did that happen?”

She shrugged and chewed on her bottom lip. “A little over a year ago.”

My throat tightened. She’d been alone in this castle for over a year? I couldn’t imagine such a tragedy. Watching as everyone you loved died around you and being left in isolation to fend for yourself. As a wolf, that was the most terrifying prospect of all. The pack was everything.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. And I was. Though it was to our benefit that the plague had left the kingdom barren and ready to welcome our return, I truly felt sympathy for this kind girl.

“Why didn’t you just leave?” I asked. “You could’ve wandered to a neighboring

kingdom and sought help, sought a new place for yourself.” I liked to believe that our pack would’ve helped her.

She shook her head fervently. “I could never leave Varinya. My subjects may all be dead, but I still have a duty as princess. Varinya is my home. This castle is where I belong.”

I struggled to keep my eyes from widening. Princess? She was the last living descendant of the royal line who’d slaughtered countless members of my pack?

It was my sworn oath to destroy her.

And yet, she’d saved us. She’d welcomed us into her home and patched us up. I sat here now, dressed and fed, thanks to her. She’d shown me nothing but kindness. She was innocent. I could see that. But I didn’t think the rest of my pack would see it that way, especially not Jax.

If he woke up at all...

Perhaps I could get her out before they came, convince her to move on. It was the least I could do in return for her kindness.

I cleared my throat. “I can understand your sense of duty, but that doesn’t mean you have to be alone for the rest of your life. You owe it to your people to continue your line. You could marry a prince of another kingdom, forge an alliance.”

The muscles of my chest squeezed around my ribcage, an irrational sense of rage flaring inside me at the thought of her marrying anyone else.

Where the hell did that come from?

She chewed on her lips again, her pretty face crinkling with conflict. “I have no way to send word anywhere to arrange any such alliance, and making the journey on my own would mean certain death, especially after seeing the wounds the two of you endured.”

She had a point there. An image of her being torn to pieces by a cusith flashed in my mind, forcing a powerful protective urge to ignite inside me.

What was this? These feelings came out of nowhere. She was nothing to me.

Unless...

“Besides, even if I did make it to the next kingdom, who would believe I was a princess?” she said with a self-deprecating laugh. “I mean, look at me.”

I did, and she was right. In her current state, she was a far cry from a princess. But she was still beautiful, in a wild, feral way that drew me in. She looked like a forest nymph, like a goddess of the hunt.

“Without the proper appearance and going through the official channels, I can’t prove my pedigree without carting heaps of lineage books.” She shook her head. “It’s just not possible. Varinya is the safest place for me.”

Not for much longer.

When the rest of my pack showed up and discovered who she was, she would never be safe again. They’d lock her up as a prisoner of war or publicly execute her for the crimes committed by her forebearers. And every fiber of my being sizzled in rejection of either outcome.

I didn’t like these foreign and compelling emotions I felt toward her, and I feared

what it meant. Suspicion whispered in the back of my mind, but I denied it, shoving it deep down. It couldn't be. She wasn't one of us. She was our enemy.

She unbent her legs and scooted to perch on the edge of her armchair. "You must be tired after what you went through. Would you like me to make up a room for you?"

I shook my head and looked at Jax. "No. I should stay with him. I want to be close when he wakes up."

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“Okay.” She rose. “I’ll get a pillow and blankets then, so you can at least be comfortable.”

She skittered away up the stairs before I could reply. She was too sweet for what was coming for her.

I pushed my reluctance aside and focused my attention on Jax. He had to pull through this. He wasn’t just my Alpha, he was my oldest and dearest friend. We’d grown up together, gone through every first, every hardship, every battle together.

When we were pups, I was the runt of the pack, and therefore the subject of ridicule and hazing by our peers. And though he was the Alpha’s son, he stood up for me. He defended me when a pack of pups ganged up on me and declared me untouchable.

Without his intervention, I wouldn’t have grown to be one of the most formidable of the black wolves. I was his second-in-command, his beta, and I would do anything for him. I loved him like the brother I never had. Seeing him like this, battered and barely hanging onto life, shredded me up inside.

Aliya came back into the den with a bundle of pillows and blankets piled in her arms, and rather than handing them to me, she went about setting up a sleeping space on the floor beside the couch Jax was on.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I said. “I’ll be fine in the chair.”

“Nonsense,” she said as she aired out the comforter and draped it over the sheet and pillow. “You need some sleep after your journey, and this way, you can be right next

to your friend if he needs you.”

My heart squeezed again at her compassion. We were strangers to her, intruders in her kingdom, and yet she went out of her way to care for us. Little did she know our true intentions, and guilt over that fact gnawed at my gut like maggots on a festering sore.

I didn't deserve her kindness. None of us did, least of all, Jax.

“Well, I'm going to have a rest too. So I'll see you later?” she said awkwardly when she was finished, then nodded at me once before sweeping from the room.

Leaving me alone to wrestle with my troubled thoughts over what I must do.

Chapter 4

Aliya

IDIDN'T FALL ASLEEP during my afternoon rest. The excitement and gratitude at having actual people in the castle with me after so long was overwhelming and had anxious energy coursing through my body.

I wasn't alone. I wasn't alone!

I was so happy over that fact that joyous tears trailed from my eyes and soaked into the pillow beneath my head.

And then there was the obvious perk that they were so handsome. I couldn't stop the images that circled inside my mind. Their impressive naked bodies kept popping into my restless brain, though honestly, I didn't really want to stop.

I'd never seen a man without clothes before, at least not one that wasn't an artistic statue or in a painting. After months of solitude and despair, I'd become convinced I never would. And though they'd come bloody and injured, I couldn't help but fantasize about them naked in good health.

What if I could convince them to stay?

I rejected the foolish thought as soon as it came. They were obviously headed somewhere. They had lives, goals, probably families. Why on earth would they stay here with me, in this dusty, deserted castle? I was no longer a pampered princess, but a raggedy vagabond wench. I was no prize anymore.

But that didn't stop me from falling into frenzied, passionate dreams when sleep finally did find me, leaving me aching and frustrated when I woke.

As soon as the sun began dropping behind the mountains, it cast glowing rays through my window. It was time to get up. I threw off my blankets and got dressed—much more presentably this time. It had been months since I'd worn a proper dress, and getting the ties fastened behind my back was a cramp-inducing chore that took far longer than necessary.

When I got it as tight as I could, I went through the herculean task of brushing the knots out of my long hair, deciding to leave it down because I couldn't stand another second of not seeing them and making sure they were real.

I flew down the stairs with hasty feet, nearly tripping over the skirt of my dress. When I found Tannin still there, kneeling by Jax's side, a huge wave of relief washed over me.

At least until I saw the lines of dread etched into his handsome face when he turned at my entrance.

“He’s feverish,” Tannin said, his voice heavy. “I think his wound is infected.”

I rushed to his side to examine Jax. Indeed, his pallor had turned a sickly yellow, and his forehead and chest were covered in a film of sweat. I peeled back the bandage on his abdomen and gasped at the blooming redness that surrounded the sutures and the yellowish puss that oozed between them. It reminded me all too much of the sores on my parents’ bodies.

“You’re right,” I said through a tight throat. “It is infected. Badly.”

“Do you have any medicine?” Tannin beseeched desperately. “Anything to combat the infection?”

I swallowed thickly. “No. All the medicine stores were depleted before the end of the plague. I’m so sorry.”

“No!” he bellowed, making me flinch. “No, he can’t die! There must be something we can do. Please, don’t let him die.”

My brows puckered at the heartache on his face and in his voice. I wanted to help them, I really did. But there was nothing—

My breath hitched as an idea sprang to my mind.

“There might be something I can do,” I hedged cautiously. “B-but it might not work.”

“Yes, please!” he begged. “Anything. Just try!”

“Okay,” I agreed.

I ran to the kitchen counter where I had left the book of spells last night after my

obsessive garden adventure and began to hastily flip through it. I remembered seeing a few spells for healing. At the time I'd thought that if only I'd had access to this during the plague, I might've been able to save some of those who were lost. I could've saved my parents.

There were different healing spells. One for illness, one for broken bones, one for reviving from a coma...

“Ha! Found it!” Spell for healing a flesh wound. This one didn't require any ingredients like some of the others, only the complete focus of the Wielder and the intention to heal.

I clutched it against my chest and made to dart back out, but something made me pause. My intuition told me to keep the book safe, even from my guests. So, I lowered the open book in my arms and read the short incantation over and over, committing it to memory, then closed the book and stashed it in a cabinet.

I returned to the den, repeating the incantation in my mind. When I knelt beside Jax once more, I removed his bandage completely and put both hands over the stitched gash.

“What are you doing?” Tannin blurted out in fretful confusion.

“Just be quiet,” I told him, closing my eyes. “I need to concentrate.”

When he didn't make another sound, I set my intention and spoke the incantation out loud.

“Vulte riay kai altum.”

Just as yesterday in the garden, a comforting warmth blossomed in my belly, rose up

my chest and spilled down my arms, flowing into the angrily hot flesh beneath my palms. I could feel the magic working through me like I was merely the conduit, stitching back together the separated flesh.

Then the sensation grew cool, like pool water on a hot summer's day, sucking the heat of infection from Jax's skin. And then the flow stopped altogether.

I opened my eyes and looked down as I pulled my hands away, and though I knew what I'd find, it still shocked and thrilled me to see the gash gone, the thread I'd used to sew it laying loosely on top of his belly.

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“Holy shit!” Tannin breathed. “Did you just use magic?”

“Yeah, I—”

Jax suddenly bolted upright with a hoarse gasp, the surprise of it making me stumble backward and fall on my butt.

“What the—” His head turned wildly as he took in his surroundings, then his eyes fell on me, and outrage flared his nostrils. “Who the fuck are you? What are you doing to me?”

I was too shocked to reply, to say anything in defense for myself.

“Hey, brother,” Tannin said, putting a hand firmly on Jax’s shoulder. “This is Aliya, and she happens to have just saved your life. She saved us both. You could show her some respect.”

Jax continued to glare at me with hateful suspicion, and I felt small and foolish.

“What happened?” he barked at Tannin.

“We were attacked by a pack of cusith in the forest,” Tannin explained in a much calmer tone than I would’ve been capable of.

“Yes, I remember that,” he snapped. “But how did we get there?”

“You got badly injured in the fight,” Tannin continued with a patience reminiscent of

pacifying an unruly child. “I carried you here, to Varinya. The village was completely empty, and I banged on the castle door, expecting to find nothing and no one, but this nice young woman here let us in and tended to our wounds. She healed you.”

Jax eyed him warily, then slid his slitted gaze back to me, assessing me. He jutted his chin out. “Where is everyone? The villagers, the castle guards, the staff?”

I licked my dry lips, struggling to find my voice. “Gone.”

“Gone?” he snapped. “What do you mean, gone?”

“Th-they all died. There was a plague. I-I’m the only one who survived.”

His expression softened slightly as he mulled that information over, his tense posture loosening. “The king and queen?”

I nodded mutely.

He huffed a sigh. “Well, I’m sorry. What a terrible tragedy.” He glanced briefly at Tannin, then back at me. “Who were you, you know, before the plague?”

In the corner of my eye, I saw Tannin tense, making me hesitate in my response. “I... I was—am—the princess of Varinya.”

Hostility returned to light Jax’s eyes. “The princess?”

Tannin’s grip tightened on his shoulder. “Yes. Aliya is the princess. And she was kind enough to offer us shelter and assistance when we needed it most. We owe her a great debt.”

“Debt, my a—”

“Jax!” Tannin cautioned loudly, cutting him off.

Jax’s mouth pressed tightly closed, his jaw clenching. After a long breath, he said through gritted teeth, “Thank you for offering us your assistance, Princess.” He said my title like it was a filthy word.

I didn’t know how to react. It had been so long since I’d spoken to anyone, but even then, I wasn’t accustomed to being addressed so harshly, so rudely. I could only assume they had very humble backgrounds, that this Jax especially had poor manners, and maybe that wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t every day the common man had an audience with royalty, and it was my duty to act my station and show grace.

Blushing at his once again exposed nudity, I reached for the other set of clothes I’d fetched last night. “Here. These were my father’s. They should fit you.”

He snatched them from my hands, then began to climb into them without a speck of shame for my presence, but I turned my head anyway.

It was difficult not to peek. Despite his brusque and hostile demeanor, he was gorgeous, and the dreams that had plagued me all night only fueled my temptation. It wasn’t every day that a princess got to see such raw, carnal beauty, and I was pretty much at the end of my rope as it was.

How long would it be before I got to see a naked man again, if ever?

But by the time my resilience failed, and I turned my head, he was already buttoning up his shirt. I internally kicked myself for not visually gorging on the whole ordeal while I’d had the chance, especially since he hadn’t seemed to care if I saw him naked or not.

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Damn my stupid, inane sense of propriety!

Once he was done with his shirt, they both looked at me with some expectation I didn't immediately understand.

Oh. They want privacy.

I took a step back. "I'll give you two some time and go make up rooms for you."

"Thank you, Aliya," Tannin said with a warm smile. "That would be nice."

Jax didn't reciprocate his friend's attitude, only looking down his nose at me without a word.

I nodded once, then made my way to the west wing to decide on suitable rooms for them. Everything everywhere in this castle aside from the few places I frequented was covered in dust, and it would take quite some effort and time to make them guest ready.

But I was determined to win them over, especially the stony, untrusting Jax. Tonight, I'd make them a wonderful dinner. His miraculous recovery was a cause for celebration after all, and I had to do everything in my power to make them want to stay for as long as possible.

I knew it was selfish, but I couldn't bear the idea of going back to being alone again. I'd survived the first time I'd been abandoned, but now... I wasn't sure I'd survive it a second time.

Chapter 5

Jax

A STORM OF CONFLICTING victory and outrage seethed beneath my skin as I glared at my beta—my oldest friend. The kingdom was empty, the castle unguarded and basically welcoming our return with open arms. The epic battle I'd anticipated and planned for was now unnecessary, and there were no obstacles before us.

But the princess, the last of our enemies, still lived.

“Why didn't you just kill her?” I growled at Tannin.

He didn't cower at my harsh question. Unlike the rest of my pack, he never shrank in the face of my anger, and I found that both admirable and annoying. Especially right now, when I demanded accountability for this egregious error in judgment.

Instead, he cut me with a deadpan frown. “You really expected me to kill the only person in a hundred miles who could help you when you were knocking on death's door?”

I huffed, my nostrils flaring, but I couldn't exactly argue with that.

“Plus, I didn't find out she was the princess until after she cleaned and sealed the wound in your side,” he continued, gesturing to my right abdomen. “She's dressed up this morning, but last night she wore rags.”

I lifted my shirt and looked down to inspect myself. “There's nothing there. Not even a scar.”

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“That’s because she used magic to heal you when fever set in,” Tannin said, his eyes widening meaningfully. “You were almost dead. Literally.”

My pulse spiked, furious heat exploding in my chest. “She’s a Wielder?! A Wielder and the princess, and you still let her live!”

He shushed me loudly, holding up both hands. “Keep your voice down,” he hissed. “She saved your life—both our lives! Like it or not, we owe her a life debt. Only a mongrel bites the hand that feeds it, and we are not mongrels.”

I didn’t like his chiding tone, but he was right. The laws of our pack were ironclad, and as the Alpha, it was my solemn duty to uphold them flawlessly. We couldn’t kill her after she’d saved our lives, no matter who or what she was. And that posed a unique problem.

“What do you propose we do with her then?” I asked behind gritted teeth, folding my arms obstinately over my chest.

He sighed, a hint of resignation in his eyes. “We continue as planned. When the moon rises tonight, you can call the pack and invite them to come. When they do, we take the princess as a prisoner.”

A strange reluctance darkened his tone when he said the last part, and I narrowed my eyes on him in suspicion.

“You don’t seem very pleased with that outcome,” I said accusingly.

This time, he did shirk, but only slightly. “She has been nothing but kind to me—to us—since the moment she opened that door. She’s an innocent, and if she weren’t the princess, this wouldn’t even be a problem.”

Righteous anger cracked inside me like a whip. “Innocent? She’s the descendant of the very monarchs who betrayed and slaughtered our people, who banished us from this kingdom and forced us into the wastelands. And if she knew what we were, do you really think she wouldn’t use that magic of hers to do the same?”

He frowned and looked down at the carpet. “I don’t know.”

The tension in my shoulders loosened as I looked at him, my anger cooling. Tannin always was a more compassionate wolf than most, and I admired that about him, but now wasn’t the time for it.

I walked up to him and put a comforting but firm hand on his shoulder. “I understand your moral struggle, brother. But we must consider what’s best for the pack before all else. Justice will prevail, one way or another. The right path will make itself known.”

He nodded.

“In the meantime, I think I’ll explore the castle, get myself acquainted with our new home.” I patted his back and strolled toward the stairs.

Despite the layers of dust that coated every surface, this palace was even more beautiful than the stories I grew up on suggested.

White marble floors with gold veins. The walls were smooth cream-colored plaster with embossed coffers and crown molding along the vaulted ceiling and bordering the archways between rooms. And the grand staircase to the upper level was truly stunning, with rails of thick, polished cherry wood, and each step was layered in the

same marble as the floor.

Every inch of this place had been lovingly crafted with expert craftsmanship for the highest of royalty, and as I walked up the stairs, for the first time in my life, I felt like I was home.

For too long, my people had been living in shabby huts in the farthest reaches of the northern forest, scrounging for food and living like humble savages. No more. Never again.

After I made my moon song tonight, it would only be a matter of days before the pack came in droves to live in the luxury that had been stolen from them all those generations ago. Soon, the streets of Varinya would be filled with frolicking pups, and I could hardly wait.

I took my time venturing through the castle and inspecting each room, making mental notes of which of my highest-ranking pack members might reside in which bedroom. There were so many.

Honestly, my entire pack could live in the castle comfortably, but it would be wrong to let the surrounding homes go unoccupied, and I had to leave room for the ranking families to grow.

Plus, there were also guestrooms to consider. Once we established ourselves as the new kingdom, there would be trade opportunities with neighboring kingdoms, and we'd need places for those dignitaries to stay.

In the upper levels, where the royal chambers were situated, I found the girl in one of them, hastily making the massive canopy king bed. I leaned against the doorframe, watching her.

I couldn't deny that she was beautiful. The tight purple dress she wore flattered her body perfectly, sinching around her thin waste and giving way to the wide curves of her hips below and pushing up her supple breasts above.

If she had only been a villager, or a handmaid perhaps, we could have offered her asylum, maybe even wed her to one of my generals.

Or I could take her for myself.

Potent desire flared inside me at the thought, even as I recoiled in disgust. She was the blood of my enemy, no more worthy of sharing my bed than the lowest omega. Why would such a loathsome notion even occur to me?

And why did the idea of her in the arms of another man fill me with murderous rage?

She turned and startled at the sight of me. "Oh! Sorry, you scared me."

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I fought a smug smirk. I should scare you, Princess.

She stepped away from the bed and clasped her hands at her waist. "I hope this room will be okay for you."

"Yes, it'll do nicely," I replied. For now.

