



# The Healer and the Wolf, Part Two

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** She risked her heart to save him once. Now she'll risk everything to bring him home.

Vanessa thought the hardest part was over when she saved Leo, the wounded wolf shifter who stole her heart. But just as their new life together began, danger tore them apart, leaving Vanessa determined to fight for the man—and the wolf—she loves.

Leo never intended for Vanessa to become entangled in his dangerous world. Now, held captive by those who see him as nothing but a beast, memories of Vanessa's gentle touch are his only refuge. He knows she'll never stop searching, but he fears the price she'll pay might be too high.

As Vanessa gathers unexpected allies and prepares for a daring rescue, their bond proves stronger and deeper than either imagined. But to reclaim their future, they'll need more than bravery—they'll need trust, resilience, and the kind of love that refuses to surrender, no matter the odds.

The Healer and the Wolf: Part Two is a heartfelt, steamy paranormal romance about choosing love, finding strength in unexpected places, and fighting for the family you make. It is the thrilling conclusion to Vanessa and Leo's story.

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# Page 1

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1

VANESSA

“H elp me!”

Leo was calling for me; I would know that voice anywhere. Suddenly, I was thrust into a miasma of technicolor. None of it made much sense, just a mire of shades.

“Ven! Help me!”

It was as if his voice conjured the world. All the vague shapes suddenly solidified, and I was back in the lab again, the lights flashing red around me. Leo was in front of me, faceless lab technicians grabbing at him, trying to pull him away from me.

“Vanessa! I need you!”

“I’m trying!” The words coming out of my mouth felt like mush and were incomprehensible.

I threw myself against the window separating us, clawing at it and slamming my head against it, but I was so goddamn weak . I could only watch as Leo was dragged farther and farther away, still crying out my name, begging me not to abandon him.

“No, no, Leo, please! I’ll get to you! I swear I’ll get to you!” I slammed my palms into the glass, as if somehow I would become strong enough to shatter it.

But the crazy thing was, I could have sworn it was starting to give. The faintest green glow appeared around the edges, with spiderlike cracks growing in the glass.

Wait, no. Not spiderlike. Vine - like. Little hairline slivers of emerald. I had no idea what that could possibly be, but I did it again, and again, and again until the cracks began to spread farther out across the surface.

Suddenly, the ground turned to something like quicksand below my feet, and it was pitch black. I began sinking almost instantly, the floor greedily sucking me down like it was ravenous. My nails scored along the wall as I tried to grab the window ledge, but there was no stopping the insistent drag. Bit by bit, the ground swallowed me until the hungering void reached all the way up to my chin.

I was still calling for Leo as acrid nothingness spilled across my tongue. It was a curse and a plague all wrapped up in one, and I couldn't even spit it out before my entire head was swallowed and I was plunged into the endless dark.

I screamed—at least I thought I did—but there was no sound. Nothing. For a moment, I thought I would spend the rest of my life trapped in an endless void of nonexistence. But then I was dropped into a room where I hadn't been in quite a while.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. And by that, I meant it quite literally. Flames lit up the walls to my left while thick, cloying smoke bellowed through my closed door.

It was hot, so abysmally hot! I sat up from the bed and tossed off my comforter. Some part of my brain knew I needed to stick close to the floor and find a way out, but it was like my body was no longer my own. Fear, discomfort, and confusion overrode that small voice that knew what was safest.

I crawled to the closet, opening the door and hiding myself among the plushies there. All the while my mind was screaming that I needed to get out.

Get out.

GET OUT!

“Vanessa! Vanessa, baby, where are you?”

Oh, that voice.

I hadn’t heard that voice in over a decade. It was melodic and usually full of love, but now it was packed with the same terror I felt.

I tried to reply, but when I drew in a breath to answer the call, my lungs filled with smoke, and all I could do was cough.

It was getting hotter, and every second that passed made it harder to breathe. I needed to get out, but all I could do was hide with my toys.