She smiled nervously, biting her lip, and I found it difficult not to stare at her mouth as she did.

"I prepared the room next door as well. I'll let you two decide which one you'd each like."

"Thank you for your hospitality," I said, pushing away from the doorframe and slipping my hands into the pockets of my slacks as I approached her. "It sounds like I owe you a debt."

"Oh, no, not at all," she said, shaking her head. "I did what anyone would. You don't owe me anything."

If only that were true.

"Tannin tells me you used magic to heal me," I said conversationally. "I'm very grateful. You must be exceptionally talented at wielding, indeed."

She blushed, her sweet scent teasing my nose and pulling me closer to her. "Well, I don't know about that. I've only recently begun to study the old ways. I didn't even

know I could heal before trying the spell on you.”

My brows twitched with interest, and I nodded. So, she wasn't taught. Her referral to the “old ways” suggested wielding had become a lost art. She might not be that big of a threat, after all.

“Well, er... I should go,” she said abruptly, walking past me.

“Go where?” I asked, turning to watch her.

“To make dinner,” she said, pausing at the door. “I thought you two might enjoy a nice meal.” Then she ducked out.

She was an odd girl, that was for sure. She didn't seem to know how to hold a conversation, and she stared for longer than was comfortable. Tannin had said she'd been alone here for over a year. I supposed that would make anyone a little eccentric. Maybe we could use that to our advantage.

Following her from a distance as she descended to the ground floor, I watched as she went out the kitchen door to the garden. I wanted to study her, gain an understanding of the foe I was dealing with.

Surprisingly, the garden was lush and plentiful. She'd tended to it alone all this time. An unlikely skill for pampered royalty. It showed resilience, and I both respected and resented that. It meant she might put up a fight when we took the kingdom as our own.

If only she'd starved before now. And yet, that thought stabbed at my gut like the talon of the cusith who'd nearly killed me. Why was this princess, this odd girl, my mortal enemy, affecting me in this way? I should want her dead, but the prospect pained me in a way I didn't understand.

I followed her around the back of the castle to a fenced-in yard where the clucks of chickens sounded. She opened the gate and slipped inside.

The next ten minutes were an entertaining show of her chasing annoyed hens around and failing to catch a single one. It was both amusing and pathetic. So much for resilience. She clearly hadn't done this before, which suggested to me that she hadn't eaten meat in over a year. No wonder she was so thin and frail.

When I couldn't stand watching her ineptitude any longer, I shoved into the yard to show her how it was done. I snatched a fat hen with ease, clutched its wriggling body against my chest, and snapped its neck in front of her.

She winced at the terrible cracking sound, then looked mournfully at the dead bird bundled limply in my arms.

"Th-thank you," she said in a small voice.

I took the bird by its loose neck and extended it to her. "You're welcome," I said, not bothering to hide my irritation.

She accepted it with hesitant hands and cradled it like an infant. So gentle. And so foolish.

"I don't suppose you need me to pluck and gut it, too?" I ask gratingly.

The first sign of anger pinched her features as she glared at me, and she straightened her posture indignantly. "No, I can manage."

Then she strode past me with her head held high, and I snickered at her display of attitude. I rather enjoyed getting under skin. I trailed behind her, intent on watching her struggle with the task of cleaning the bird, which should prove highly amusing.

I smelled the odor of putrid decay before I heard the snap of a twig in the nearby trees. I whipped my head in that direction to see the ash-gray beast emerge from the shadows.

And its glowing red eyes were set on the girl.

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“Princess!” I shouted, and she spun around angrily to glare at me.

My shout spurred the cusith into action, and it leapt, charging right for her with poised claws and gnashing teeth.

Instinct took over, and I sprinted for her as fast as I could in my human form, intercepting the beast seconds before it could tear her to pieces. She screamed as I caught its paws at the wrists, then shoved it forcefully backward.

I whipped around frantically searching in that brief reprieve for anything useful, spotting a shovel leaning against the castle wall. I grabbed it by the handle and brandished it like a sword, bashing the metal end at the side of the cusith’s face as it lunged at me.

It fell to the ground, rocked, and I swung at it violently over and over until finally stabbing the blade into its neck and severing the head from its body.

I stood, chest heaving and heart racing as I studied the trees for any sign of more. But there was no sound, no smell other than the reek emanating from this feral corpse.

“Wha—what the hell is that thing?” the princess squeaked from where she pressed herself against the wall, her face pale as a sheet.

“It’s a cusith,” I panted, staring down at the heinous monster. “It seems to have been alone, but where there’s one... Go inside. I’ll burn it so its scent doesn’t attract the others.”

She nodded shakily but pulled herself together enough to grab the dead chicken, then ran for the kitchen door.

Why had I saved her? Fuck! That had been my chance! I should've just let it kill her and be done with this.

"Consider our debt paid," I muttered at her absence.

She'd saved my life, and now I had saved hers. We were even. At least there was that.

But this didn't bode well for any of us. The cusiths in the forest were one thing, but seeing one so close to the castle... They were getting bolder, venturing farther. I would not let them threaten the safety of my pack, not when we were so close to reclaiming our home.

The princess was the least of our worries, and now that our debt was settled, there was nothing standing in the way of eliminating her.

Nothing except for the little fact that I had clearly mate-bonded to her. Everything I did pointed to it. I was ridiculously drawn to her and wanted to fuck her, even now. I'd reacted to protect her from danger without even thinking about the fact that I was meant to kill her or at least let her die.

No... it was clear to me now. I wanted her. And I would protect her until my dying breath.

Fuck.

Chapter 6

Aliya

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ICOULDN'T STOP SEEINGthat hideous beast in my mind while I was preparing food for our dinner. Not even gutting the chicken was able to distract me.

All my life, I'd heard stories of the black wolves, our enemy from generations past. They were said to be ferocious yet beautiful creatures. But that...thingwas far from beautiful. It was more like something out of my worst nightmare.

Its skin had been a sickly bluish gray, like the rotting flesh of those who'd died during the plague. The color of their corpses before we'd burned them. Its back was humped and arched unnaturally, with strange spikes down its spine. Its limbs were spindly and knobby, ending in razor-sharp claws. And that face... a shiver coursed over my spine at the memory of drooling fangs and red eyes.

A cusith.Jax and Tannin knew what they were and had obviously fought them before, but I'd never even heard of them. Where did they come from?

And the way Jax had slain it so easily, so swiftly... I sighed with a mix of gratitude and awe. His combat skill and strength had been incredible to witness, and I was so grateful to him for saving my life. He may be a smartass and kind of a jerk, but he'd defended me when he didn't have to, and I adored him for that.

What would I have done if he hadn't been there, if these men hadn't come at all? That thing would have eaten me alive. Now, more than ever, I had to convince them to stay. I needed them, but I also wanted them more than I could explain.

Even when Jax had been rude to me in the hen yard, I'd felt drawn to him, compelled to win him over and get closer. I ached to touch them both, burned to do even more

than just that. No potential suitor, or any man for that matter, had affected me like this in the past.

Was it only because they were the first people I'd seen in fourteen months? Was it because they were both so heartbreakingly gorgeous, and I'd first seen them in all their brutal naked glory?

Remembering their exposed bodies made my core throb and my thighs clench as I took the chicken out of the oven, nearly dropping it in the process. I was being ridiculous. I had to control myself or I'd scare them off.

I carried the roasted chicken, vegetables, and apple pie to the dining room, then went about setting plates and silverware to make everything look perfect. The table in here was long, meant for the times when we hosted many people, but I focused everything around the three chairs at one end.

Willow had popped her head in at one point but had quickly assessed the situation and vanished again. I made sure her bowls were filled with food and water so she could come and go as she pleased.

It was a little strange that she was so stressed about our guests, but they were strangers after all. And she was probably as shocked to see other humans as I was.

When I had everything set and as perfect as it could be, I found the men huddled in quiet discussion in the den by the fire. They stopped their conversation at my entrance and looked at me expectantly.

I cleared my throat. "Dinner is served in the dining room. I prepared roasted chicken, vegetables, and apple pie for three of us."

Jax arched a brow, but Tannin smiled.

“Sounds delicious,” he said, then rose from the couch, slapping Jax’s arm with the back of his hand to encourage him to follow.

I ushered them to the dining room and took the seat at the head of the table, patting the spots on either side of me for them to sit.

Jax rolled his eyes as he sat to my right with obvious reluctance, and Tannin politely settled into the chair on my left, beaming at the meal before him.

“This looks and smells very good,” Tannin said as he reached for the large knife beside the chicken and began to slice off one of the legs. “You are so kind to do this for us.”

To my surprise, he set the leg on my plate instead of his, and my heart melted.

“You should have seen her trying to catch the chicken,” Jax said with a laugh, pulling off the other leg with his bare hands. “She’d still be chasing them around the yard if I hadn’t swooped in and caught one for her.” He took a big bite out of it as he scooped a giant helping of vegetables onto his plate.

I clenched my jaw at his derision, struggling to remain silent and just take it. It really helped that he was so fucking handsome. Maybe if I just looked at his face, I could ignore his words and attitude.

“Forgive my friend,” Tannin said, shooting a warning glance at Jax as he carved himself a piece of the breast. “He’s not used to being in the presence of royalty.”

“Ha!” Jax barked a laugh with a mouthful of food.

I picked up my knife and fork and cut a small bite from the chicken leg. “That’s alright. I’m not used to being in anyone’s presence, so who am I to judge. I’m just

glad to have company.”

Tannin offered me a sad half-smile before focusing on his food, and an uncomfortable silence fell over us.

For a seemingly endless few minutes, no one said anything, and the quiet was unbearable. I didn't know what to say or how to start a conversation. So many times I opened my mouth then closed it again, thinking better of what I was going to voice.

“Oh, for God's sake, will you just spit it out already?” Jax complained. “You look like a floundering fish, and it's getting really annoying.”

Embarrassment burned in my chest and up my neck. I bit my lip, feeling foolish.

“And stop biting your lip like that,” Jax muttered under his breath.

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Tannin glared at him before turning to me with an apologetic frown. “Ignore him. I know it must be difficult to converse after so long in silence, but you can talk to me about whatever you want.”

He put his hand softly on my arm, and a warm tingle saturated my skin at his touch, making me gasp. The way he blinked at our point of contact told me he felt it too. But he didn’t remove his hand right away, instead letting it linger for several seconds then slowly pulling away, lightly dragging his fingertips across my skin in a way that made me ache.

I looked up into his soft green eyes, and he held my gaze for a moment. I wanted to disappear into them, and I found myself leaning closer until Jax loudly, rudely cleared his throat.

I rested back against my chair and chose one of the many questions racing around my mind. “When you came here, you said you were heading to Rodak. That’s the outpost town in the west, isn’t it? Why were you going there?”

Tannin took a bite and nodded while chewing. “We’re from a very small village in the north. Life became unbearable there, so I guess you could say we were on a sort of pilgrimage, looking for something better.”

My heart jumped up into my throat with excitement. They had nowhere to go. They wanted a new home. This could be their new home!

I swallowed against the eager tightness in my throat. “Well, as you can see, there’s a lot of room here. You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

Tannin's responding smile seemed bittersweet, and I wondered if I offended him somehow. Was I being too eager? Did I sound desperate?

"I think that sounds like a fantastic idea," Jax said suddenly. "Especially if meals like this are going to be a common thing. You may not be good at catching chickens, but you're fairly decent at cooking them."

I smiled, deciding to take that as a compliment. Mama always said the way to a man's heart was through his stomach.

"Well, if you like the chicken, then you'll love the pie." I got out of my seat and stepped around Jax to get to the dessert, which was just past his plate.

He scooted his chair out to give me better access to it, and the gesture surprised me. Maybe he wasn't a complete asshole after all.

I cut into the pie and set slices onto each of their plates.

"Thank you," Tannin said, licking his lips as he eyed the caramelized apples spilling from beneath the crust.

I giggled at his response, then tripped on my skirt as I made to return to my seat and fell awkwardly into Jax's lap.

"Whoa!" His arms closed around me, his hands firmly gripping the sides of my waist.

Just as with Tannin, Jax's touch sent a hot shiver through me. I looked at his face over my shoulder, finding concern in those icy blue eyes as well as heat.

Smoldering heat that threatened to incinerate me from the inside out. "Are you okay?" he asked, his fingertips pressing into me.

I nodded dazedly, distracted by the telltale bulge nudging at the bottom of my thigh. I knew enough about the bedroom to understand what that was and what it meant, and a thrill throbbed between my legs.

“Mm-hmm... just tripped,” I muttered. “Not used to wearing dresses anymore.”

I pressed my buttocks into his lap, and the quietest yet sharpest gasp escaped his lips. I wanted so badly to kiss them.

Suddenly, he lifted me off him and set me back on my feet beside him.

“Try not to be so clumsy, please,” he scolded, looking pointedly away from me, scooting back into the table with blatant irritation.

But his jagged edges didn’t cut me because I knew the truth, which he was reluctant to admit. He wanted me every bit as much as I wanted him.

I glanced at Tannin as I made my way back to my chair, and the two of them were glaring at each other in a different way than before. In challenge.

Was Tannin jealous? Did he want me too? That would be crazy.

The sinful, frenzied dreams that had haunted me all night came back to me, shooting sharp desire through my center, and I closed my eyes against its potency. The idea of having one of them was almost too much to bear. But both of them... was that even possible?

“No, that would be crazy,” I muttered to myself.

“What?” Jax asked, looking quizzically at me with one eyebrow raised.

“Oh, nothing,” I blurted, internally kicking myself. “I, uh... talk to myself sometimes.”

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Dammit! Why did I say that? I'm just making it worse!

Jax made a derisive snort, and I sagged into my chair. Attraction or not, I'd be lucky if they even wanted to stay at this point.

Suddenly, Jax pushed away from the table and stood. "I need some air," he grunted, then stomped out of the room.

I deflated even more, as much as my tight corset would let me.

"I'm sorry about him," Tannin said. "I know he can be an asshole sometimes, but he's a good guy under all the bravado and ego. I'll go talk to him. Thank you so much for the food."

He gave me one last smile, then stood up and left too.

No. No, no, no. They couldn't leave. I had to do something. I could not go back to being alone in this castle. I would die first. And truthfully, I would die without them if more of those cusiths came.

Chapter 7

Aliya

AFTER CLEANING THE table from dinner, I wandered around the castle in search of them. I didn't really know what I was going to say, but I hoped the right words would come to me in the moment.

They weren't in the den or anywhere outside, so I ventured up to the royal chambers where I had set up rooms for them. I could hear muffled voices carrying down the wide hallway as soon as I emerged from the staircase.

They were in the room in which Jax had found me this morning.

Okay, I can do this. Offer them whatever they want. Food, riches, even my body if that's what it takes to make them stay.

Though, at this point, that wouldn't be much of a sacrifice. I didn't understand this intense desire for both men, but I was more than willing to give in to it.

I walked up to the door and lifted my hand to knock, but something stopped me before my knuckles could touch the wood. I paused there, curious at this strange hesitation.

"I saw the way you touched her at dinner," Jax's voice said angrily on the other side. "You can't fool me, brother!"

"You're one to talk," Tannin countered. "Your hands were all over her when she fell in your lap, and you were looking at her like you wanted to bend her over the table!"

My breath hitched. They were talking about me. My intuition told me to listen in, and though I felt slightly guilty for eavesdropping, I was also burning with curiosity. So I hunched down and peeked one eye into the keyhole.

Tannin was leaning against the bed post, his arms folded, and Jax was pacing across the floor, moving in and out of my limited scope of sight.

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“Ugh! I didn’t want to say anything, but I’ve bonded to her,” Jax said.

Bonded? I’d only heard that term in reference to...

“You what?” Tannin growled.

“I know,” Jax shot at him. “I tried to deny it, and I’m trying very hard to fight it. We don’t get to choose who the mate bond connects with, okay?”

“That’s not possible,” Tannin said, shaking his head.

“Why? Because she’s a Wielder? Or because she’s the Varinyan princess? Trust me, I’m aware of the irony.”

Tannin pushed away from the bed post. “No, because I’ve bonded to her. She’s mine.”

Jax immediately stopped his pacing and stared at Tannin. “No, you didn’t,” he seethed.

“Yes, I did,” Tannin asserted. “I felt the stirrings of it last night, before you even knew she existed.”

Jax shook his head, tapping his foot. “That’s not possible. Two men can’t bond to the same woman.”

“I know, and yet here we are,” Tannin said. “So, what do we do about this?”

Jax shrugged arrogantly. “Well, as Alpha, I have right of first choice.”

“Bullshit!” Tannin barked, stomping up to within inches of him. “That right doesn’t apply when a mate bond is present.”

“But if you’re saying that we’re both meant to be with her, then we have to settle this.” Jax argued, puffing up his chest. “And the way to settle the dispute of who gets to claim her is to defer to hierarchy. I’m the Alpha, you’re my beta, and you will relinquish her to me.”

Alpha? Beta?

“The fuck I will!” Tannin rebuked. “I saw her first. And she likes me better anyway. You’ve done nothing but treat her like shit since you woke up!”

I nodded and frowned in agreement as I hovered above the doorknob, spying. Tannin had a point there.

“You’re only nice to her because you want to fuck her and can’t control yourself,” Jax snarled. “I’m the one who saved her life from that cusith, so I should be the one who gets to have her.”

“You would have killed that cusith whether she’d been there or not, so don’t pull that chivalry bullshit with me,” Tannin said. “I have just as much right to claim her as you do, and you know it.”

“Then I guess there’s only one way to settle this.” Without warning, Jax swung a punch at the side of Tannin’s face.

I gasped and pressed my hands over my mouth.

Tannin spat blood off to the side. “Bring it on, asshole.” Then he lunged at Jax, tackling him to the floor and out of sight.

I moved my head all around the space in front of the keyhole, trying to get a better angle to see them, but they were too far away.

They were fighting over me. Two drop-dead gorgeous men were fighting over me and beating the shit out of each other from the sounds of the bangs, grunts, and slaps.

I couldn’t remember ever being this excited about anything in my whole life, and I was desperate to see this play out. Who would win? Not that their stupid fight would prove anything, because I was a fucking princess and not some voiceless trinket. I would choose my suitor, and silly as it may sound, I didn’t know who I’d pick, given the chance.

Tannin was sweet and gentle, and Jax could be snide and callous. But he’d risked his life to protect me, and I’d caught small glimpses of his caring heart.

What if I didn’t have to choose? I could stop this fight right now and tell them I wanted both of them. Oh gods, I wanted to do that so bad!

I lifted my hand toward the knob, but a loud crash from inside made me jump back. What the hell were they doing in there?

I leaned closer, peering through the keyhole again. Tannin was in sight, taking off his shirt and pants. My insides tightened at the sight of his naked body, and I didn’t even care why he was stripping for a fight.

But then thick black fur sprouted all over his body, which grew and stretched and mutated, and in the next instant, he was no longer my handsome, kind Tannin, but a massive black wolf.

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Another wolf shot out from the side and swiped a clawed paw at him. Jax.

In horrified disbelief, I stumbled backward until my back smacked into the wall.

Black wolves. My men were black wolves!