That voice kept calling me, begging for me to come out, but I couldn’t. All I could do was cough and cling to the closest stuffed animal. I was so terrified, my entire body was paralyzed. My grown mind was screaming at me to move, to do something other than hide.

But I didn’t. Even as the world burned down around me, I let my fear win.

“Fuck!” I sat up so fast, my head spun. My stomach churned, wanting to get in on the action, some sort of competition for which body part could make me feel sickest quicker.

“Mrrr?” Goober trilled inquisitively as he rubbed his cheek against mine.

Mudpie wasn’t far behind, kneading my thigh and rumbling lightly.

Fork was missing, but a few beats later he came marching in, dragging his favorite toy along. He jumped on the bed and dropped it in my lap.

Oh, goodness.

They were all trying to help me. I loved my little family, and I couldn’t be more grateful for them. Ever since we’d returned after our disastrous outing to the medical facility, they could tell something was up. They’d been extra nice to me, buttering me up, never leaving me alone, almost always sitting on me and purring, like they were trying to heal me.

I loved them so much

“Hey, are you okay in here?” Ricky asked, peering in through the gap between my door and the wall. “I thought I heard something.”

“I’m fine,” I said, the lie tasting bitter on my tongue. “Nightmare.”

“Sorry about that. Want me to make some of that sleepy-time tea you have in the kitchen?”

Only a week had passed since my world had been turned upside down yet again, but in those seven days, Ricky and I had grown more comfortable with each other. It was nothing like what I’d had with Leo—nothing would ever be like that—but it was nice and familiar in a world that was rapidly becoming more and more foreign to me.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind. Especially since I think I’ll make some for myself anyways. I’d like to get a few more winks in before having to face the world.”

I got the feeling he was lying, but that was okay. “Well, if you were already going to make some for yourself, I wouldn’t mind some.”

“Sounds good. Do you want it up here?”

“No, I think I’m good on sleep for now.” To be honest, the thought of closing my eyes and possibly slipping back into another nightmare was too horrifying. Going out into the garden to siphon whatever peace I could from it would be far better than trying to force myself to go back to sleep. “I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Sounds good, I’ll put the kettle on to boil.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. We got to take care of each other, right? That’s what packs do.”

I gave him a soft smile, even though my heart ached.

Pack.

Who would have guessed that would become such a loaded term for me? The word was irrevocably tied to Leo and everything that came along with him. So much had been promised, so much we had all been hoping for.

And all of it was gone.

But I was determined to get Leo back. Our story wasn’t going to end with him being ripped away like that. I wouldn’t let it.

It would be nice if Ricky stopped getting in my way, however.

I'd thought that when we found the loophole in his alpha's orders, we'd turn right around and go rescue Leo. But no, that wasn't how it had turned out at all. Ricky was open to us going back, but not until we had a plan in place. What annoyed me the most was that he shot down every plan I came up with.

It was strange to be on the opposite side of such a similar argument that I'd had with Leo, but I was trying to be a little logical while also being speedy. It was called efficiency—at least, that was what I told myself.

While I knew there was some truth in what Ricky was saying, and that infiltrating without enough information last time had gotten us into trouble before, it was hard for me to care. I wanted to get Leo. There was no telling what they were doing to him, or even if he was still alive. My biggest hope was that they had no idea who he was, because if they realized he was the head of the pack who had killed three of their brothers... I didn't even want to imagine what they would do.

It wasn't like I hadn't tried on my own, either. Ricky still needed a lot of sleep since he wasn't fully recovered, so I'd waited until after he'd drank a particularly potent blend of tea with extra chamomile before I ventured out back to the medical facility. I couldn't use the truck for obvious reasons, but I had my trusty bike.

Yet even with my phone's GPS, I'd gotten hopelessly lost, which made absolutely no sense. I wasn't a savant, but I was pretty good with direction, so it wasn't likely that I'd gotten turned around. And yet every time my GPS said I was five minutes from my destination, it recalculated, then I was twenty minutes away again. They must have put some spell on it after we broke in. It was the only thing that made sense. And as much as I hated to admit it, that also gave a lot of credence to Ricky's insistence that we needed to wait for the heat to die down. There was no doubt they would be looking for us. Just because we'd escaped didn't mean we were safe.