As quietly as I could, I ran down the hall and into my room, softly closing the door behind me and sliding my back down until I slumped on the floor.

They'd been lying to me from the very moment I met them. They were black wolves, the ancient enemy of my kingdom. That's why they'd been talking about Alphas and betas and mate bonds, but I'd been too lust-driven and desperate to think rationally.

Mate bonds. They said they'd mated to me. And even now with my pulse racing and my body trembling in fear over what I'd just seen, I couldn't deny the powerful yearning I felt for each.

What was I going to do? They were the enemy of the kingdom I now ruled alone. It was my duty to my ancestors to kick them out. But I'd already invited them to stay, and with this whole mate bond business, there was no way they'd leave willingly.

A shadow caught in the corner of my eye, and I snapped my head in that direction.

"Willow," I sighed in relief after she came into the moonlight spilling through my window. "It's just you."

She curled up on my lap, and I busied my anxious hands with petting her.

I really didn't want them to go, even with this revelation. I couldn't bear the thought of returning to the solitude I'd been wallowing in before they stumbled into my life.

But I was the last of the Varinyan line. Allying with them went against everything my ancestors fought and died for. Letting them stay would be like spitting on my parents' graves.

There was only one right choice. I had to protect my castle from its enemies, even if that meant shattering what was left of my battered heart.

Chapter 8

Tannin

RAGE. PRIMAL, ANIMALISTIC Rage consumed me as I fought against my Alpha. But right now, he wasn't my Alpha, he wasn't my life-long best friend... he was my nemesis.

I leapt onto his back, digging my claws into his sides as I bit the back of his neck as hard as I could. He yelped and rolled, slamming me hard against the floor, but I refused to let go. I refused to lose.

But he was bigger than me, his weight crushing down on me as he continued to roll and pinned me between his back and the floor. He bucked his powerful body, slamming me over and over, until I finally lost my grip on his sides.

Then, faster than I could react, he spun around to face me and drove his mouth into my neck, clamping down. His teeth sank into my skin, squeezing my windpipe. I knew he could crush my bones with those powerful jaws, but he was holding back. This bite was a warning.

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“Why... are we... fighting... over her?” I grunted with what little voice I could strain out. “You don’t... even want her. She’s... your enemy.”

His bite tightened, completely cutting off my airway, and for a moment, I really thought he was going to kill me.

But then he released his jaws and pulled back just enough to snarl down at me. I sucked in air, gasping and coughing as he kept me pinned beneath him. Slowly, his upper lip lowered over his fangs, his features relaxing.

“You’re right,” he growled, pushing himself off me and shifting back to his human form to stand over me. “This temptress is clouding our judgment, turning us against each other, and making us forget why we’re here. We can’t allow that.”

I shifted back too, still wheezing and gasping to catch my breath. I rolled onto my side and tried to push myself up. Jax offered me a hand, and I reluctantly took it and let him pull me up to my feet.

“Our duty is first and foremost to our pack,” he said, keeping my hand in his even after I stood. “And to each other. I don’t want to fight you, brother.”

His words humbled me, cooling the flame of jealous rage that had been broiling within me. Now human and rational again, I remembered how much I loved him.

“I don’t want to fight you, either,” I admitted shamefully. “I’m sorry for challenging you.”

He chuckled as he stepped back into his pants. "I'm sorry for nearly killing you. Aliya must have more magic than we thought."

He would have had every right to kill me under pack law. I challenged him and lost. Challenging the Alpha was not something any wolf took lightly, and I never should have done it.

But this mate bond—or Aliya's magic—had me losing my mind, descending into possessive jealousy and a determination to claim and protect my mate. It made me foolish and impulsive, two things neither of us could afford to be as pack leaders.

I sank onto the end of the bed and ran a hand through my hair. "What are we going to do about this? About her?"

He pushed his arms through the sleeves of his shirt and started to button it up. "I think there's only one thing we can do."

I cocked my head at him curiously.

"We have to remove her as a temptation," he said with a shrug.

My heart squeezed in panic, and my mouth went dry. "What?"

"That girl is a threat to everything we've been fighting for our whole lives," he said. "We've already seen how easily she turns us against each other, and we're best friends."

I shook my head, my chest filling with desperation. "But she didn't do that. We did that to ourselves."

"No, the mate bond did it to us," he countered. "And as long as that bond exists, we

can't think or operate rationally. So, the only logical conclusion is to sever it."

I stared at him in astonishment, but he refused to meet my gaze.

"You can't even say the word, can you?" I accused.

He didn't answer me.

"How do you expect to remove her if you can't even say the word out loud?" I pushed, hoping to dissuade him from this horrible, ruinous thought.

Finally, he did look at me, his expression stony. "That's why you're going to do it."

All blood drained from my face. "What?" I breathed.

"As your Alpha, I'm ordering you to kill that girl," he said, authority ringing in his voice and reverberating through my bones.

I shook my head, shrinking away from him. "No. No, I can't do that."

He loomed over me menacingly, his eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. "Are you refusing an order from your Alpha?"

The pull of his power tightened like a leash around my neck, compelling me to submit. Fighting the command caused me physical pain, but the idea of killing the one person I was fated to protect hurt far worse.

He sat on the bed beside me and put his hand on mine, surprising me with his gentleness. "I know it hurts. I feel it too. But it will only hurt until it's over. When she's dead, this affliction will leave both of us."

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A wolfish whimper peeled up my throat. “But she’s innocent. She hasn’t done anything wrong.”

He gave my hand a comforting squeeze. “I know that. But her existence is a threat to our pack. As long as she lives, the bond will continue to turn us against them and each other. One human life isn’t worth the loss of so many others. We have to think of the greater good.”

I nodded sadly in agreement.

He was right. The future prosperity of our pack was more important than the life of one outsider. More important than the pain I knew her loss would cause me. She was my mate, and Fate only offered the bond once. I wouldn’t get another. But every wolf had sacrifices to make for the pack. This was mine.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do it tomorrow. I need a little time to prepare myself.”

I looked into his eyes pleadingly, and he smiled sadly and nodded.

“Tomorrow then.”

Relief washed over me, and he patted my back as he stood.

“The moon is up,” he said. “I’ll go outside and make my moon song. The pack will rejoice at the good news.”

He went to the door and left the room, leaving me alone with my despair. I didn’t

want to be alone. The silence only made the cries in my head louder, and I couldn't stand it.

I shot off the bed and jogged after him, catching up to him at the stairs. Neither of us said anything as we made our way through the castle, and although I hated the quiet, I didn't want to talk. His presence was the only comfort I could draw on, and it would have to be enough.

We went out through the kitchen door to the garden, and the bright moon above cast its glorious silver light on us, soothing my soul ever so slightly. I let myself savor it as I followed Jax past the garden to the base of the tree line, where he stopped and closed his eyes as he turned his face up toward the moon.

He took in a deep breath, his chest expanding with it, then let out a mighty, melodious howl. The moonlight absorbed the hauntingly beautiful sound, pulling it up into the sky and sending it out into the night.

The message rang in my mind, as I knew it would soon ring in the minds of my pack.

Varinya is abandoned. The castle is empty, just waiting for our occupation and dominion. Come and thrive.

As the message faded, a sort of peace settled over me. Our pack was coming. We'd finally have everything we'd prayed for over so many generations. This was all a good and wonderful thing for everyone.

I just had to cut my heart out first.

Chapter 9

Aliya

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AFTER FINDING OUT WHAT Jax and Tannin were, I grabbed the magic book from its hiding place in the kitchen and fled to my bedroom.

There, I went through the entire spell book but didn't find anything that I thought might help me. So in the middle of the night, I went into the library, thinking that if there had been one book of spells, there had to be a lot more. Magic had been a big part of our history, and it was foolish to think it would all be condensed into one small book.

I slowly scanned each level of shelves, letting my intuition guide me, pulling out every book that gave me even the slightest tug. By the time I'd checked the entire collection of books, I'd amassed a pile of fifteen.

I'd spent yesterday going through every last one. That first book I'd found really was just the tip of the iceberg. I found so many spells that they started to blur together in my mind.

But which one would be the right one for my situation?

The combative spells would be an obvious solution, but I didn't want to hurt them. Just the thought of harm coming to either Tannin or Jax made my insides knot painfully, and my heart felt as though it were hollowing out.

No, I couldn't hurt them. That was out of the question. It was hard enough contemplating getting them to leave and imagining never seeing them again.

There was a forget spell and a compulsion spell, but both of those required foreign

items I didn't have access to. Those would have been the easiest if they were possible. I could erase myself from their minds and order them to leave. Then at least they wouldn't have to suffer the loss that I would endure alone.

Willow found me through the night and curled up in my lap, giving my heart solace for the difficult times ahead.

Finally, just before the sun came up, I found the right spell. A protection ward. It involved wrapping a braid of sage with a gold chain and burning the end, then going around the perimeter of the place needing protection and reciting an incantation while waving the smoke along the walls.

The ward would cause an invisible barrier that could only be crossed by those invited by the master of the house—or in this case, castle.

So, my plan was to cast the ward most of the way around the castle, then lure Tannin and Jax into the forest and run back to finish the ward.

But it would take time. The castle was huge, and by myself, it would take me hours to circumnavigate the whole thing while waving smoke and chanting. And I had to do that without being seen by either of them or raising suspicion.

That would be tricky, especially now knowing their mate bonds drew them to me.

The other difficult part would be gaining their trust enough that they would follow me into the forest. They craved me, but that didn't necessarily mean they trusted me.

I'd have to seduce them—which I honestly was excited about—but I'd have to do it without getting seduced in return. And as badly as I wanted them, I wasn't entirely sure I could manage not to fall for them.

“But I have to,” I told myself.

Willow meowed in agreement from her coil in my lap.

“Thanks, Willow,” I said, scratching her head. “I need all the encouragement I can get.”

I looked at the window, where the golden morning light was spilling in. “Well, I’d better get started.”

I lifted her off my lap and climbed to my feet, my joints stiff and achy from sitting cross-legged on the hard floor for so long. I stretched until my body felt loose once more, then went up the stairs toward my room. I needed to look my best for my plan to work.

When I got to the top floor, I hesitantly peered around the corner down the hallway. Their doors were closed, and the hall was quiet. Hopefully, they hadn’t woken up yet, and I could get a head start.

I tiptoed past their rooms and into mine, then had a quick but hot shower. Then I scoured my wardrobe for the sexiest dress I could find. I decided on a sleeveless, slinky red and purple dress with a heart neckline that made my boobs look incredible and a hi-low ruffled skirt that showed off my upper thighs.

Then I brushed out my now clean hair and styled it in a simple up-down do that much of my neck was exposed. Mama always told me that my long neck was one of my most flattering qualities.

I could only imagine what she’d think of what I was doing now.

I pushed my sorrow deep down and grabbed a gold necklace chain from my jewelry

box, then went down to the garden to gather the sage I needed. Making a braid out of the stiff strands was harder than I thought, but I eventually managed to force the sage into place and tied it with the gold chain.

When I was done, the sun had risen a quarter way into the sky. It was mid-morning now. I wondered how long I had before Tannin or Jax woke up and came looking for me.

There was no more time to waste.

I started just beside the main entrance doors of the castle.

“Flamare,” I said, focusing on the far end of the sage braid.

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The fire spell worked like the flip of a switch, the end of the braid igniting with a burst of flames. A big one. I really needed to work more on my intention. I was lucky the whole stick didn't incinerate and burn me in the process.

I blew it out, needing only the smoke from the sage.

“Parum nir alte tunak.” I invoked the spell, concentrating on my desire to protect my castle, and waved the smoking sage up and down in front of me.

Then I moved two steps to the right and repeated the words. On and on I went, slowly making my way around the castle, two steps at a time.

I hadn't anticipated how exhausting it would be. This was powerful magic and wielding it like this for hours on end drained me. By the time I'd made it a dozen yards or so, dizziness gripped me, and I stumbled forward, bracing myself against the wall until it passed.

“I think that's enough for now,” I told myself, resting my forehead against the cool stone. Then I pushed the end of the braid into the wall, dragging it slightly to stop the smoking.

I needed water, food, and to sit for a while. But I needed some way to mark my place, so I'd know where to continue when I was ready to start again. Angling my foot, I dug the heel of my boot into the ground, carving out a line that I'd be able to recognize.

“Aliya, there you are.”

I gasped at the unexpected voice and shoved the sage braid into the pocket of my skirt before turning to face Tannin as he approached.

Out here, in the light of day, he looked so handsome. The sun's rays caught in his brown hair, making it look lighter and softer, and brought a rosy tint to his boyish cheeks.

“What are you doing all the way over here?” he asked, his charming smile on full display as his eyes dragged down my body.

“Oh, I just wanted some air,” I said as casually as I could. “I like to walk around the castle sometimes, especially this time of year.”

His gaze caught on my chest, where my breasts were pushed up and heaved over the thin fabric that barely covered them. From the look on his face, I'd made the right choice.

“That's—er—you look...beautiful,” he stammered, his stupefaction making him even more adorable.

I clasped my hands behind my back to push my chest further forward and fluttered my lashes coquettishly. “Thank you.”

His throat bobbed, and he finally managed to rip his gaze from my chest to look me in the eye. “Uh, would you like some company while you stroll?”

I gave him a coy smile. “I would like that very much.”

I took a step toward him, and my head began to spin again. My body crumpled forward in a moment of dizziness, and Tannin caught me.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked, concern lacing his voice as he held me firmly against him.

His hands on my arms sent fire dancing over my skin, and his chest beneath my palms was so hard, so strong. I wanted to bury myself in his embrace and never emerge again.

I looked up at him, our faces only inches apart. “Yeah, I think I might have had too much sun. I feel a little...”

My eyelids fluttered, and my head drooped against his chest as my knees buckled.

“Okay, let’s get you inside,” he said, squeezing my arms to keep me up.

He slid one arm around my back, scooping it around my waist, and braced my upper arm with his other hand, then slowly ushered me toward the kitchen entrance.

“Can you walk?” he asked softly.

“I think so,” I murmured. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me.”

Other than the fact that I wielded a lot of draining magic as part of a convoluted scheme to exorcise you from the castle...

“That’s okay. We’ll get you some water.”

He escorted me through the garden and into the kitchen, then guided me to a stool at the island and helped me climb onto it.

“There. You just sit.” He rushed to the faucet and filled a glass with water, then brought it back to me.

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I reached for the glass, and our fingers brushed each other in the exchange, sending a shiver through my torso.

“Thank you,” I said, teasingly curling my fingertips over his hand before lifting the glass to my lips.

As soon as the cool water touched my tongue, my thirst became overwhelming, and I guzzled down the whole thing, accidentally spilling some down the sides of my mouth. The tiny streams dripped down my chin and splashed onto the tops of my breasts.

“Oh, dammit,” I muttered.

“Here, I got it!” Tannin rushed forward with a washcloth in hand and began patting the droplets.

And he didn’t stop even when it was clear that the rag had soaked them up. He just kept staring, transfixed by my flesh, and as for me... I could hardly breathe through my gnawing anticipation.

I leaned forward, daring him to touch me, to give in to his obvious desire. Please, touch me...

He pulled away and stepped back. “Are you hungry?”

I nodded my head, trying not to show my disappointment.

“Okay, I’ll fix something for us,” he said, then went about searching through the cabinets.

This was going to be harder than I thought.

Chapter 10

Tannin

WHY DID SHE HAVE TO wear that fucking dress? Her perfect tits were practically falling out of it, and her skirt was so short I could... I could reach right under it and pet her warm, wet—

Fuck, I wasn’t sure how much longer I could control myself!

Focus, Tannin. Remember your task.

I promised my Alpha that I would kill her today. Why hadn’t I done it outside? She’d nearly fainted, and she was clearly in a weakened state. It would’ve been so easy to slit her throat with the knife I had tucked into my pants behind my back. Or push the blade into her gut.

Those mental images flooded ice through my veins, and bile rose in my throat. I couldn’t do that. How could I? Even if I wasn’t fighting a painful hard-on at the sight of her, that would still be nearly impossible.

I cut a ripe tomato into slices for sandwiches, keeping my back to Aliya and focusing on what I needed to do. I just had to stop looking at her. Stop getting distracted by how torturously sexy she looked and rip the band-aid off.

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I wouldn't feel this way anymore after it was done. I'd be free of these impulsive feelings.

Just kill her. Just do it!

“Do you want some help?” she asked, making me freeze completely.

I could hear the ruffles of her skirt rustle as she slid off the stool and the air moved with her steps as she came up behind me. I held my breath against the sweet assault of her scent.

Her arm brushed against mine as she joined me at the counter. She reached in front of me and took another knife from the block, then grabbed a head of lettuce from the basket and began chopping it.

Slowly, I returned to slicing the tomato, lifting the knife handle and pushing it down in precise, careful movements.

It would be so easy. I could make it quick. Stabbing her would be a merciful death. Then she could move on to the afterlife and be with her parents again. I'd be doing her a favor, really. It was better than what the pack would insist on when they got here.

But every time I tried to force myself to take action, my body refused to move. My hand only tightened around the handle, my chops coming down harder and harder, and—

“Fuck!” I hissed in pain, realizing too late that I’d brought the blade down right over the tip of my thumb. Blood mixed in with the juice from the tomato on the cutting board.

“Tannin! Are you okay?” Aliya cried.

She frantically reached for a clean washcloth, then took my hand in her free one and wrapped the rag around my thumb.

Stupid. I was so stupid. I was making a fucking mess of this whole thing.

“Hold on, let me get you a bandage,” she said. “Keep pressure on it.”

I nodded, squeezing the rag in my hand, and she ran behind me to rifle through a cabinet. After a moment, she came back and took my hand in both of hers.

“Okay, let me see it.”

She pulled away the washcloth and carefully inspected my thumb. I’d cut a layer of skin clean off. But I couldn’t feel the sting anymore. The touch of her soft hands on mine and the gentle caress of her fingertips as she cleaned the cut were the only thing I could feel.

She pushed out her bottom lip fretfully as she worked, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her mouth. My lips burned to press against hers. What would she taste like? Would she gasp if I pulled her into my arms and claimed her mouth right now? Would she open those pink lips to welcome my eager tongue?

“There, that’s better,” she said, and I dazedly realized that she’d wrapped a bandage around my thumb.

She held my hand in hers, and I didn't pull it away, unable to willingly remove myself from her touch. In this moment I was her puppet, and I had no desire to cut the strings.

Keeping my eyes captured in her gaze, she brought my hand up to her face and planted the softest, sweetest kiss over the bandage on my thumb.

Mesmerized. She had me completely and utterly under her spell.

I slowly loosened my hand from hers, keeping my thumb against her lips as I cupped my palm lightly around her jaw. Though I couldn't feel the softness of her skin through the bandage, I traced my thumb along the petal of her bottom lip.

So beautiful. So sweet.

She parted her lips, an invitation to give me better access for whatever I wanted—and there were so many, many things I wanted to do to her. But I stayed very still, desperately grasping the last bit of restraint I still had.

She puckered her lips and kissed my thumb again and again, nuzzling her cheek into my palm. The crippling need throbbing in my cock was almost irresistible.

Shewas irresistible.

I slid my hand around the back of her head and pulled her to me, crushing my lips against hers. Fire. My whole body was on fire!

With a soft whimper, she opened her mouth, and I greedily deepened the kiss, exploring her mouth with my tongue. She tasted even better than I imagined. Like warm honey. Like bliss.

Her hands roamed down my chest, over the brim of my pants, then cupped gently over the bulge of my stiff cock.

I groaned at the need her touch elicited and pushed away from her, forcing myself to take a few steps back.

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Her face cracked with worry, her kiss-swollen lips pouting again. “I’m so sorry! Did I hurt you?”

“No, I—”

I couldn’t do this. I wouldn’t do this. She was my mate, and harming a single hair on her beautiful head went against everything I was and everything I wanted to be.

“I have to go,” I blurted out, then spun on my heel and rushed out of the kitchen, making a beeline for the stairs.

Not stopping, I didn’t slow down until reaching Jax’s room on the top floor. I pushed open the door without announcement or apology.

Jax was sitting in the armchair by the window, book in hand. He shifted in surprise at my outburst. “What the hell?”

“I’m not doing it,” I declared.

He closed his book, set it on the windowsill and stood, glaring at me. “What do you mean, you’re not doing it?”

He stalked closer, looking every bit the Alpha he was, but I refused to back down. I would not be intimidated, not about this.

“I won’t kill her,” I said.

“Won’t or can’t?” he asked, accusation in his tone.

“Both,” I professed with confidence. “She’s my mate, and the sweetest girl alive. I won’t harm her in any way, no matter what you do to me.”

He stopped a foot in front of me, grilling me with his furious gaze.

“You want her dead? Do it yourself.” I went on. “I won’t stop you. Take her from me if you must. But know that if you do, I will never forgive you.”

His glare intensified, his upper lip twitching. I didn’t care. Let him kill me for my insubordination. I was done with this. And if I had to be done with him too, then so be it.

But he didn’t do anything but continue to sneer at me. So, I turned my back on him and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

I went into my own room next door and bolted the lock. Whatever he was going to do, I wanted no part of it. I didn’t want him to kill her. I strongly believed he wouldn’t be able to, just like me.

But this was his choice to make. He had to learn this lesson on his own. And if he failed, if he committed the ultimate crime, I was done with him.

Chapter 11

Aliya

ATIDAL WAVE OF CONFLICTING, confusing emotions crashed over me after Tannin ran off.

Our kiss was amazing! Not that I had much to compare it to. I'd never been kissed before, other than chaste pecks on the cheek or forehead from my parents. They'd died before arranging my marriage to a neighboring prince, and I'd been protected from the men in the kingdom even before then.

But I couldn't imagine anything better!

His lips were so soft, his mouth hot and demanding. And when he pushed his tongue between my lips—I didn't even know one could kiss like that! Incredible! My lips still tingled from the delightfully rough treatment, and I unconsciously lifted my hand and ran my fingertip lightly over my bottom lip.

But he'd run off so quickly afterward. Perhaps he didn't feel the same way? Maybe I was a bad kisser. What if my breath offended him?

I cupped my hand in front of my mouth and exhaled into it, then sniffed. Nope. That wasn't it. At least, I didn't detect a foul odor. If anything, my breath smelled kind of sweet.

Maybe I went too far by reaching for the bulge between his legs? That was when he stopped everything. He'd seemed shocked or possibly scared, maybe. I didn't know.

I hadn't meant to do it. In the heat of our kissing, my body had acted on instinct. My hand had a mind of its own, seeming to know what to do when I consciously didn't. And, oh, the thrill that spiked inside me when I pressed my palm against the proof of his desire!

But he'd shoved me away. Clearly, he didn't feel the same excitement and longing I felt for him. He stumbled away from me like I might hurt him, then ran off without a word of explanation.

And now I felt rejected, naïve, and filled with self-doubt and confusion. I used to think of myself as beautiful. The castle staff and villagers in the streets would comment on my beauty often.

"Your hair glistens like warm honey."

"Your eyes shine like sun-kissed amber."

"Your skin is as smooth as alabaster and as creamy as milk."

Perhaps they only said those things because I was their princess, and they felt they had to flatter me. Maybe in reality I was average, plain, undesirable.

With a heavy heart, I finished making the sandwiches Tannin had started. Though my appetite had thoroughly vanished, I still felt weak and lightheaded, and I knew I had to eat something to regain my strength and energy.

I carried my lunch to the island counter and forced myself to eat it while my thoughts churned over and over. I didn't really know how to be intentionally alluring. Attention had never been something I was deprived of, not before the plague.

It didn't make sense that it was only about beauty. There were women in the village

who weren't particularly pretty that had still commanded the attention of men and had arranged fine marriages for themselves with men above their stations.

Those women were intelligent, confident, bold. They knew what they wanted, and they took it. It seemed that men respected that quality in women. Confidence.

I was going about this all wrong. I'd been playing the sweet, naïve princess—which, okay, I was—but that hadn't gotten me anywhere. It was time I stepped into the role I was born for—the bold, unwavering queen. It was time I took the things I wanted.

And, really, how hard could it be? They said they were both mate-bonded to me. I didn't know much about that, but I knew what I felt. This powerful, insatiable urge to be with both men. To touch them, to kiss them, to melt into them. They had to feel the same, or they wouldn't have fought over me.

Hmmm... maybe that was why Tannin had pushed away from me—he'd lost the fight. He wanted me, but he felt like he had to step aside because of some weird black wolf politics.

And if he lost, that could only mean Jax won.

And Jax was the Alpha. Tannin would side with whatever Jax said. I didn't have to seduce both, just Jax.

I swooned at that notion, squeezing my thighs together.

With that in mind, I quickly ate the rest of my sandwich and guzzled down another glass of water. With my belly full, I felt much better, and I was ready to wield my feminine power.

I swept upstairs to prepare myself. I had to make myself irresistible, make it

impossible for him to refuse what I was offering. And this dress, as flattering as it was to my body, wasn't going to cut it.

Quickly rinsing off in the bath again, I then rubbed sweet smelling oils over my skin and teased it through my hair. Then I went through the dowry chest my mother had presented me with on my eighteenth birthday when she and Papa were beginning the process of finding me a suitable husband.

Hard to believe that was three years ago, just before the plague set in. I still remembered so vividly the day she had shown me everything that was inside. That was the occasion I first felt like a woman, and it had been such a special moment between us.

But right now, I wasn't interested in the gold bars and extravagant jewelry, nor the immaculate wedding dress and sparkly satin high-heeled slippers.

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I only cared about the sexy lace negligee. It had been made for my future wedding night, but seeing as I was likely never getting married, and this was the sexiest item of clothing I had, it was perfect for what I had in mind.

Carefully, I hooked my fingers through the thin straps and pulled it from the chest, admiring it as I held it aloft.

It was pale, baby pink, and so thin I could see right through it. Scalloping lined the plunging neckline, midsection and the hem of the flowy skirt. It was so beautiful, the color complimenting my peachy skin.

But could I really wear this? Every inch of my body would be on full display, leaving little to the imagination. Blush heated my skin all over, and I once again felt foolish. What was I doing?

Nevertheless, I lifted it over my head and pulled it down, gingerly slipping my arms through the straps.

If it looks ridiculous, I'll just take it off. It probably will. The other dress will be fine. No big deal.

I looked down at myself, smoothing the soft material over my torso. It felt like I wasn't wearing anything at all, and that only made my skin burn hotter.

Holding my breath, I turned around and faced my full-length mirror.

And I just stared at myself for a long moment.

I didn't look silly or ridiculous. Not even close. I looked stunning. I looked like my mother. Strong. Beautiful. Commanding.

The timid, frightened girl I'd become since her death was nowhere in sight, and I could hardly recognize the woman looking back at me in my reflection.

There was no way Jax wouldn't become putty in my hands when he saw me. And once I had him wrapped around my delicate little finger, I'd lure him and his beta out into the forest and banish them from my castle—and my heart—forever.

The woman in the mirror frowned sadly as my heart squeezed.

"It has to be done," I told myself. "They are the ancient enemies of my kingdom, and I owe it to everyone who died to remove their presence. I can't let my selfish desires tarnish the history of Varinya."

I forced my features smooth, straightened my shoulders and held my head high. Then I turned around and headed for the door.

The hall was empty, and both their doors were closed. I couldn't even be sure Jax was in his room. What if he was out wandering the castle and this was all for nothing? I really should've planned this better.

But something told me he was beyond that door. Not just my intuition, but something deeper. Was it our mate bond? Did I even have one of them, since I wasn't a wolf?

If I closed my eyes, I could feel a tug pulling me in that direction, like an invisible rope connecting us. I could sense Tannin too, in the other room. It was a magical realization. And one that gave me pause.

Maybe I shouldn't do this.

“No, I have to,” I whispered.

But not only that. I wanted to. This might be my only chance to know true intimacy. And even if it was for deceitful purposes, I desperately wanted to experience that intimacy with Jax. I needed to know him that way, just once, before I let him go forever.

So I padded across the hall and stopped in front of his door. I took a vitalizing breath, lifted my hand, and tapped my knuckles softly against the door.

Now was the moment of truth. And I was both heart-poundingly excited and utterly terrified.

Chapter 12

Jax

IDIDN'T KNOW WHO WAS more deserving of my rage—Tannin for expressly disobeying my direct order, or the princess for tempting us both and placing this massive wedge between us.

Fucking cowardly Tannin. I should have known he wouldn't be strong enough to do the job with his endless compassion and gentle heart. It made him weak. He was supposed to be my brother, my second-in-command, and yet he'd turned his back on me for that conniving royal brat.

I should never have delegated the task to him in the first place. I was the Alpha. Eliminating threats was my job. I should have taken the responsibility of killing her myself.

Yet, as I sat in my armchair, stewing and chewing on my dark thoughts, I couldn't convince my body to move.

Why hadn't I just killed her before? Or let the cusith destroy her. Last night after I made my moon song would have been the perfect opportunity, while she was asleep and unable to use her feminine wiles to disarm me.

Why wasn't I getting off my ass and doing it right now? At least an hour had passed since Tannin had stormed in here and berated me, and all I had done was brood impotently.

I didn't want to kill her. The thought of it seized my muscles and joints, making it difficult to breathe. But it was just the mate bond doing that to me. I knew nothing about the girl to whom Fate had cruelly decided to shackle me. The only thing I knew for sure was that she was the Varinyan heir, and I should hate her for that.

But I didn't. Not in any measurable way I could use to fuel my muscles into action.

Was I weak like Tannin? Was I too beguiled by the mate bond to do what I knew must be done?

Furious tension ripped through my seemingly frozen muscles. No. I was not weak. I was the fucking Alpha, and I was going to take care of this once and for all.

Right now.

With great effort, I shoved myself off the chair and strode for the door. I would not stop until I found the princess, then I'd grip her by the neck with both hands and choke the life out of her before she even knew what was happening. Then she wouldn't be my problem anymore.

Just as my hand reached the doorknob, a soft tapping came from the other side, and I hesitated.

Perhaps it was Tannin coming to apologize for his incompetence and beg for my forgiveness?

A smug sense of satisfaction swept over me, loosening my shoulders. But then it disappeared just as suddenly. Maybe instead he'd come to plead with me to spare the girl's life like the sniveling pup he was.

Either way, I would be the magnanimous leader he needed and set him straight. The

princess had to die. End of discussion. And he would come to heel.

I turned the knob and pulled the door open, ready for whatever Tannin had to say.

But it wasn't Tannin.

The princess was standing in the hall, draped in a lace negligee so sheer that I could see every torturously sensuous inch of her through it. My blood flash-boiled with desire as my mouth hung open, my dick instantly hard beneath my slacks.

"Can I come in?" she purred, flaring a perfectly arched eyebrow as those amber eyes locked me in their snare.

Too stunned to speak, I mutely took a step to the side to welcome her inside. She sashayed past me, and I was helpless not to visually devour her perky ass that swayed from side to side as she made her way to the center of the room.

My mouth ran dry. I closed the door, facing the wooden panels for a few seconds as I struggled to regain my wits and resolve. Then, with bated breath and thundering pulse, I turned the dead bolt.

Whatever happened next, I didn't want any interruptions from Tannin.

This was perfect. I didn't have to hunt her down. She'd practically delivered herself to me on a silver platter. And now trapped in my room with only me, there was nothing and no one to stop me from killing her.

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But she was so goddamned sexy, and every molecule in my body burned to destroy her in an entirely different way—to pin her sweet little body against the wall, plunge my cock between those creamy thighs, and fuck her while she screamed my name in ecstasy again and again!

No. I was stronger than that. She would not dissuade me from my duty.

She dies now.

Solidifying my purpose, I turned on her with a predatory gaze, then stalked toward her.

“What do you think you’re doing, little princess?” I growled low in my throat as I came to loom over her.

She looked up at me with those innocent yet yearning eyes and ran her tongue over her lips, this time in a very intentional, seductive way that had primal need stabbing into me.

“I’m making things easy for both of us,” she purred, stepping even closer and putting her hands softly on my chest. “I know you want me just as badly as I want you.”

I swallowed dryly, keeping my face fixed in a disdainful expression. “And what makes you think such a silly thing?”

“Because you look at me like you want to devour me,” she said, running her hand down my body and past the waistband of my pants. Then she pressed against the

ridge of my stiff cock, making me grunt. “And because of this.”

She rubbed her hand up and down the length of me, and a lustful haze filled my head, dissolving the motivation I fought to hold onto.

Grab her neck. Snap it and be done with it!

She lifted onto her toes, her face so painfully close to mine that I couldn’t help but inhale her sweet scent with each tight breath.

“Take me, Jax,” she cooed, brushing her lips teasingly against mine.

I fucking lost it.

With hungry, clawed fingers, I clutched her hips and crushed her against me, conquering her mouth with mine. Her lips parted, inviting my eager tongue in to rake against hers. She tasted just as sweet as she smelled, and her mouth was so delightfully hot and pliant, giving into my dominion over her.

I wondered if her other lips would taste as sweet, and I gripped her ass to press her pelvis over my starving cock. Even through the two thin layers of fabric, I could feel the moist heat of her pussy teasing my shaft, and it was all I could do to stop myself from yanking my dick out and thrusting it into her.

No. I can’t succumb to her temptation. Kill her. Now!

With a snarl, I backed her up to the wall and gripped her neck, pinning her there like the helpless prey she was.

“Yes,” she whimpered, nipping at my bottom lip. “Please.”

She thought I was playing with her?

Did she really not understand the mortal danger she was in? How easily I could snap her pretty little neck?

But instead of tightening my hand around her throat, I shoved my tongue into her mouth until I couldn't think straight. She was the most intoxicating creature, and the taste of her, the smell of her... it was all too incredible to resist.

My other hand lifted the lacy negligee and roamed between her legs, which she spread wide to welcome my touch. And oh, the sweet, warm wetness that greeted my fingertips as I slid them over the slick, delicate folds!

I found her clit with my fingertips, swollen and juicy. I ran my fingers over the tiny bud again and again, luxuriating in the sounds of her pleasure. Her soft gasps and whimpers were a serenade to my greedy soul, encouraging me to push her even further.

I strummed her pussy like it was an exquisite instrument that I was born to play. Finally, when I couldn't take it any longer, I plunged my index finger inside her entrance, eliciting a sharp gasp from her lips. Greedily, I swallowed the sound.

Fuck, she was so wet, so tight. And she was mine. Mine!

I dragged my finger in and out, pumping my palm against her clit as I made her squeal louder and faster. She was getting close to ecstasy, her pussy tightening around my finger, which seemed to know exactly where and how to touch her. And fuck, I wanted—no, needed—to bring her to ruin under my mercy.

Just a little bit more, my sweet little princess...

“Come for me,” I demanded into her mouth.

And like a good little girl, she obeyed immediately. She moaned into my feverish kisses as her pussy squeezed and contracted around my finger, her juices dripping over my knuckles. I continued to pulse the heel of my hand against her clit, coaxing out every last ounce of pleasure from her body until her quaking finally stopped.

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Then I withdrew my finger and brought it up to my mouth, sucking it between my lips. Gods, her juices were even sweeter than her mouth!

Before I could question my intentions, I dropped to my knees, forced her legs apart, and lapped my tongue against her pussy. Her fingers tangled into my hair as I ate her, her thighs trembling around my shoulders like they were the only thing holding her up.

Finally, I rose back to my feet, standing over her, paralyzed with indecision.

I was far from done with her. I wanted to ruin her in every possible way. And the pleading way she looked up at me, she was begging me for all of it. I suddenly realized she wasn't at my mercy. I was at hers.

Damn it.

I brought my face close to hers once more, and she leaned forward, eager for more kisses.

"Get out," I snarled dangerously.

She flinched, blinking at me in confusion. "W-what?" she squeaked.

"Are you deaf?" I barked. "I said, get out!"

She shrunk inwardly like I'd hit her, then slid out from between me and the wall and rushed out the door, covering the front of her body like she was ashamed of herself.

The door slammed closed, followed by another muffled slam across the hall, and all I could do was stand there, facing the wall, wrestling to collect myself.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill her. I'd had her right in my grasp, and I'd failed.

But more importantly, I didn't want to kill her. Tannin was right. Harming a mate went against every instinct we had. In fact, the very opposite was true. I wanted to protect her, cherish her, worship her.

I'd gone about this the wrong way.

Our pack would be here in a few days, and they'd be out for blood. How was I supposed to do right by my pack and protect the woman I was completely, irrevocably in love with at the same time?

Chapter 13

Aliya

ICOULDN'T STOP MY body from trembling even after I locked myself in my room and curled up into a ball in my bed.

I'd never been so confused in my whole life. The things Jax had done to me... I hadn't even known it was possible to feel such overwhelming pleasure. I could still feel his lips... his tongue pressing against mine, his fingers sliding inside me and driving me wild with lust.

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And then his mouth between my legs... Holy shit! It was the closest thing to heaven I'd ever experienced.

It must not have been the same for him, because he'd gone from touching and kissing me to shouting at me to leave. He'd seemed so angry. Had I done something wrong?

No. I couldn't have. I hadn't even had the chance to do anything. I'd just stood there and taken what he'd given me. He had been the leader in everything we'd shared, and dammit, it felt so good!

So why then did he completely reject me afterwards like that? Like I was somehow to blame for his actions and feelings.

This bond between us was potent and bewildering, but maybe not as strong as I thought it was. Not if both men could reject me so easily. I was a fucking princess, dammit!

Maybe I was giving the supposed 'matebond too much value. And if they could resist the pull of it, then so could I. If they could completely dismiss it and ignore the throb of attraction, I should too.

And if they weren't going to give in and let me seduce them, so be it. I didn't need to gain their trust to get them to leave. I could just claim some threat outside the castle, play the helpless damsel, and ask them to get rid of it. If I said there was a cusith out there, I was confident Jax would demand he and Tannin take care of it.

Willow hopped up onto the bed and tucked herself against me on the comforter. Even

though my body continued to shake, her purring soon began to send soothing vibrations through me. Running my hand over her back, I savored the comfort of her presence.