Despite my morning shift at the grocery store the next day, I'd ridden around the entire night before giving up and starting back home. I knew Ricky would wake up before I got there, and sure enough, he'd rolled up with the truck when I was about two-thirds home. All that biking, along with work, had me practically confined to my bed all night and the next day because my legs hurt so much, but that still hadn't been enough to distract me from the gnawing in my chest.

They still had Leo. Nothing had changed.

Well, there was no use ruminating on that abysmal failure, so I went out to my garden and tried to do something productive. My work was punishing me for taking so much time off by cutting my hours, but I didn't care. We were heading into the real productive time of my little horticultural space, and I would fare well enough from that bounty. Especially since Ricky had brought home two rabbits the other day. He'd skinned and butchered them as well. I'd been surprised to say the least, but he said it was part of his responsibilities since I took care of everything else.

I could see why he and Leo got along so well. They definitely took on a lot of responsibility and cared for those around them. While I appreciated it, I wished it didn't make me miss Leo so damn much.

"Hey, guys, you're looking good," I murmured, trying to put my heart in it as I greeted the rows of tomato plants I'd been struggling with for the week. Although gardening was my respite, it wasn't easy to concentrate on it these days. Especially since every time I dug a hole or pruned an errant branch, I thought of how I could be saving Leo instead.

Soon. The thought was calming, even though I didn't really have any proof it would be soon at all. But whatever. Sometimes hope was a drug I very much needed.

Thankfully, my garden did turn out to be somewhat of a respite, even if its effects



were muted. I focused on getting the rest of my heirloom tomato varieties in below the cattle panel trellis I had erected on three T-posts, then went on to harvest a whole bunch of greens for lunch. No one could complain about not getting enough fiber in my house.

While I was washing some particularly vibrant leaves of chard at my makeshift processing station, I noticed two pairs of eyes staring out at me from the greenhouse. Fork and Mudpie were perched in different spots, watching me with that keen interest cats naturally had. It had been ages since they'd both been in the greenhouse while I was outside. The arrival of a giant wolf had definitely shaken things up a bit.

Goobar was there too, but unlike his siblings, he wasn't lounging. No, he was prowling around, looking for something. Maybe a mouse had gotten in? That was one of the reasons I had gotten the landlord's permission to build the cat tunnel. Although, if I was being honest with myself, my primary motivation had been hanging out with my cats while I was working outside—a difficult thing to do, considering I was strictly against having outdoor cats, so the cat tunnel was the best compromise.

Sure, some farms had barn cats, but those were animals with jobs. To me, that was very different from allowing my pet outside. I was well aware plenty of people would disagree with me, but those people wouldn't have to deal with the heartbreak if a coyote somehow got hold of my babies. Not to mention that back when I was volunteering at the clinic, we'd had a surge of FIV and FeLV kitties, which had also put me off having an indoor-outdoor cat. While veterinarian sciences had come a long way since then, those two infectious diseases could be so insidious, and if keeping my cats indoors kept them from suffering from debilitating conditions, then I was all for it.

It was under their watchful eyes that I finished all the planting I had to do for the day. After that, I was supposed to move on to weeding—goodness knew my garden

needed it—but a quick look up at the gray sky, as well as the smell of camphor and geosmin in the air, told me it was going to rain. And soon.

I could go inside, do some deep cleaning, maybe do more research on the internet about the Mammon cult, but all I wanted was to shut off my brain and listen to some music while keeping my hands busy.

Propagation it was.

As I headed into the greenhouse, Ricky stepped out on the back porch, fully dressed, looking much more awake than the last time I had seen him.

“Looks like it’s about to rain. You gonna come in?”

I shook my head. “Going to get some work done in the greenhouse. I’ll be sheltered in case it storms.”