Hot tears filled my eyes, and I dashed them away, feeling stupid. For a moment, while Jax was working his magic between my legs, I'd lost myself to how right it felt to be with him. I'd actually entertained surrendering to this bond and just being with him. With both of them.

I'd foolishly believed that maybe it could work, that we would be happy living together and nurturing this mate bond.

But they weren't human, and I had to stop forgetting that. They were every bit the bloodthirsty, primitive, brutish dogs they turned into. They couldn't be trusted to be civilized and decent. They couldn't be trusted with my heart or my body.

And they certainly couldn't be trusted to remain in the castle. I was convinced that they had to get out now. I didn't need them. Being alone was far better than being toyed with and jerked around by their hot-and-cold bullshit.

"Besides, I'm not alone," I whispered, continuing to pet Willow. "I have you. That'll have to be enough for me."

She meowed softly in agreement.

I'd spent long enough licking my wounded pride. I was the princess of Varinya, and it was time I started acting like it.

With renewed purpose and determination, I whipped off the covers and got out of bed. I pulled off the ridiculous negligee and threw it angrily in front of the idle fireplace, too disgusted with it to ever want to lay eyes on it again. Tonight, when I'd

finished what I needed to do, I'd burn it.

But for now, there was work to be done.

I got into a pair of warm leggings, a plain shirt and a pair of work boots, perfect for moving about freely outside. Then I pulled my hair into a ponytail and left my room, creeping down the hall until I reached the stairs and descending them quickly.

The sun was hanging a quarter above the western horizon when I went out the kitchen door. I still had plenty of time to work before nightfall, and I was dead set on completing the ward before the day was over.

Making my way around the castle, I found the spot I'd kicked into the ground, then lit the sage braid and continued where I left off this morning.

Though I knew my time was limited, I went slowly, taking breaks to snack on nuts and drink water to keep my strength. I didn't have the luxury of draining myself like I'd done this morning. I had to be smarter than that. I couldn't afford to faint out here and the wolves to find me with my tell-tale sage braid. They couldn't know what I was up to, not until it was too late for them to do anything about it.

My arms ached and my brow was slick with sweat, but I trudged on regardless of the exhaustion.

Little by little, I made my way around the castle, finally finishing the ward up to the other side of the front doors just as the sun grazed the mountaintops in the west. All that was left to seal the ward was the few feet that spanned the castle entrance, and I'd be able to do that with one wave of the sage smoke and one recitation of the spell.

Hopefully, that would be simple enough to do before they caught up to me. It had to be.

It occurred to me then, as I stood in front of the large carved doors, that I might need to use some kind of force to keep them at bay and give myself enough time to get back inside to safety.

They were black wolves, after all, far stronger and faster than me in their shifted form. Compared to them, I was little more than an easily crushed rodent. It would be foolish of me to go into this endeavor without any kind of defense at my disposal.

Luckily, I had several books from which to learn combative spells.

I stashed the sage braid under a large rock next to the entrance of the castle, then brushed myself off and went back to the kitchen door. I was relieved to see that neither Tannin nor Jax had emerged from their rooms, so spending some time in the library studying the books would go unnoticed.

Fuck them.

One of the books I'd set aside to read was filled with the spells I needed. Originally, I'd dismissed it as unnecessary. Even now, as filled with resentment and heartache as I was, I didn't like the idea of hurting them. But I was prepared to do whatever was necessary, now that my other plan had failed.

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The elemental spells were the most interesting. I already knew I could conjure fire, as I'd done while lighting the sage. There were spells for conjuring and forming fireballs to project at an enemy, but they came with a ton of warnings. If the Wielder wasn't careful, they could burn themselves badly, and I wasn't foolhardy enough to test that.

The spells for unearthing roots or summoning vines to hurt or bind an enemy looked fascinating, and they'd be perfect for trapping the wolves in the forest, but they were far too advanced for me to attempt at this early stage. Lots of hand movements and incantations, and they took a taxing amount of energy and focus, more so than even the protection ward.

No, that wouldn't work. Whatever I chose needed to be quick and relatively simple.

That left air spells. Wielding air looked easy enough. One had to imagine the wind as an extension of one's own limbs and focus on their breathing to make it work properly. The spell would take a lot of energy, but if I timed it right, I was confident it would do the trick.

But I had to test it first. I couldn't go into this fight blindly, and gods forbid whatever I tried backfired on me in the moment I needed it most.

I looked towards the window. There was a bit of daylight still clinging to the sky though the sun had set behind the mountains.

Tucking the book under my arm, I rushed outside into the garden.

The scarecrow that hung on a stake in the fence was in poor shape. Most of the straw

had spilled out of the armpits, and its makeshift head was slumped forward, hiding the face that was meant to frighten off the birds. But he'd make a fine target for practice regardless.

I set the book down on the garden bed and opened it to the page for this spell. The incantation was only one word, and memorizing it wasn't the problem. No, the difficulty came in aligning my breathing with my movements and connecting my will with the wind itself.

I closed my eyes and focused on the air around me, paying attention to how it moved and what it felt like. I lifted my arm, willing the air to move with me, and my heart leapt with excitement as a gust of wind brushed upward at the underside of my arm.

Holy shit, that was incredible!

Don't get too excited. Don't lose focus.

Centering myself, I concentrated on that connection once more. Then I took a breath and wafted my arm across my body as I exhaled. The wind stirred around me, blowing across me to the left and sweeping loose strands of hair in front of my face.

Okay, so I could summon the wind and make it move. But could I use it defensively?

I glanced down at the diagram on the page again, then set my sights on the scarecrow. As I sucked in a long breath, I pulled my hands, palms-out, to my chest. Then, blowing it out with force, I thrust my hands outward, aiming at the scarecrow.

A powerful blast of air released from my palms and slammed into the scarecrow, making it explode in a flurry of straw, dirt and shredded clothing. With a gasp, I shielded my face with my arm and ducked, then peered under my arm at the now splintered, useless wooden post.

“Whoa,” I breathed, gawking at the destruction that one simple move had caused.

I hadn’t meant to destroy the scarecrow. But then again, I didn’t really know what I’d intended. How would that attack affect Tannin or Jax? My stomach twisted at the mental image of their bodies exploding into chunks of guts and blood, and I hastily shoved that thought from my mind.

I didn’t want to hurt them, and I certainly didn’t want what happened to the scarecrow to happen to them. But that thing was made of straw and sun-bleached fabric. Surely, wind couldn’t cause that much damage to a human—or black wolf.

But I wasn’t willing to take that chance. I had to practice more. I had to learn how to control this magic so that it only did as much harm as I desired.

As much as I hated both of my mates at the moment, I couldn’t stand the thought of killing either of them. I only needed them gone, and it was worth every moment of training to make sure I did just that and nothing more.

Chapter 14

Jax

IT TOOK LONGER THAN I was proud of to collect myself enough to go to Tannin's room.

Nothing I did worked to alleviate the arousal that haunted me after the princess left. I tried meditating and clearing my head, then when that failed, I imagined all sorts of off-putting things. But with her smell still clinging to my fingers and her taste still filling my mouth, it was pointless.

So, I gave in to my crippling need and stroked my cock furiously until the demand subsided, letting myself imagine all the ways I wanted to ruin and worship her sexy little body. Even after coming the first time, my damn erection wouldn't go away, so I did it all over again.

This girl was so deep under my skin that I was certain I'd never be the same again. And I didn't want to be. I wanted to be her monster that pinned her to the wall and made her scream. But after the way I'd treated her... I'd made so many mistakes, I wasn't sure I could fix things now.

With her or Tannin.

But I had to try.

I cleaned myself up in the adjoining bathroom, scrubbing her scent from my body

until I could finally breathe. Then I ventured to Tannin's door like a pup with my tail between my legs. I knocked twice, then waited.

Nothing.

I knocked again. "Tannin? We need to talk."

Silence for a moment.

"I have nothing to say to you," his voice finally said on the other side of the door.

"Perhaps not, but I have plenty to say to you," I said, swallowing the lump in my throat as surely as my pride. "Including that you were right."

There was shuffling inside, the sound of feet padding toward the door. "And just what was I right about?" he asked just on the other side of the thick wood.

"Everything," I conceded with a sigh. "You were right about everything."

The deadbolt clicked, and the knob turned, the door opening to reveal Tannin standing with one hand braced against the doorframe and the other on his hip. A resentful yet intrigued expression hung on his features.

"Come in," he said with a reluctant tone.

I strode into the room and sat on the edge of his bed while he closed the door and walked toward me, arms folded obstinately over his chest.

"Forgive me, brother," I began, humbling myself before him. "I was a fool before."

"Tell me something I don't know," he said with a roll of his eyes.

His tone grated at me, but I let it slide.

“I thought eliminating her was what was best, for us and our pack,” I went on. “But I couldn’t do it either. And I’ve realized now that I’m not supposed to be able to do it. She’s my mate—our mate—and it’s our job to protect her.”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “What happened?” His nostrils flared and his shoulders bunched with hostility. “Did you hurt her?”

“Calm yourself,” I soothed, holding up my hands in reassurance. “No, I didn’t hurt her. I couldn’t.”

“Then what happened?” he demanded.

I pursed my lips, not wanting to tell him what had transpired between the princess and me. Mostly because I knew it would wound him. And after all I had done already today, I didn’t want to cause him further pain.

He stormed toward me, clenching his fists at his sides. “What did you do?”

Dammit.

“I couldn’t help myself, okay?” I barked defensively. “She threw herself at me wearing practically nothing, and the mate bond took over.”

Murder blazed in his eyes like green fire. “You fucked her?”

“No,” I hedged, averting my guilty gaze. “Just some kissing and petting.”

“You bastard!” he yelled, then his fist slammed against the side of my face, the force of it making me slip off the bed to the floor.

“I know, okay!” I shouted, holding my hands up again, both to disarm him and to shield against another blow. “You have every right to hate me. But I want to fix it.”

He snarled at me, shaking his head as he began to pace in front of the bed. “After all the shit you gave me for giving in to her, and you went so much farther than I let myself go.”

I sighed, the weight of my shame pressing down on me. “Tell me how to fix it, Tannin.”

He shook his head again. “Look, I’m glad you came to your senses and realized we’re not meant to harm Aliya, but I don’t know how we move forward. I can’t stand the thought of you touching her.”

Jealousy coiled inside my gut. “And I can’t stand the thought of you touching her. So

where do we go from here? We obviously can't abandon her."

Tannin paced for several long seconds, then slowed to a stop. "What if... What if we worked out how to share her?" he suggested.

"What?" I balked.

"We're both mated to her," he said. "That had to have happened for a reason. And it's not entirely unheard of for wolves to have more than one partner."

"Yeah, but femalewolves to have more than onefemalepartner," I corrected, my upper lip twitching in disgust. "Not the other way around. And those unions don't happen when there's a mate bond involved. Mating to more than one person doesn't happen."

"Well, it has," Tannin countered. "And seeing as how we can't kill her or each other, the only reasonable option left is to come to some sort of agreement where we both get to have her."

My insides were burning and clenching with possessive rage. Male wolves didn'tsharewomen. That wasn't how we operated. Especially not an Alpha like me. And that thought alone made me want to rip his throat out with my teeth.

Tannin perched on the bed next to where I still sat on the floor. "Look, I know it's not ideal, but mate bonds are the most sacred thing in our world. I don't think it's a coincidence that we, the leaders of the black wolf pack, both mated to the princess of Varinya. Fate has some sort of grand plan. We'd be foolish to stray from it."

I didn't like any of the words coming out of his mouth, but I couldn't deny the truth that resonated in my soul.

“You really think we can share her? Without killing each other?” I asked, a growl rumbling in my chest.

“You’re my best friend,” he said. “The two of us have been closer than brothers our whole lives. I think if any two wolves can share a woman, it’s us.”

I sighed through the low growl that wouldn’t stop rattling my throat. He did have a point. “How are we going to make it work? There have to be ground rules.”

He nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I think we have to agree that neither of us is intimate with her alone.”

“You’re suggesting we lie with her at the same time?” I asked.

“Can you think of a better arrangement? Would you want me touching her beyond your reach?”

I snarled. “No.”

“Then there you have it,” he said. “But none of that means anything without her consent. We’ve both treated her like shit. I think we need to tell her the truth. All of it. And leave the decision up to her.”

My heart fell. Would she even want me after the way I’d acted today? I’d fingered her until she came apart so perfectly, then I’d snapped at her to leave. She’d looked so hurt. Would she be willing to give me a second chance? Could I live with it if she chose to only be with Tannin and reject me?

Well, if she did, it would be my own fault. Then I would do everything I could to win back her favor and prove myself a mate she could depend on.

“How do you think she will take it?” I asked in a reserved, doubtful tone. “I mean, the black wolves are the enemy of her kingdom. Do you think she would disregard that because her kingdom fell?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But she has such a kind heart. I think once she sees the depth of our devotion to her, she’ll come around.”

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I nodded, still doubtful. “Okay, but let’s hold off on telling her about the pack coming soon. At least until we know what to do about them.”

“Any thoughts on that yet?” he asked.

I shook my head, and it felt heavy on my shoulders. “No.”

“I don’t feel good about lying to her,” Tannin lamented.

I hopped back onto the bed and put a hand on his back. “It’s for her own protection. Until we figure out how to handle the relations between her and the pack, it’s best for her not to know about them. For now, we just need to make amends with her and prove ourselves to her. If this is fate, then the rest will reveal itself in due time.”

He nodded. “Okay. I can live with that.” Then he turned and smiled at me. “Thank you.”

I frowned. “For what?”

“For not killing her,” he said. “For being the Alpha I always thought you were.”

My heart squeezed. I really did love Tannin like a brother. We’d been through so much together, and the thought that I’d almost lost both him and Aliya because of my arrogance and pride brought me great shame. I’d never let that happen again.

“I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations,” I said sincerely. “And hers. From now on, I’m going to do right by her. Both of you.”

He hugged me, and though we'd shared brief embraces in the past after battle, this one felt different. I didn't truly know if I could share the princess without some adjustment, but if I had to share a mate with anyone, I was glad it was Tannin.

I just hoped it wasn't too late for either of us. Our fate hung in Aliya's hands now. And I didn't like our chances.

Chapter 15

Aliya

BY THE TIME I FINALLY came back inside, I was exhausted and covered in sweat. The sun had fully set, and night was creeping up the eastern sky. I had managed to hone my targeting and narrow my impact, causing only as much damage as I wanted.

I'd practiced first on shrubs and trees in the forest, then on birds I spotted in the branches. I only killed the first one, then afterward I'd learned to soften my blows to merely knock them off their perches.

I felt bad for the dead dove. She hadn't deserved to die for my training, and I'd felt compelled to honor her sacrifice. So I picked up her body when I was done and brought her with me inside. I could add her to dinner. Though, at this point, I didn't care if Jax and Tannin ate or not.

To my surprise, both of them were busily working in the kitchen when I walked in. Tannin was chopping vegetables, and Jax was stirring something in a big pot on the stove.

They both paused their work when I entered and turned to smile at me.

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“There she is,” Tannin greeted, and the charm on his handsome face made my insides melt against my will. “Where did you wander off to?”

“Er...”

I was lost for words. Not only because I hadn’t planned an alibi, but also because the scene playing out before me was so beyond my expectations that it left me dumbfounded.

“I was just practicing my skill with a slingshot,” I lied on the spot, then held up the dead dove by its feet. “Figured we’d need other sources of meat than just the chickens.”

“Oh, good,” Jax said, coming to me and taking the dove from my hand. “I can add it to the stew. But, Aliya, you really shouldn’t be outside alone. It’s dangerous out there.”

The look on his face was so sincere and devoid of his typical snark that all I could do was stare at him. And did he just say my name? He usually only referred to me as Princess.

“Uh, okay,” I stammered. Who were these guys?

Jax took the bird to the counter and began plucking the feathers. “Tannin and I thought we’d make you dinner tonight. You know... to show our appreciation for everything you’ve done for us.”

My eyes widened, my bewilderment growing to the point of stupefaction. What the hell was going on here? Was I dreaming?

“So, why don’t you go take a nice bath or something and just relax until dinner is ready?” Tannin suggested.

“O-okay...” I mumbled in a daze, then walked like a zombie out of the kitchen.

Was this actually happening? Tannin had always been the nicer of the two, but after he’d run out on me this morning, I’d expected him to continue to avoid me. And Jax? He was never nice. Even when he was giving me unbridled pleasure, he was kind of an asshole about it, and especially after.

What had caused this sudden turn in them? Maybe I’d misjudged them... Or maybe they were up to something.

I wasn’t about to let my guard down just because their attitudes had suddenly changed. I wasn’t that easy or that foolish. Not anymore. I was the princess of Varinya, and no matter what tricks they pulled, I was still going to banish them from my castle.

However, since the responsibility of preparing food was off my shoulders—for the first time in over a year—I was going to do what Tannin suggested and relax. I was bone-deep exhausted after all the magical energy I’d expended today. And a long, hot bath sounded lovely!

As soon as I got up to my room, I filled the tub with the hottest water I could stand. Then I stripped out of my dirty clothes and slowly sank into it, goosebumps of pleasure covering my skin as the heat saturated into my sore muscles.

Ahhh. Heavenly.

I must have dozed off because a knock on my door made me snap to awareness, my jumpy movements sending water spilling over the edges of the tub.

“Aliya? Dinner is ready,” Tannin called through the door. “Take your time.”

Damn, how long had I been asleep? Long enough for my fingers to be pruney and the water to be tepid, obviously.

I got out, dried myself off, and put on a simple yet elegant dress befitting a princess. Nothing too flattering or ostentatious. I was done trying to impress those men, and I wanted to be comfortable in my own home.

When I entered the dining room, I was shocked by how artfully the table had been set. Bowls of stew were placed in front of the three chairs at the end of the table, and a dish of roasted vegetables sat in the center, surrounded by candlesticks that lent a cozy orange glow to the room.

Jax and Tannin were standing behind the table, apparently waiting patiently for me.

Tannin pulled out my chair as I approached, then tucked it in after I sat. Then they both took their seats on either side of me, looking at me with some emotion I couldn’t decipher. Whatever it was though, made my insides feel warm and gooey.

I looked away, unwilling to let their gazes affect me, and focused instead on the food in front of me.

“This looks really good,” I said, my tone somewhat reserved. “Thank you.”

And it smelled good, too.

I lifted the spoon from the bowl, careful not to let any of the stew spill, and blew on it

to cool it. I could feel their eyes on me the whole time, but I kept my eyes fixed on liquid and chunks in the end of my spoon.

Tentatively, I touched the broth to my lips, then put the spoon in my mouth when the heat wasn't too much.

“Mmm,” I hummed in delight. It was so hearty and savory, and the meat and vegetables were the perfect texture. I hadn't tasted stew this good since before the kitchen staff fell ill.

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“Do you like it?” Jax asked, watching me as I swallowed.

I nodded, my enjoyment of the flavors lowering my defenses. “Yes, it’s really delicious.”

He smiled a beautiful smile. “I’m glad. It’s an old family recipe, but I haven’t cooked in ages, so I’m relieved it has your approval.”