“All right, I’m heading out for a bit. See if I can hunt something to fill your freezer. Don’t be alarmed if I’m not back until dawn.”

As much as the prospect of fresh venison or other game was exciting, I couldn’t help but feel there was something off about Ricky’s tone. Or maybe it was his body language. It was hard to tell since I was still getting to know him.

“You okay?” I asked cautiously, not wanting to sound suspicious. I was going for concerned. I figured he had the right to be a little off considering everything he’d gone through while trapped in his wolf form and abused for so long, but it never hurt to check in.

“Yeah, yeah.” He said it in a way that made it sound like he wasn’t okay at all. “Got a lot on my mind.”

“Anything you want to share?” We weren’t that close, but I hoped he knew I was more than happy to listen to anything that was troubling him.

“Nothing that’s new. Same ol’, same ol’.”

“Leo?” I hedged. Although a good part of me resented Ricky for carrying me out of the laboratory and keeping me away for the past week, I also understood that he’d had to go against his very wolf nature. He chose to follow Leo’s orders and keep me safe rather than save his best friend. I had to respect that even if I hated it.

“Pretty much.”

“I’m sorry.” It was all I could think to say, because really, what else was there? We’d gambled, and it hadn’t turned out in our favor. As a result, we’d lost someone incredibly important to us, even if Leo was important to each of us in different ways.

“You ain’t got nothing to apologize for.”

“Feels like I do.”

Ricky let out a sigh that was jam-packed full of emotion and scuffed his shoe against the ground. I got the sense he was thinking, so I didn’t interrupt him. But it seemed like he wasn’t quite done grappling with whatever was in his brain, because after quite a pregnant pause, he tipped his head.

“You be safe now. I’ll be back soon.”

“I will,” I promised.

With that, Ricky shifted into a wolf and took off into the trees.

I watched him go, idly observing all the differences between him and Leo in their wolf forms. Ricky was still far larger than the standard lupine, but several inches shorter than his alpha, and he didn't have nearly as much mass. His coat was darker with a reddish hint, and his eyes were bright yellow. And now that he had quite a few good meals into him, his bones didn't show anymore, making him look much more like the apex predator he was supposed to be.

Once he disappeared out of sight, I headed into my greenhouse to work on some climbing jade babies as well as golden pothos nodes. It was soothing, especially with my cats all around me. Goober was still on the hunt, winding around my legs occasionally and eek-eek-eeking like he usually did whenever he saw a particularly pudgy squirrel scurrying past the kitchen window. But there were no squirrels here as far as I could tell, so I chalked it up to my Maine Coon being a silly Maine Coon.

Sure enough, about an hour or so into my propagation groove, the sky opened up and rain poured down. It was impossible not to think of the time Leo and I had been caught in the rain together, as well as everything that had happened after it. It had all seemed like a fairy tale at the time. Now, my story felt like more of a tragedy.

Depressing.

I tried not to think about it, though, which was easier said than done. So, I put all my focus on my plants, being as meticulous as I possibly could.

I stayed out until it was time to feed the cats again. Once all their bowls had the appropriate serving in them, I realized I needed to feed myself, too. I made a salad out of the greens and tossed some shredded chicken on top. It was no steak smothered in deliciously caramelized onions and sauteed mushrooms, but it was plenty tasty—and there was the added satisfaction that I had been the one to grow it.

Granted, it was impossible not to think what Leo would say if he was eating it. I

knew he needed a lot of protein in his diet, but it never stopped him from complimenting whatever I served him from my garden. I closed my eyes, trying not to think how excited I was to feed him his first garden-fresh tomato or pick a cucumber off the vine and slice it up for us. I would get him back before either of those were ready to harvest.

I swore it.

I stared out the window as I ate, watching the rain. Once I was done, I quickly did the few dishes from the day and settled in to read a book with my cats curled around me.

I had become so used to being alone in my home. Used to the quiet. Used to the emptiness. But having Leo and Ricky in my space for such a short time had made me accustomed to company. To the warmth of another person. To being able to walk up to either of them and start a conversation. Hopefully, I'd get that back soon enough.