Then they began eating as well, and we fell into an oddly comfortable silence.

Maybe it was their new demeanors, or the comfort-food feel of the stew, or perhaps the cozy glow of the candles, but a deep sense of contentment settled into my bones. Last night, when I’d made them dinner and we sat together like this, I’d been too full of excited energy to enjoy their presence.

How ironic that I only appreciated their company when I knew they’d soon be gone.

No. I couldn’t begin to question myself. Couldn’t allow doubt to get in. Not now when this was so close to being over. When they were gone, I would stop wanting them so badly. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Aliya,” Tannin said, breaking the peaceful silence. “Jax and I have something to confess to you.”

And just like that, my comfort vanished like the flame of a candle being snuffed out. In its place, a heart-skipping curiosity bloomed in my chest.

I wiped my lips with my napkin, then set my hands in my lap. “Alright,” I said, hiding my intrigue.

The two of them exchanged glances, making my interest spike further.

“Well, first off, we both owe you an apology for the way we’ve behaved toward you,” Jax began, his expression endearingly awkward and vulnerable. “Me, especially. I have been inexcusably cruel and dismissive of you, and I’m truly sorry.”

He reached over and put his hand gently on my arm. The sensuous heat of his touch mingled with the sincerity of his words had my walls crumbling.

“The truth is, Tannin and I have mate bonded to you,” he confessed.

It took me a moment to remember that I wasn’t supposed to know that. I scrunched my brow at him, feigning confusion. “Mate bonded?”

Tannin put his hand on my other arm, making me burn even hotter, and I turned to face him.

“We are both black wolves,” he said like it hurt to speak the words.

I gasped, a sincere reaction to hearing him say it out loud.

“We’re so sorry for keeping it from you,” Tannin added hastily, as if afraid I’d freak out. “Things were so frantic when we first arrived, and Jax was dying, and then you healed him. There just hasn’t been a good chance to tell you the truth. And with you being the princess of a kingdom that has hated us for centuries, we were afraid how you’d take it.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew all this already, but the fact that they were telling

me, even though they feared my reaction and rightly so... I was utterly speechless.

“It’s not a good excuse, by any means,” Jax said, “but the reason we’ve been so strange with you is because of the mate bond. The last thing either of us expected was to be mated to the princess of our ancient hunters. We tried to fight the feeling, to spare all three of us from unwanted complications... but we can’t fight it anymore.”

My heart began to pound, and my core throbbed with a shocked thrill. Did Jax really just say what I thought I’d just heard? Jax? The man who’d made me feel so incredible earlier today, before pulling the rug out from under me.

He leaned closer, and I could feel the heat of his breath on my face. “I’m not strong enough to resist you any longer. And I know you feel it too. That’s why you came to my room today. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Memories of those sultry lips and his skilled fingers flashed inside my mind. I squirmed in my seat.

“No, you’re not wrong,” I confessed breathily. “I feel insatiably drawn to both of you...” I bashfully glanced at Tannin, and the heat in his eyes only intensified the growing need inside me.

“Good,” Jax said, closing his eyes briefly in relief. Then he squeezed his hand on my arm. “Can you forgive us for the way we treated you? For keeping the truth of what we are to you?”

My chest tightened with heavy sadness.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Black wolves are the ancient enemies my forefathers died to protect us from. I don’t know how I can overlook that.”

“The same way we can overlook the fact that you’re the heir of the kingdom that slaughtered our ancestors,” Jax said, an edge growing in his voice. “It wasn’t easy, least of all for me. But this bond links us in a way that’s unbreakable. And now that I’ve found you, it doesn’t matter to me who or what you are.”

I swallowed, my insides so tight with desire, I could barely think straight.

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“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Tannin said. “Finding out that we’re wolves must be overwhelming, and I’m sure this bond has been making you feel crazy and confused.”

I nodded. “Yes, it has.”

“For two wolves to mate to the same woman has never been heard of among our people,” Tannin continued. “We can’t explain how or why it happened, and it’s a struggle for Jax and me to know how to handle it, so we decided to leave the choice up to you.”

My breath hitched. Surely, they didn’t want me to choose between them.

Jax’s thumb began to rub lightly over my arm. “Our proposal is that the three of us indulge this bond as nature intended. Together.”

“Together?” Blood rose to the surface of my skin everywhere, making me feel hot and a little lightheaded.

They wanted... me and both of them? At the same time? Okay, now I knew I was dreaming. This couldn’t be real!

“Only if you want to,” Tannin reassured me softly. “We’ll both understand if you can’t see past our differences or forgive us for our actions. Neither of us is going to force you to do anything you don’t want to do. What happens between us, if anything, is completely up to you.”

My hormones were racing rapidly now, making every inch of me burn for them. It

was all I could do not to throw myself at either one of them right this instant.

Thankfully, I was able to hold onto the last remaining thread of my rational functions.

“I-I need some time to think about this,” I said slowly.

Longing pinched Jax’s features, but he nodded. “Of course.” He withdrew his hand, and the absence of his warm touch made me feel strangely destitute—like I never wanted him to not touch me ever again.

“Take your time. We’ll respect whatever you decide.” Tannin did the same, and though my heart screamed for his touch to be restored, I was grateful for the chance to clear my head.

I rose and made a beeline for my room. This was all too much.

This day had been a cruel emotional whirlwind. So much flirting and teasing, so much rejection followed by amazing kisses and touches. And now they were laying themselves before me with open arms, offering the greatest temptation I’d ever known!

Wicked, powerful Jax, and sweet, gentle Tannin, both touching me together, kissing me together, teaching my body all the ways to feel pleasure together. It was a dream come true. And my insides ached painfully, blissfully, to experience every sinful thing they had to offer.

But I’d spent the entire day plotting their banishment. And they were still my enemies. Did their confession really change anything? I still didn’t know if I could trust them. My way forward wasn’t certain, and I hated that.

I had a big decision to make, and my whole future depended on me making the right

one.

Chapter 16

Aliya

MY HEART WAS FLUTTERING like an excited bird in a cage as I roamed the castle in search of Jax and Tannin. After several hours of laborious back-and-forth deliberating, I had made my decision, and to say I was nervous about declaring it was the biggest understatement of my life.

I found them in the den. Tannin was sitting on the couch, hunched forward with his hands clasped between his thighs as one knee bounced anxiously. The concern on his handsome face was almost precious. My vulnerable, gentle Tannin.

Jax stood next to the crackling fireplace, leaning beside it with his hand braced on the top of the hearth, his serious expression fixed on the dancing flames. The light cast on his features made him look even more predatory. Beautiful and deadly, that's what he was. Like a black widow. Like a siren.

When I walked towards them, they both straightened their postures and turned to me with expectant yet apprehensive gazes. Even though a tremor quaked through my limbs, commanding the attention of such powerful creatures like them gave me the confidence I desperately needed. I was the one with the power in this moment, and I had to wield it wisely.

"This wasn't an easy choice to make," I prefaced, my voice ringing in the silence. "Though my kingdom is all but gone, I am still its princess, and you are black wolves. My whole life, I was raised to fear and hate your kind, as I'm sure you were mine."

I paused, letting that resonate with them for a moment. Their features sagged with despair, and seeing it made my heart ache.

“That being said, I can’t deny the powerful hold this bond has over my body and my heart,” I continued. “I have been alone for so long, and the fact that the first two men I’ve encountered in sixteen months were mated to me must mean something. I feel like I’d be doing myself a disservice by denying the opportunity to explore this connection we share.”

Their features lifted with hope, and I fought the urge to smile in relief.

“I’m willing to try,” I said. “But, after everything that’s happened, how do I know I can trust you?”

Tannin shot to his feet and rushed toward me, taking my hands in his. “You can trust us, Aliya. We are fated by the stars to honor and protect you, to cherish you. And we will do whatever it takes to reassure you it’s true.”

His words touched me, warming my insides and soothing the anxious tension in my muscles. Tannin, I believed. He was the sincere one, the kind one.

But Jax was a different animal entirely. Mysterious, elusive, tricky.

He walked toward me with slow, measured steps, as if approaching a forest fawn he feared he might spook. Then he stopped inches from me, lifted his hand to my face, and oh, so gently brushed his knuckles down the side of my cheek, sending electricity sizzling over my flesh and making my eyelids flutter.

“I know we haven’t given you much reason to trust us,” he said softly. “But give us the chance to prove our devotion to you. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

The dark promise in his sensuous tone sent a thrill stabbing through me, and I wanted so badly to surrender myself to it—to him.

But I fought it, holding my ground for at least a bit longer.

“Devotion?” I asked. “Only yesterday, you were mocking me like I was an ignorant child. And just today, you shouted orders for me to leave your presence. How am I to believe this sudden devotion won’t be washed away by the tide of your next mood swing?”

He nodded, pulling his lips between his teeth in an acceptance of guilt. “I can’t apologize enough for my earlier behavior. But I only acted that way because I was fighting a losing battle with this all-consuming hold you have over me. I’m done fighting. I surrender to you, my mate, my queen. I am yours, if you’ll have me.”

To hear Jax, this powerful, brutal Alpha, say those words to me...I couldn’t describe the way that made me feel. Strong and weak at the same time, vanity and humility all mixed into a potent cocktail of devastating desire and undying affection.

I was gone.

I nodded, letting myself nuzzle into the knuckles he still held against my cheek. He opened his hand and gently cupped my jaw.

I licked my lips, trying to force a breath into my lungs. “So, um...what do we do now?”

A wicked smile spread across Jax’s beautiful lips, and he curled his fingertips teasingly under my chin. “Now, we show you just how much we adore you.”

Before I knew what was happening, Jax picked me up and hoisted me over his

shoulder, carrying me across the den and up the stairs. His free hand spread over my ass as we ascended, kneading my flesh, his fingers dipping so close to my center that I couldn't help but squirm in anticipation.

Tannin followed behind us, holding my gaze the whole time with both feral need and tender love. I didn't care where they were taking me, I only knew I couldn't wait to get there.

Once in the hall on the top floor, I heard a door open behind me, and Jax carried me into a room. Tannin closed the door as Jax set me down on my feet. I only distantly realized we were in Jax's room as both stared at me like wolves about to pounce on unsuspecting prey.

Jax reached out to run his hand up the back of my head, gently raking his fingers over my scalp.

"We'll go slow," he said in a deep, gravelly voice that had my core clenching. "If there's anything you don't like, tell us. We only exist to please you."

I nodded dazedly, and then they descended on me.

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With his hand behind my head, Jax pulled my face toward his and pressed his lips to mine. Tannin came up beside me, his hands gripping my hips as he nibbled and sucked on my neck.

Jax's kisses were slower now than this afternoon, but no less rough and demanding. His tongue invaded my mouth like a conquering warrior, and I welcomed his dominion.

At the same time as Tannin's teasing kisses were on my neck and earlobe. Both their hands were everywhere—my breasts, my waist, my ass. They had me in a dizzying thrall from which I never wanted to surface.

With one last nip at my bottom lip, Jax turned my face toward Tannin, offering my mouth to his gentle yet hungry kisses. Jax went to work unfastening the laces of the back of my dress, kissing my shoulder as the falling gown exposed more flesh. The fabric dropped and pooled around my ankles, leaving me standing in only my scant underwear.

They took turns claiming my mouth as they each removed their articles of clothing. It was a struggle not to get lost in the maelstrom of pleasure that their demanding lips and tongues.

It didn't matter that I had seen them both naked before. That was a whole lifetime ago, and in a completely different context. Before they were mine to touch, to kiss, to lick.

Seeing them now, they were gods. Their bodies were chiseled perfection. Hardened

muscles under smooth, suntanned skin. And the proof of their desire for me, the stiff appendages standing at attention between their legs—I couldn't take my eyes off them even as they continued to block my view with their feverish kisses.

Together, they guided me to bed, and I clumsily fell onto the foot of the mattress as they kissed and caressed me.

Jax slid his hand between my legs, cupping the flesh of my thigh, then dragging his hand down to my knee and pulling it outward. Obediently, I spread my legs wider, desperate for whatever he intended.

With my legs open, my center fully exposed, they both drew back enough to stare at my pink folds, the heat of their gazes making my cheeks heat furiously.

Jax leaned close to Tannin, speaking softly into his ear while his eyes burned into mine. "Taste her, brother. She's delicious."

Like a starved man, Tannin dropped to his knees before me and brought his face to my center. I watched his every move, barely breathing. Finally, he stuck out his tongue and gently flicked my clit with the tip.

I sucked in a sharp gasp at the incredible sensation, and he took that as his invitation to proceed, closing his mouth over my flesh and devouring me like a delicacy. I arched onto the mattress, throwing my head back as his tongue roamed and swirled and licked. I was now a slave to the incredible pleasure.

Jax claimed my mouth once more, then kissed down my neck and over my collarbone. He stopped at my breast, sucking my nipple into his mouth and flicking it with his tongue. I gasped loudly at the double assault, my nipples tingling with pleasure.

All the while, Jax was stroking his rigid cock with one hand, and the sight made my mouth water.

Tentatively, I reached out and lightly touched the rounded tip. His cock was so warm and soft yet hard.

Amazing.

Jax hissed, and I instinctively retracted my hand, afraid that I'd hurt him somehow.

But he pushed his pelvis closer, then took my hand and guided it back to his cock, silently instructing me with his fingers to close my hand around the shaft.

This shot the most potent excitement through me, intensifying the magic Tannin's mouth was working between my legs. His cock was so hard, yet so smooth. I never would have thought that such a thing could be pretty, but his was beautiful.

Curiously, with my hand still closed around the shaft, I began to stroke it like I saw him do, flicking a glance at his face to gauge his reaction to see if I was doing it right. His eyelids fluttered closed, a long, low breath escaping his lips.

I wanted to make him feel good. No, I needed to.

I tightened my grip slightly, running my hand up and down a little faster, and he grunted in pleasure. Staring at it transfixed, my mouth ached to taste it. Such a thought would have been absurd to me a few days ago, but their mouths felt incredible between my legs. Would Jax enjoy my mouth on his cock?

Too enticed to resist anymore, I leaned forward and gently ran the tip of my tongue over the tip.

“Oh, fuck,” he hissed, looking down at me with heavy-lidded eyes, then gave an eager nod.

Yes!

I opened my mouth over his dick and wrapped my lips around it, not expecting the sharp thrill that pulsed inside me at having his cock spreading my lips. Holy gods! Just as I did with my hands, I moved my mouth up and down his shaft, pressing my tongue over his tip as I took it deeper.

His sharp gasps and deep groans encouraged me. I tightened my lips and groaned myself as he began to thrust forward and back, sliding his cock between my lips over and over.

Abruptly, he pulled free, and Tannin’s mouth left my center. For a split second, confusion and self-doubt gripped me. Were they going to abandon me again after we’d shared so much?

But they didn’t leave me. Instead, together my mates flipped me onto my stomach over the corner of the bed, Tannin taking position at my backside and Jax standing in front of me with his hard length pointed right at my face.

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Something nudged between my legs, rubbing over my moist entrance and teasing me into desperation.

“Do you want Tannin to fuck you, Princess?” Jax asked darkly.

“Yes, yes!” I whimpered. If that’s what was going to make this incredible ache go away, it was exactly what I wanted.

Jax nodded to Tannin behind me, and slowly, Tannin pressed his cock into me. Inch by slow inch, he penetrated my body, stretching and filling me until he was buried fully inside.

The sensation was mind-blowing in the extreme, but almost too much. I felt so full and achy in a new sort of way, and prayed they knew how to make it better.

Then Tannin gradually pulled out then thrust back in, forcing a groan from my lips as his dick hit my pleasure center deep in my core. He repeated this over and over, falling into a torturous rhythm that I never wanted to end.

Jax rubbed his shaft in front of me, then guided it to my mouth.

“Suck my cock, beautiful,” he commanded in a low growl.

I eagerly parted my lips, and he shoved his dick into my mouth, the thrusting of his hips mimicking the same pace as Tannin’s behind me. Together, they were conquering my body in every way imaginable and it was incredible.

It was too much and yet not enough. I could hardly stand the pleasure they were giving me, but I never wanted it to stop.

The sounds of their groans amplified my own pleasure, knowing they were drawing as much ecstasy from my body as they were delivering to mine. If it weren't for Jax's cock filling my mouth, my moans would surely drown out theirs.

"She's moaning on my dick," Jax panted, tangling his fingers into my hair. "Fuck her harder. I want to feel her screams."

Tannin obeyed his Alpha, thrusting into me harder and faster until I was indeed screaming as Jax had foretold. Pleasure erupted in my core and radiated outward, making me convulse and cry out.

"Oh, gods!" Jax hissed, suddenly yanking his cock from my mouth. He gripped it hard and furiously stroked it as creamy white liquid shot from the tip onto the floor.

His body shuddered in front of me, strained grunts bursting from him until he stopped his frenzied squeezing.

Seconds later, Tannin followed us into bliss, slamming into me one last time and letting out a long, loud moan. His hot seed spilled inside me, his pleasure drawing out the last of my own pulses.

He pulled out of me, then they dragged me up to the head of the bed and snuggled in on either side of me. Our heavy panting formed a chorus as their hands continued to roam my body like a playground.

These men were my mates, my saviors, my monsters. And as sleep crept over me, I knew they would be the ruin of me.

The last princess of Varinya. Mated to two black wolves. Oh, the irony of it all...

Chapter 17

Tannin

THE SUN WAS JUST CRESTING over the mountains, its soft golden light catching in the locks of Aliya's hair that were strewn messily across the pillow beneath her head.

She was so beautiful.

I'd been awake for at least an hour, and I couldn't get enough of staring at her face as she slept, memorizing every line, angle and curve.

Last night had been wild. The memory of the three of us together was a struggle for me to get straight in my head. Not because it had been awkward or weird, but because it had felt so right.

Before our escapade in this room, seeing Jax touch her was a strain on me, and the very idea of her sucking his dick would have driven me to chop it off.

But the two of us working together to claim her changed everything, and watching her suck him while I took her from behind was the most incredible thing I'd ever experienced. I would never forget the muffled sound of her filled mouth as my thrusts made her come.

Jax and I naturally fell into a rhythm with her, neither one of us competing over her but rather teaming up to please her. I didn't even mind that he'd taken the lead, that

our pack mentality had trickled into this unique romantic union. He was my Alpha, and I had to admit, at least to myself, that I kind of enjoyed him telling me what to do with her.

Especially since he'd let me be the first to claim her pussy. Plus, I think she liked his dominance, too.

Just thinking about sex with Aliya made my erect cock twitch. I was so tempted to crawl beneath the covers and wake her up with my tongue between her legs once more, but I couldn't bring myself to disturb the peace of her slumber. And, if I were being honest, I couldn't keep my fears of the pack's arrival from creeping into my mind and making me sick with dread.

What was going to happen when they got here? How were we going to protect her?

Jax rolled over on Aliya's other side to face me, his eyes open as if he'd been awake for a while, as well.

"Hey," he whispered.

"Hey," I whispered back.

He held my gaze for a moment, and he seemed just as conflicted as I felt. "Can't sleep?"

"I can't stop worrying about what's coming," I confessed.