I just needed to come up with a better plan.

With so many heavy things on my mind, sleep didn't exactly come easy. Just when I'd managed to drift off, a loud bang from the kitchen had me sitting bolt upright in my bed. I needed to be careful otherwise I was gonna throw my back or my neck out. Maybe both. Then I really would be useless.

My cats scattered as I put on a robe and hurried down to the kitchen, grabbing the bat I kept at the door along the way. While I knew investigating such a sound would likely get me killed in a horror movie, I'd lived out in the country long enough to know that many things that went bump in the middle of the night had natural explanations beyond an intruder.

"Ricky?" I exclaimed as I rounded the corner into my kitchen, the bat raised.

He looked worse for the wear, battered and absolutely filthy. It was a bit of a shock, especially since it was so similar to how Leo had first stepped into my kitchen. Except Ricky was Ricky, and Leo was Leo, and my heart belonged only to the alpha.

“Ven,” he wheezed, limping over to my kitchen table and plopping into a chair. “Don’t suppose you’d be willing to patch me up?”

“What the hell happened?” I asked, immediately going into triage mode. Step one was grabbing my first-aid kit, step two would be evaluating his wounds, then anything after that would come from the information gained in step two.

“I tried to get in, Ven. I figured the last thing they would expect was for me to grab one of their workers on a Monday night so I could infiltrate on a Tuesday morning before they got to doing whatever they do down there. And I figured I could use the night to press any information out of whoever I managed to grab.”

I gaped at him. That was about the last thing I’d expected. “You went to save Leo without me?” Perhaps not the most pertinent or mature question, but sometimes my mouth moved faster than my brain.

Ricky gave me a rueful look, but his wince of pain marred the expression. “Thought I had a way not to risk you. Because if I got Leo back but something happened to you, he’d never forgive me.”

I didn’t know how I felt about that. While my ego was definitely pleased at the idea that Leo would be so affected if something were to happen to me, I couldn’t help but feel that maybe I could have helped Ricky, so he wouldn’t have come home so battered.

“What happened? Did whoever you pick have more bite than bark?” I asked, trying to inject some humor into the situation, despite the fact that it wasn’t very funny at all.

“Never even got that far,” Ricky grumbled, staring at the floor. Embarrassment and shame radiated from him, but I wasn’t really sure what to do about it. “I had to shift to get close this time, ’cause I figured they’d know our truck, even with switching out all the license plates.”

That made sense, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the same issues I’d had with my GPS had extended to the truck America and her tribe had given us. I didn’t say that, however, because I didn’t want to interrupt Ricky.

“But I guess it’s still too soon, because right when I took my wolf form, I wasn’t in control anymore. It was like my inner wolf was rabid. My entire mind was full of hatred. It was like every thought was bite, rip, tear . I couldn’t keep track of my plan at all, and my wolf locked in on some enemy shifters’ scent.”

“Bears?” I murmured.

Ricky’s eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“That’s how Leo and I first met. He’d been pretty badly wounded by a couple of bears. I didn’t know they were shifters at the time, but I wouldn’t doubt it now.”

“Holy shit! Two bear shifters got their paws on him, and they didn’t finish the job?”

“Well, I chased them off.”

It was so strange to think back to that time—a world I’d thought only had humans and animals, and I didn’t fit well into either group.

“ You chased off two bear shifters?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?” I asked with mock offence.

“Come on. I’m pretty sure I don’t have to spell it out. A human versus two aggressive bear shifters enthralled by a group of evil warlocks? That pretty much only has one outcome.”

“Two outcomes, apparently,” I teased, and it felt like the tension eased ever so slightly. Good. I needed Ricky to relax before I cleaned his wounds. Although I had witnessed the wonders of shifter healing firsthand, it was a bit less effective while they were in their human forms. Also, they healed so rapidly it was easy for foreign objects to become sealed within their body, causing little pockets of infection. Their systems could handle it, but it took a lot of extra time and energy. The wounds I managed to clean first healed much faster than the ones I didn’t, and they never scarred. Not even temporarily. “But if I’m being honest, they probably already thought Leo was dead. All I did was scream and wave my hands around. Made a real fool of myself.”