He gingerly propped his head on his bent arm on the pillow, careful not to unsettle Aliya. I rolled onto my side and did the same. Aliya stirred slightly, so we waited silently for a few heartbeats to make sure she was still asleep before continuing.

“Now that we have officially claimed her as our mate, the pack will have to concede to our union,” he whispered, though he couldn’t hide his doubt from me.

“She’s not a black wolf,” I countered. “Our laws won’t apply to her.”

“Anyone who mates with a black wolf becomes a member of the pack by default,” he stated, as if quoting some ancient text I’d never seen.

“Even the Varinyan princess?” I asked. “You know as well as I do that they’ll want her head on a pike.”

His jaw ticked. “I am their Alpha. My word is law, and they will recognize her as a member of the pack if I command it so.”

I raised a dubious eyebrow at him. “Are you certain of that?”

“Let anyone who disagrees challenge my role,” he said. “I will destroy them.”

I sighed at his tedious ego. “One or two, perhaps. But more than that will be outraged by her continued existence. You really think you can fend off the entire pack?”

His gaze fell on her face, and his features softened. “I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, debating whether to ask the question on my mind. “What if that means siding against the pack?”

“It won’t come to that,” he snapped in a harsh whisper.

“But what if it does?” I insisted.

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His jaw clenched again as he looked protectively down at her. “Like I said, I will do what I must for her.”

I nodded, and we both stared at her for a long moment.

“We should tell her the truth,” I whispered. “I don’t like lying to her. Not after what we shared.”

He exhaled slowly through his nose. “I know. We will tell her, but not yet. I just want to savor this bliss for a little while longer.”

I didn’t say anything to that. I knew how he felt. A big part of me wished we could stay here like this forever, just the three of us in this castle. I wished he hadn’t called the pack, then they’d never show up.

But the reality was that they were on their way, and they’d be here any day now. And as much as I wanted to enjoy this carefree fairytale version of our threesome, the guilt over keeping the whole truth from her was eating me up inside.

“I’m telling her tonight,” I whispered.

His eyes whipped at me angrily, but I wasn’t backing down on this.

“We’ll have one last day of peace and fun, but that’s it,” I declared. “She needs time to prepare for their arrival. We all do, as a team. Letting her go unaware any longer isn’t fair to her.”

He simmered over that for a moment, then gave a stifled scoff. “Fine. I guess you’re right. I hate it when that happens.”

I couldn’t help but smirk at that. It always made me proud when I was able to change Jax’s mind and make him see reason, as rare of an occasion as that was. I believed the princess softened his stubbornness, but only a little.

“In that case, shall we wake her up?” He flared his eyebrows, licking his lips suggestively.

“You read my mind,” I murmured.

He grinned, then before I could make a move in that direction, he dove under the covers and situated himself between her legs.

Asshole.

She sucked in a breath, arching her back against the sheets, letting me know that he had begun his feast of her pussy. Her thick lashes parted, her amber eyes locking on my face as she roused.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” I purred, caressing the side of her face with my fingertips.

“G—mor—ugh!” she panted.

I snickered, then lowered myself over her to greet her lips with a soft kiss. She opened her mouth, her tongue flicking out in a silent demand for deeper affection as her hand wound around the back of my head and pulled me in closer.

It appeared I had two Alphas now, and I was more than willing to obey her

commands.

I swallowed her moans as I kissed her, tracing teasing lines over her tits and belly while Jax ate her out. I whipped the covers back, needing to see what he was doing to her.

His face was buried between her creamy thighs, which clenched around the sides of his head as she writhed in pleasure. And when she came, she squealed tightly into my mouth, followed by a series of sweet whimpers.

Jax lapped at her until her tremors waned, then slid off the foot of the bed, pulled her down by the ankles, and flipped her around like she weighed nothing.

“Bend your knees for me, baby girl,” Jax instructed.

She curled her legs beneath her, and Jax helped her spread them, propping up her ass just high enough for his pelvis to reach.

“Good,” he growled, then he guided his cock to her entrance and pushed inside, making her arch again and thrust those perfect tits toward me. “Now, let’s show Tannin how good that little mouth of yours feels.”

Her eyes opened dazedly, falling on me as she bit her bottom lip. I slid down the mattress, positioning myself in front of her.

“Only if you want to,” I said, though I was aching to have her in whatever way she’d let me.

“I do,” she panted, then lowered herself over my cock, stretched her lips, taking me inside her mouth.

Fuck, that felt incredible!She was incredible.

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Her mouth was so warm, so wet, and so gentle. Her tongue slid up and down my shaft, her eyes closing like I tasted delicious to her. I couldn't stop watching her enjoy me.

Jax's thrusts increased, pounding into her rougher than I had last night, and that only seemed to invigorate her sucking.

I couldn't take it much longer. She felt too damn good. And with Jax making her moan, the vibrations in her sweet mouth were pushing me close to the edge far too fast.

"I'm gonna come," I hissed and reached down to withdraw my cock.

But her hand whipped out and grabbed my wrist, her eyes fixing on mine with a knowing warning, and she took me in deeper.

Holy shit!

I came hard, groaning loudly as every muscle in my body clenched in failed restraint. Her eyes widened in surprise as my cum spilled into her mouth, but she only paused for a moment before continuing to bob her head.

"Good girl," Jax growled, slapping a hand against her ass before buckling over her and finding his own release with a vicious howl.

I felt her mouth tighten as she swallowed, then released my spent cock with a choked gasp.

Pleasure was still wavering through me, my cock still twitching from what she'd done, but I bent forward and cupped her face in my hand.

"You didn't have to do that," I panted.

She wiped her mouth as Jax pulled out of her. "I know. But I wanted to try it."

My heart warmed as I leaned in to plant a soft kiss on her forehead.

"That's our girl," Jax praised before going into the bathroom and returning with a small towel. He gently cleaned her with it before wiping himself down too.

She blushed, looking both so innocent and so insanely seductive.

She was perfect.

"How would you like us to wake you up like that every morning?" Jax asked.

Aliya giggled as she sat with her legs curled to the side. "I don't think I could handle that."

Jax barked a laugh. "We'll see about that, beautiful." He winked, and her blush darkened.

He pulled on a pair of pants, then slapped my shoulder. "Get dressed. We're going to make our mate a breakfast fit for a queen."

I reluctantly rolled out of bed and found my pants from last night. What I really wanted to do was stay in bed with her all day, even if all we did was kiss and talk. I wanted to know everything about her before we lost the opportunity.

But Jax was right. She deserved to have us fawn over her for one last day. Before we told her the truth about the wolves, and possibly ruined what could have been... forever.

Chapter 18

Aliya

THE ROOM WAS QUIET in the wake of my men's exit, but the thoughts roaring in my head were so loud they would've drowned out anything else regardless.

I didn't want to hear them. I wanted some time and space to think. Or maybe to not think at all.

After the intensity of last night, I certainly hadn't expected them to wake me up with more carnal play. My body was sore in an admittedly delightful way, making it easy to curl up beneath the sheets and surrender to the comfort they offered.

I wanted to stay in this bed all day. It smelled like them.

I smelled like them.

And I was a traitor for loving that smell. I was a traitor for going along with their fun this morning. And I was a traitor for feeling anything for them but hatred.

They hadn't known I'd been awake during their whispered conversation. I hadn't even been sure I was truly awake, that it wasn't part of some dream, until Jax's tongue ran up between my thighs.

Then, I'd known it was all true. That they'd been lying to me this whole time. I'd believed them about everything they'd said. I'd trusted them... but it was all for

nothing.

Their pack would arrive soon, and according to Tannin, they'd want to put me to death.

I bit my lip. Tannin's lies hit harder than anything else. He'd been so sweet, so wonderful the whole time I'd known him. How could he hide something so important from me?

I hated myself for going along with what they'd done to me this morning, for not putting a stop to their seduction and making some excuse to make them leave. I told myself at the time that I needed to act normally, that if I didn't play along, they'd get suspicious, and I'd lose their trust.

But the truth was, everything they did to me felt so good. I couldn't bring myself to deny them even though I knew who and what they truly were, and what they'd been planning all along.

Now I felt dirty and ashamed. I was a disgrace to my people. I'd given myself to a pair of wolves who were only using me. I'd been so blinded by my immature, bullshit fantasies of love and fate, I hadn't been able to see what was right in front of me.

Why hadn't I questioned if they had a pack? Jax had said he was the Alpha, and I had foolishly assumed that was just part of the dynamic between the two of them. I was so stupid for not realizing he was the leader of the entire black wolf pack.

I put my hands over my face, wishing I could rub my idiocy away. Stupid girl.

Their pack was coming, here to Varinya, and I could only assume it was for the purpose of conquering it for themselves. I'd had a plan to get Jax and Tannin off the property, but what was I going to do about an invasion?

I sat up in bed as a sad thought slithered through my mind, silencing all the others.

Was Varinya even worth protecting anymore? There was no one left to even call my home a kingdom. The villagers, the castle staff, and my parents were all dead and gone.

Maybe I should just leave. I could pack up my necessities while my mates were making breakfast and sneak out before they knew I was gone. I'd throw a few outfits in a bag, grab Willow, and slip out through the main doors.

The main problem however, was that I wouldn't be able to get any food for my journey. Jax and Tannin were in the kitchen, and they'd see me if I tried to rifle through the garden. How long would I last without food?

Where would I even go? Ashala, the neighboring kingdom, was three days' travel from here, probably more with my limited knowledge of the terrain and poor navigation skills. If I was cautious and constantly alert, I stood a small chance of defending myself against predators with my magic. Though I didn't like my odds against a cusith, let alone more than one of them.

And if I managed to reach Ashala, what would I do? They wouldn't believe I was who I claimed to be, not without proof. I didn't know what I could snatch before being caught to show them as evidence of my pedigree. And even if I could, they might not care. What good was a princess without a people to rule?

I was little more than a useless woman now. Especially to an outsider.

If I was able to escape and arrive anywhere safely, I'd have to completely start over. And the world wasn't kind to lone, nameless women, especially those with any manner of beauty.

The door opened, and Tannin peered inside. Dammit, why did he have to be so handsome? A wolf in sheep's clothing, indeed.

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“Breakfast is ready, Your Highness,” he said with a flirtatious wink.

I forced my lips to spread into a small smile. “Okay. Thank you. I’ll be right down.”

He puckered his lips and made a smooching sound before ducking back out into the hall.

With wobbly legs, I climbed off the bed and crossed the hall to my room. I didn’t feel like wearing a dress today, but I had to act like everything was normal. If I wore anything that hinted at function over fashion, they might get suspicious. So, I put on a simple summer dress with little frill—one that would be easy to run in if needed.

Then I brushed out my hair, leaving it down, and took my time joining them downstairs.

Just like last night, the dining room table was set with care. In the center was a big tray of scrambled eggs, bread, and various jams from the pantry.

Jax pulled out my chair for me before returning to his seat to my right, brushing his hand lightly down my arm as he did so. I hated how good it felt to be touched by him. How it made my insides feel like molten lava.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked as he spooned a large helping of eggs onto my plate.

“Yes,” I said, picking up my fork. The eggs smelled delicious, but my appetite was non-existent.

“Are you alright?” Tannin asked, his brows pinching in concern.

“Uh, yes, why?” I asked awkwardly.

“You just seem...a little reserved today,” he said. “Did we hurt you?”

Yes. More deeply than you’ll ever know.

“No,” I lied with a sugary smile. “I’m just tired, and honestly a bit sore from...you know...” The memories heated my cheeks, and I hated myself even more.

Tannin pouted sweetly and nodded. “I’m sorry. If it was too much for you, we can slow things down.”

Jax reached over and put his hand on my arm, rubbing his thumb back and forth. “Your comfort and peace of mind are our top priority. Whatever you need or want from us, just say it.”

I want you to leave, call off your pack, and never come back.

But even as the words shot through my thoughts, I couldn’t speak them aloud. I knew they were a lie. I didn’t want them to leave me. They’d lied to me, manipulated me, and used me, but I still craved them like a woman lost in the desert craved water.

The look in his eyes was so sincere. I wanted to believe him.

I nodded and tucked my hair behind my ear. “Yeah, I think maybe slowing things down a bit would be good. At least for now. It’s kind of a lot to process.” I gave a nervous giggle.

“Of course,” Jax said. “You’re our mate, and it’s our job to keep you happy and

safe.”

“Do you really mean that?” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

A serious expression fell over his face. “With all my heart.” After holding my gaze meaningfully for a long moment, he patted my arm and removed his hand.

They were both still staring at me like I was a sheet of broken glass about to shatter, so I poked my fork into a clump of egg and put it in my mouth. That seemed to satisfy them, and they began eating as well.

I wanted so badly to trust what they were saying to me now. They had said they would protect me from their pack, who obviously all wanted me dead. Jax was their Alpha, their leader. If he vouched for me, would they accept me? Would our mate bond be enough for them to spare me?

But even if that did happen, I wouldn’t be the princess of Varinya anymore. No matter what, I’d lose my kingdom. I didn’t want to be part of their black wolf pack. Surrendering to them would be the ultimate betrayal of everything my bloodline stood for.

I wasn’t sure I could relinquish my possibly meaningless title just to survive among primitive monsters who hated me. And even if they did pretend to accept me, they might still slaughter me in my sleep while Tannin and Jax had their backs turned.

No, there was only one right course of action. Only one way to preserve the sanctity of my kingdom’s legacy.

I had to proceed with my original plan, and that was to coax Jax and Tannin outside the castle walls, then leave them there to greet their pack on arrival.

How were my supposed mates going to explain to their people that Varinya was now off limits? Once my magical boundary went up, there was no way they were ever getting back inside.

Chapter 19

Jax

ALIYA'S SILENCE AT breakfast concerned me. She was usually lively and chipper, but as she sat beside me at the table, she ate quietly, like a timid mouse.

Perhaps I'd been too rough with her this morning. She'd shown so much enthusiasm last night, such a willingness to learn and explore new sexual avenues. It had shocked and thrilled me when she'd started sucking my cock without any prompting from me. And fuck, it felt so damn good!

I'd let that excitement run away with me. She'd been a virgin before last night, still so innocent and fragile. I should've respected that she'd need some time to adjust before having sex again, but instead, I'd propped up her tight little ass and fucked her with wild abandon.

At the time, she'd sounded and acted like she'd enjoyed it as much as I did.

Had she only done that to please us? Was she just playing along because she felt beholden to us in some way? Or was she too shy to speak up about what she really needed? We were two strong and powerful men having our way with her, and perhaps some part of her felt helpless against us.

I'd been selfish. I'd been negligent of her needs. Would I ever stop fucking things up when it came to her? I needed to show her that she was the one in control of this unconventional relationship, and that sex wasn't a requirement for our affection.

When everyone had finished eating, an idea came to me as Tannin and I cleared the table, and I rushed to set it into motion.

“Tannin, can you handle washing the dishes on your own?” I asked as I set the last plate in the sink.

He turned to me with a frown. “Why?”

“I have an idea that I think will make Aliya happy,” I said. “Finish up in here and then join us in the ballroom.”

“But—”

I dashed out the archway before he could respond. I didn’t want his pessimism to dissuade me from what I had in mind.

I opened the door beside the kitchen and skipped down the flight of dusty, cobweb-covered stairs. The air down in the basement was musty, made thicker by the cold temperature that rose goosebumps on my arms.

But it was perfect for chilling and preserving the hundreds of wine bottles kept in the honeycomb-style shelves lining every wall of the modest space.

I’d discovered the wine cellar two days ago during my exploration of the castle. From the dust coating every surface of this room, it appeared that no one had been down here in a very long time.

I wondered if Aliya even knew about it. If she had, she probably would’ve indulged during her solitude. Being alone for so long would be intolerable sober. For a wolf, it wouldn’t be tolerable at all.

Wolves were pack animals. We needed each other, not only for our survival but also for our sanity. A wolf who was banished was doomed to death. On the off chance they survived the crippling isolation, they wouldn't be themselves anymore. Instead, they'd become something feral and inhuman.

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I'd wondered if that was how the cusith emerged. If they were some ancient species of shifter that had been civilized once upon a time, but after being individually cut off from their packs, they'd been forced to band together once they'd mutated into whatever they were now.

I shook my head of the thoughts and began to survey the various bottles on the nearest wall. What would Aliya like?

Wine was a rarity for our pack, something we only acquired through infrequent trades. Some members brewed a sort of mead from honey and berries, but it was far too sweet for my liking. I preferred dry red wine. It was bold and hearty, like an Alpha.

But that didn't seem like it would suit the princess. She was sweet and gentle, and she deserved a drink to match.

I plucked champagne from the middle shelf and inspected the bottle. The date on the bottle was twenty years previous, and the cork was wrapped in elegant gold foil. Yes, this would do nicely. A bubbly, pink drink for my bubbly, pink girl.

I turned for the stairs, then paused. Who was I kidding? One bottle was not going to be enough for the three of us. I grabbed a second bottle, then jogged back up the steps.

Tannin was just rinsing off the last plate when I returned to the kitchen, and I reached over him for the cabinet where the glasses were kept.

"What are you doing?" he grouched, stepping aside and drying his hands on a towel.

I pulled three champagne flutes from the cabinet. “I think we should have a little soiree today. A grand ball of our own to celebrate our union. You know, before you blow the whole thing up with your confession.”

He cut me a deadpan glare.

“I know, I know. It’s the right thing to do,” I said. “Doesn’t mean I have to be happy about it. I just want to show Aliya a nice time before it’s too late.”

He sighed and nodded. “Okay. It’s not the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

I snorted. “There’s a Victrola and some records in the study. Set them up in the ballroom. I’ll fetch our mate.”

With a roll of his eyes, he strode for the study beneath the grand staircase, and I went off in search of Aliya.

After checking dozens of places throughout the castle, I finally found her in the library. The relief that crashed over me at the sight of her curled up on a couch beneath the window was palpable. Some part of me had feared she was hiding from us. From me.

I had to remember to be gentle with her. To show her the man I could be for her.

I tapped the knuckle of my index finger against the door frame, and her face shot from the book she was reading up at me. She quickly closed her book and set it aside.

“I’m surprised to find you in here,” I hedged as I stepped into the room.

“I like to read in here,” she said, lowering her feet to dangle off the edge of the couch. “Before you two came, I used to sleep in here for days at a time. I guess the words on

the pages made me feel less alone.”

Pity tightened the muscles in my throat as I came to sit beside her. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you to be alone for so long. And after losing everyone you cared about. I’m truly sorry that happened to you.”

She offered a sad smile, then shrugged. “Well, I’m not alone anymore. Now I have you and Tannin.”

My heart softened, and I took her hand gently in mine. “Yes, and we will never leave your side. Unless, of course, you want us to. I know I can be a bit of an asshole, and that my past actions have given you a bad impression of me. But I want you to know that I—we—don’t have any expectations of you. I don’t ever want to do anything that you don’t want. I only want to make you happy, whatever that means.”

She nodded, and though her smile remained, there was still some unspoken sadness in her eyes.

“To that point, I have a surprise for you,” I said.

She cocked her head at me with intrigue, and my smile widened in anticipation.

I stood, still loosely holding her hand. “Come with me.”

She narrowed her eyes curiously but rose from the couch and let me usher her out of the library. She was quiet as I led her through the halls, and I hoped my surprise would be something she’d enjoy. I was determined to give her a fun day before our brittle utopia crumbled into oblivion.

Tannin was setting a record onto the Victrola as we entered, and when he saw us, he placed the needle on the edge of the black disk and flipped the switch on its base.

Music began to play softly, a symphony of string instruments whose title I didn't know, but I still appreciated its elegant beauty.

Aliya sighed wistfully, putting her free hand to her chest. "This was my mother's favorite song."

I smiled at the nostalgic look on her face. "I thought we might have ourselves a little ball. We've gone about this courting thing all wrong, and a princess should at least have the chance to be swept off her feet by her two dashing suitors."

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“Oh,” she said, surprise dancing across her features.

“And what’s a ball without wine?”

I placed a brief kiss on her hand, then released it and strode over to the buffet table against the wall where I’d set the champagne bottles and three glasses.

I tore the gold foil off one, then popped the cork, catching it in my palm as a flurry of foam gushed from the spout and spilled over my hand. I hastily poured the bubbly, rose gold liquid into the glasses, then wiped my hand on the tablecloth before bringing the glasses to Aliya as Tannin joined us.

I handed one to each of them, then raised my glass in the space between us. “To a bright new beginning and to our cherished princess.”

Tannin clinked his glass against mine, and Aliya timidly followed suit.

“I’ve never had champagne before,” she said, sniffing the glass. “Is it like wine?”

“It’s even better,” I said. “Try it. I think you’ll like it.”

She tentatively brought the glass to her lips and took a sip. Her eyes widened, and she took a bigger drink. “That’s delicious!”

I beamed in delight, then took a large gulp of my own glass before setting it back on the table.

I returned to her with a dramatic bow, holding out my right hand. “May I have the first dance, Princess?”

She blushed as she accepted my hand, and I led her out to the center of expansive floor, then scooped my hand behind her waist and began to twirl her around. In truth, I had no idea how to dance in any proper, royal way she might be accustomed to. Our dances were less formal, less structured, but I took her lead, easily anticipating the steps she expected until I had the basics mastered.

The song ended, and Tannin approached, tapping her shoulder.

“May I cut in?” he asked, flashing his most charming smile.

Aliya smiled at him, her whole face lighting up. I graciously handed her off to him, stepping back to watch them dance.

After the first several songs and more glasses of champagne, formality went out the window. Happily, Aliya seemed to be finally having fun. We took turns twirling her around and sharing with her our dances, which she picked up quickly, lending a delicate poise to the movements that the women of our pack never had.

Her jubilant laughter filled the ballroom, and I couldn’t get enough of watching her let loose and embrace her wild side. She was radiant, her honey hair whipping around her as she spun round and round.

I wanted to preserve this moment forever. Just the three of us, alone in the castle.

It might be the last time to ever experience such peace.

Chapter 20

Tannin

WATCHING ALIYA WRITHE and bounce to the music in Jax's arms was just amazing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd ever been so happy. I had my doubts about Jax's ball idea, but it turned out to be one of the best experiences I ever had.

We fit, the three of us. We could easily carve out our own private version of heaven right here in this castle, with nothing and no one but each other.

If only we could have enjoyed these moments sooner. I wished I'd stood up to Jax when we realized we were mated to her and stopped him from calling the pack, but it was too late now. That conversation would be the greatest regret of my life. And soon our frolicking freedom would end.

Jax and Aliya joined me at the buffet table after their dance finished, breathy and laughing. Jax grinned as he threw back the last glass of champagne.

"Should we get another?" he asked, holding up the empty bottle.

Aliya put her hand to her head. "No, I think I've had enough. In fact, I might need to sit down."

"Yes, I think we could all use a break." I went to Aliya's side and extended my bent elbow in a gesture of gentlemanly assistance.

She slipped her arm through mine, and I escorted her to the den, where we all collapsed onto the couch. Me on the left, Jax on the right, and Aliya in the middle. That was our perfect pattern.

With her arm still around mine, she rested her head on my shoulder. “That was fun. It’s been so long since this place has had a proper ball.”

Jax barked a laugh. “I don’t know if you could call it proper, being just the three of us, but I couldn’t imagine better company.”

She giggled. “It’s certainly better than me dancing with Willow to the ghost of music past in my head.”

The orange tabby let out a disgruntled meow from her place on the armchair as if she disagreed with that statement.

“I know, Willow,” Aliya replied. “You are an excellent dancer.”

Jax and I exchanged a glance and snickered.

I’d grown used to Aliya’s conversations with her cat and with herself. They both charmed and saddened me. I hated the thought of her alone all that time. For that reason, I was glad we’d come to Varinya, even if our motives had been malicious at the time.

The light outside the castle was growing dimmer, and my clock was ticking. I’d made a promise to Jax and myself that I would tell her the truth before the day was over. But as we sat there in the cozy silence, I couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

She deserves to know.

I opened my mouth, but it seemed to have a mind of its own. “What was it like before the plague?”

Her features lightened, her eyes sparking with remembered joy. “Oh, it was wonderful. The castle was so full of life, and the village never seemed to sleep. I was lucky in those days to get a moment of privacy, between my maids running around, my tutors lecturing me, and my mother fussing over me. I never thought I’d miss it so much.”

“What was your mother like?” Jax asked, surprising me with his interest.

Aliya pouted sweetly, her brows pinching together. “She was amazing. She was everything I wished I could be—intelligent, confident, commanding. Whenever she entered a room, everyone would go so silent you could hear a pin drop. But she was also kind and nurturing. Several days a month, she would work at the orphanage and nursing home. She never seemed to have a shortage of patience, something I always envied.”

I placed a kiss on her forehead. “She sounds a lot like you.”

She snorted. “Hardly. I’d be happy to become half the woman she was.”

“What about your father?” Jax asked. “Was he a good king?”

She shifted beside me, sitting up. “I believe so. I didn’t see him as much as my mother. He was always busy working. But everyone loved him, and our kingdom thrived. If that’s not a sign of a good king, then I don’t know what is.”

“I wish I could have met him,” I said before I could think better of it.

If he had been alive when we got here, one of us would have killed him before we

ever realized we were mated to his daughter.

I swallowed against the lump of guilt that formed in my throat. How ignorant and intolerant our prejudices had made us. We were so driven by hatred for past grievances that we weren't able to judge a person by their character, and there was no greater crime than killing an innocent person.

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I stole a glance at Jax, and the serious look on his face told me he might be thinking the same thing.

“Actually,” Aliya said, releasing my arm. “Would you like to meet him?”

Jax and I both turned our heads at her in confusion.

“There’s something I’d like to show you both.” She slid off the couch and stood to face us. “Come on.”

Jax and I rose and followed her out of the den, curiosity simmering in my chest. What could she possibly mean by “meet him”? Was her mind so far gone that she believed him to be alive somewhere? Was he alive somewhere, trapped in some form of diseased coma?

The list of possibilities was endless, so we said nothing as we followed her through the castle’s front doors and across the courtyard toward the village. Night was falling around us, casting an eerie aura on the empty storefronts and dark houses lining the main road.

Beneath the serenade of chirping crickets, I could almost hear the ghosts of those who once lived here, the echoes of laughing children, the whispers of pedestrians long gone. Though there wasn’t a soul in sight, I could feel a thousand pairs of eyes on me, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

They were watching us, judging us... condemning us.

“Aliya, where are we going?” I asked as we neared the end of the main road.

“When people first started dying from the plague, we would bury them in the valley just outside the village,” she explained, pointing to the treeless plain that opened beyond the last row of houses. “We didn’t know at first how horribly contagious the disease was, and it was always our custom to bury the dead.”

We passed the final house, and I could see a grid of modest stones and wooden posts revealing themselves among the tall grass and wildflowers.

“It wasn’t until the bodies started piling up that we began burning them instead,” she continued, leading us into the overgrown cemetery that seemed all but forgotten. “It got to a point that we’d light funeral pyres every night. So many lives went unmemorialized.”

Our steps pushed through the grass, and I took great care not to trip over any of the markers. Though Varinya had long been our enemy, I took no pleasure in knowing all its people were dead. We wouldn’t have killed them if we’d found it well-populated. Only the royals and those who opposed us.

Aliya would’ve been one of them, of course, so that didn’t make me feel much better.

“When my parents died, I didn’t want that to happen to them,” she said. “They were some of the last to go and seeing as I was apparently immune to the disease, I insisted they had proper burials.”

We came to the end of the graveyard, where two large piles of stones stood above the rest. The tops were draped in woven garlands of dried flowers.

“They deserved to be laid to rest with the people they loved so dearly,” she said, stopping in front of them and bowing her head at each.

“You buried them yourself?” Jax asked, his tone breathy with astonishment.

She nodded. “It took me two days to dig the holes deep enough, and another day to drag them here and fill in the dirt.”

I shook my head. “You poor, sweet girl.”

She wiped a tear from under her eye, the liquid glistening on the back of her hand in the moonlight. “I just couldn’t stand the thought of burning them. And I wanted to have a place where I could visit them. Every few weeks, I fashion new flower garlands and bring them out here to replace the dead ones.”

Jax stepped forward and knelt in front of them. “Your Royal Highnesses, it’s an honor to meet you at last. I only wish it could have been under different circumstances.”

I followed his lead, kneeling beside him in front of the graves of the monarchs we’d come here to kill. The guilt was overwhelming, crushing me like the memorial stones that marked their final resting place.

“You may be gone,” I said. “But your legacy lives on in your daughter. She’s an incredible person, and I think you’d be proud of the woman she’s become.”

“I know you can’t answer, but we’d like to formally ask for your daughter’s hand,” Jax said, and my throat constricted painfully. “Against all odds, we’ve mated to her. Fate works in mysterious ways... But we promise you that we will love, cherish and honor her until our dying breath. We will do our best to live up to the expectations you would have had for her husband.”

I smiled tightly, because I felt those words with just as much conviction with which he spoke them. I couldn’t put it off anymore. I had to tell her the truth.

I rose to my feet, squeezing my eyes against the refusal that pursed my lips. “Aliya, there’s something we have to tell you.”

I turned around and opened my eyes.

“Aliya?”

She was nowhere in sight.

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Jax sprang up at my concerned tone, then began whipping his head in all directions in search of her. “Where is she?” he snarled, his blue eyes glowing in the darkness.

“I don’t know. She was just here. Aliya!” I called out.

In the distance, racing footsteps sounded against the cobblestones. She was running back to the castle. She was running away from us.

I moved to sprint after her, but Jax’s hand shot out in front of my chest.

“Wait, do you smell that?” he asked, his ears perking as he scanned the night around us.

I sniffed the air, the foul, rotting odor teasing my senses. Oh, gods. “Cusith,” I breathed.

With one mind, the two of us leapt forward, shifting in midair and shredding out of our clothes. My claws kicked up clumps of earth behind me as I raced for the castle at top speed, Jax’s larger wolf form gaining as he charged beside me.

I didn’t know why Aliya had left us there or what she was planning, but I didn’t care. There were cusith here, and she was in grave danger. I only hoped we could get to them before they found her.

Chapter 21

Aliya

MY PULSE WAS POUNDING in my head even louder than the stomping of my feet beneath me. I ran faster than I'd ever run in my life, back toward the castle entrance. My legs ached, and my lungs burned, but neither could compare to the agony shredding my heart.

The day with Jax and Tannin had been so lovely, and I would cherish it forever. So many times as we danced and laughed, I questioned whether or not to go through with my plan. I had all but decided not to when Jax started asking about my parents. Those questions had given me the perfect opportunity to get them out of the castle, and I knew I couldn't let the chance slip away.

Despite their passionate declarations of love and devotion, it was clear to me Jax and Tannin's allegiance to their pack went deeper than our mate bond. I couldn't trust them to protect me, or what remained of my kingdom.

Standing in front of my parents' graves had reminded me of the sacrifices they'd made for their people and for me. And although it had destroyed me to do it, I'd known that turning my back on the two men I loved was the best way to honor their memories.

So, I crept away and bolted.

My feet had barely touched the cobblestone paths when Tannin called my name. Panic had shot a jolt of energy through my limbs, propelling me even faster.

But they were chasing me now. I looked over my shoulder, and two massive black wolves were darting across the cemetery at a terrifying speed.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, pushing my legs harder. I had to get to the entrance before they did. Jax and Tannin loved me in their human forms, but the beasts they'd become didn't look capable of love or anything other than brutal violence.

I didn't want to know what would happen if they caught me before I sealed the ward.

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The light spilling from the open castle doors got brighter and brighter the closer I got. Just a few more yards. Almost there!

Vicious snarls sounded behind me, claws scraping against the stones frighteningly close.

Please, let me make it!

I hurled myself over the last few steps across the perimeter I'd made, then frantically scrambled for the sage braid beneath the rock. They were getting closer. Any second, they'd reach me.

"Flamare!" I screamed at the end of the sage gripped in my hand.

It caught fire in a blaze of flames, and at this point, I didn't care if the whole thing incinerated because its smoke was all I needed.

I waved it in front of me, the thick, dark gray cloud it emitted blocking out the charging figures of the wolves only a few feet from me.

"Parum nir alte tunak!" I cried.

The final section of the ward snapped into place, a pulse of energy radiating outward and blowing my hair back as the ephemeral wall flashed with every color of the rainbow for an instant before vanishing from sight.

The next second, the wolves leapt right at me, making me trip backward and fall hard

on my ass. But they smacked into the invisible barrier with pained yelps, crumpling to the ground only inches from my feet.

The larger one rose back on its haunches, shaking its head and snarling at me.

“What is this?” Jax’s voice, though much deeper and more grisly.

“A ward,” I said shakily, staring at him with wide, horrified eyes. “I-it will only permit those I invite to cross it.”

The smaller wolf cocked its head at me as it stood up, narrowing its eyes at me as if I’d physically wounded it.

“Why would you do that?” Tannin asked in a wolfish whimper.

I hesitantly climbed to my feet, and though my legs wobbled with the exertion of my sprint, I stood tall and held my head high.

“I heard you both this morning,” I declared. “You’ve been lying to me ever since the moment we met.”

Tannin’s ears folded downward guiltily as he turned his head away.

Jax growled in frustration. “Then you know what’s coming. Our pack will soon be here, and we’re the only ones who can protect you from them.”

I shook my head firmly. “The ward will protect me from them. Let your pack have my village, but they will never have my castle.”

“That ward will not protect you for long,” he insisted. “They’ll find a way in eventually. Please, let us fucking help you!”

“Aliya, listen to us,” Tannin pleaded. “We swear on our mate bond, on everything we are, that we won’t let them hurt you. We’ll reason with them. But you must cooperate. They will view this barrier as a declaration of war, and we won’t be able to protect you from their wrath once that happens.”

Their words had doubt festering inside me. Could their pack really break the ward? Were Jax and Tannin being sincere, and even if they were, would their pack listen to them?

Seeing the desperation in their eyes tugged on my heart, the bond urging me to let them in, to hold them and reassure them that everything was okay.

But I’d made my decision, and I refused to go back on it now.

A raspy snarl rattled behind me, and my breathing halted as a shiver of deepest dread ran up my spine.

Slowly, I looked over my shoulder.

Not one buttwohideous, ash-gray monsters were prowling slowly toward me from the ballroom.

Cusith.

“Aliya!” Jax roared as one of them charged at me.

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“Zepheren!” I yelled on instinct as I thrust out both arms, palms out, and a gust of air exploded from my hands and blasted into the creature, sending it flying across the ground.

But the other one lunged for me in the next instant, and I narrowly jumped to my right before its claws could strike me, and it slammed into the invisible barrier.

I didn’t wait for it to recover, didn’t stick around to watch as Jax and Tannin clawed and rammed into the barrier in their attempts to get to it. I just ran.

My feet hit the ground with a pounding thud as I trailed the castle wall within the ward, desperate to put as much distance between myself and those nightmarish monsters. But they were fast on my tail, one of them shredding the ground behind me, and the other one impossibly scaling the wall above me.

What was I going to do? There was nowhere to run. I had created the ward to keep monsters out, and I had inadvertently trapped two demonic beasts inside it that would stop at nothing to tear me limb from limb.

Why hadn’t I learned more defensive magic? Dammit, I was such a fool! And now I was going to die for it.

“Aliya! Let us in!” Tannin barked as he and Jax ran along the outside of the ward, continuing their attempts to force their way through it.

“Don’t make me watch you die!” Jax roared desperately.

But I couldn't hear their pleas, couldn't focus on anything but staying out of the cusith's reach.

The chicken yard loomed around the corner, an obnoxious obstacle in my path. Kicking my feet faster, I rushed at it, then hurtled over the fence, wind whipping around me as I flew off the ground for two heart-stopping seconds.

The tip of my boot caught on the top of the fence, stopping my ascent and forcing me face-down onto the filthy ground of the yard. The hens slumbering in the coop exploded into a frenzy of wing flaps and startled clucks at my rude arrival, and I frantically scrambled to push myself up.

But I'd lost all momentum, and the cusith scaling the wall flung itself off, dropping straight for me.

"Aliya, please!" Jax bellowed.

There was no more time to think. My brief, pitiful life flashed before my eyes in an instant, and I did the only thing I could.

"I invite you in!" I screamed, shielding my face with my arms as the cusith dove closer.

Two large black forms shot over the fence above me, one of them tackling the falling cusith into the wall, and the other catching the second cusith as it broke through the fence.

For a moment, I was too terrified to move, petrified into a turtling position. Finally, I broke free of my paralysis and jackknifed upward, watching in morbid fascination as the two wolves crushed the two cusith between gnashing teeth and powerful claws.

Blood sprayed out from their mutilation, splattering the wall of the castle and staining

the wood of what remained of the fence. But Jax and Tannin didn't stop their savage assault until the beasts were nothing but pulp and shattered bone beneath them.

The two wolves backed away from their slain prey, panting and stumbling. Over the next few seconds, their forms shrank, their postures righting on two legs as their fur rescinded, and they once again became the two men I knew...and still loved.

Naked and covered in blood, they turned to face me, looking exactly as they had the night they'd come to me. Only this time, they had saved my life.

They both made a move toward me, and I ran to them without thought. They caught me as I threw my arms around each of their necks, wrapping their bodies around me and clutching me for dear life.

We held each other like that for a long time, and so many emotions were flooding over me that I couldn't name a single one.

I loved them. I hated them. I needed them. I couldn't trust them.

But right now, I didn't care about any of that. I was just glad we were all safe, and I was so overwhelmingly grateful to them for saving my life.

It was Jax who finally pulled away. "Come on. Let's get you inside."

I nodded, letting them each slip a hand into mine and guiding me toward the castle entrance.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked softly as we went through the large pair of doors.

"I don't know," Jax said. "But we'll figure it out together."

“Together,” Tannin agreed.

They both looked down at me, and I could feel the love in those intense gazes. My fate was in their hands now, whether I liked it or not, and I had no choice but to have faith.

I nodded. “Together.”