Instead of chuckling, Ricky simply shook his head. “Leo wasn’t kidding. You really are something else, aren’t you?”

Oh, no. I could barely tolerate it when Leo got all complimentary; it felt downright weird coming from Ricky. “You know, normally when people say that, they don’t mean it in a nice way.”

“Well, I do, so fuck all of ’em who say otherwise. Leo’s a good judge of character—always has been. So, if he says something, I’m gonna believe my alpha.”

“Fair enough.”

The conversation tapered off as I focused on tending to his wounds. The entire time, my mind raced. I knew I had to say something, but I wasn’t sure how best to do it. It wasn’t until I finished up and tossed the last bloody washcloth into the sink that I turned to Ricky.



“If you’re going to rescue Leo, we have to do it together. This is not a solo project.”

“Ven, I admire you, I do, but I’m already pushing things by even trying to rescue him. My orders were clear, and it isn’t right for a beta to be going an’ exploiting loopholes. Taking you would be a step too far. I’ve gotta keep you protected. For Leo.”

I took a deep breath, quickly calculating what cards I had to play. “I understand that, but I need you to understand something as well.”

“What’s that?”

What I was about to do was underhanded and would likely ruin the trust I had built up with Ricky, but I was desperate. And desperate times most certainly called for desperate measures.

“I’m the one who broke Leo’s curse and then yours. Neither of you would have your humanity or even an idea of what happened to your pack if not for me. I’m the one who orchestrated the plan to save you. And in the end, I’m the one who drove the truck into that bastard and then found the medical facility.”

Ricky looked downright uncomfortable. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying the two of you owe me, and pretending you know better than me, like you’re grown men and I’m some little child, is ridiculous. You need my help. Either we build this rescue plan together and try to come up with the best way to keep all of us safe, or I will find a way to go on my own. And I doubt this time the bear shifters will be so accommodating to my strategy of screaming and waving my arms.”

Ricky didn’t say anything for a long while. He just gave me a hard stare colder than any look he’d ever given me. Not that I could blame him, but I hoped he would

understand in time.

“You drive a hard bargain, but all right. Let’s come up with a plan to get Leo back.”

“And this time you won’t automatically shoot them down because you don’t think they’re good enough? You’ll give real reasons if you’re dubious?” I hated to be such a stickler, but I felt like I had to be considering the switch-up he’d already pulled on me.

“Yeah, I promise. We do owe you everything, so the least I can do is honestly hear you out.”

“All right, then,” I said, trying not to let my voice crack as relief flooded through every cell in my body. “Let’s get to planning.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:53 pm*

2

LEO

Z ap!

I awoke with a jolt, the entire world spinning so violently, my body rattled with it.

Wait, no, that was actual electricity zinging through me, courtesy of the bleary figure standing around me.

Where was I? What was happening?

It took me a couple of moments to remember. Right. We'd infiltrated the medical facility, which turned out to be less of an office and more of a secret lab dedicated to experimenting on magical folk. I'd known the brothers were twisted, but somehow seeing so many different people in cages made it all the more real for me. They were some real sick fuckers. The world would be better with them put down.

Except it seemed I was the one who was at risk of being dispatched at the moment.

Another surge of electricity went through me, and every muscle in my body tensed, making me jerk and seize against the restraints binding me to the metal table.

It took an age to end, and when it finally did, I was both breathless and smoking. It was morbidly fascinating, but the haze of pain made it hard to appreciate the phenomenon of my body rapidly healing after such a strong shock.

As for the masked goons in lab coats around me, they simply observed what was happening and casually wrote it down, like torturing me was the most boring, academic thing in the world. Honestly, it was a bit insulting. Was I not putting on a good enough show for them? Was torturing me not entertaining enough for them?

Bastards.

My inner wolf howled to get out, throwing itself at the edges of my mind, but it was locked so tightly inside of me that I knew without a shadow of a doubt it wasn't getting out. It wasn't me keeping it in, though. There was something else within me that was stopping it from coming out. If I had to guess, these fuckers had probably dosed me with wolfsbane. That was one of the oldest tricks in the books when it came to us wolf shifters.

"Subject's heart rate has returned to the appropriate range," one of the scientists said, and, God, it made me wanna rip his throat out, even with my blunted teeth.

"Hmm, so far, it appears that being conscious hasn't decreased or increased the body's repair rate."

The body! I had a fucking name. Granted, I didn't want these people to know my name considering who their bosses were, but still. It was like I wasn't even a living, sentient being to them. I was just an experiment. Something to observe, but never empathize with.

I held on to that anger as they shocked me again and again. After that, things grew too hazy, and I couldn't keep track of what was going on. It was all torrential surges of pain followed by a slow slide toward normalcy, but never quite getting there before the next wave rolled in.

When my mind finally cleared enough for me to actually observe what was

happening around me, I saw that the electric paddles were gone, and they were hooking me up to an IV bag. I had no idea what was in there, but I was sure it wasn't good. Considering their warm-up had been trying to fry my brain, I wasn't looking forward to seeing what round two would look like.

Not that I had a choice.

Once more, I fought against the silver restraints locking me down, and once more, that did absolutely nothing but bruise my wrists. I didn't need the scientists' input to know it was taking me longer to heal.

Fuck.

On top of torturing me, which I wasn't really a fan of, they were getting all sorts of vital information on my species that probably would not go into good hands. I hated the idea of the brothers being more knowledgeable on how to exploit my kind.

The concern in my mind was quickly obliterated as burning pain consumed my entire body. I tried to resist it at first, but it overrode every single one of my senses. All I heard was my own ragged screaming. My vision was blurry and red, like I was too low on health in a video game. I could taste my own blood on my tongue and smell a strange chemical concoction wafting from my skin. As for feeling... It was pure, undiluted agony, unlike anything I'd ever felt before, and I hadn't exactly had an easy life.

With no way to fight it, the only thing I could do was retreat from it. I buried myself in my mind, trying to dissociate into happier, warmer memories.

I thought of the first time I lost a tooth, and Ricky explained the concept of the tooth fairy to me. I didn't have parents at the time to place a quarter under my pillow, yet one had been there when I woke up. Now, I had no doubt it was my best friend or his

mother taking on a role they never should have had to.

I thought of when my father came home from a long trip to recover part of our territory from an encroaching pack to find me having burnt some toast in an effort to make him something to eat. A strange smile had crossed his features and then he'd hugged me. Back then I'd thought he was laughing at my silly mistake, but my adult perspective told me he'd been crying.

I wished I'd had more time with him. I wished he hadn't been killed by another power-hungry alpha who wanted to forcibly subjugate our pack.

But I couldn't delve into that memory now. No, now was time for happiness. For all those warm little moments that made life worth living. The times in between. The smiles, the jokes between friends, the good meals shared in warm kitchens, the soft touches. All of it.

Of course, thinking of good and soft things brought up so many memories of Ven. In the grand scheme of things, we hadn't spent that much time together, but it didn't surprise me how many of my happy recollections had her as the lead actress. The way the sun shone through the windows of her greenhouse onto her hair while she worked. The smell of the soil as the two of us spent time together in her garden, creating food in a way I'd never had before. Sure, I'd hunted many times throughout my life, but that was always taking a life. Vanessa? She made life, which dazzled me right down to my core.

So, I let her protect me. I let her be my haven away from the torture. I let myself get lost in the memory of her smile, find comfort in the recollection of her scent, to relax into the ghost of her touch as if it was happening at that very moment.

It didn't completely block out the pain, but it made it survivable, and that was all I needed. Because these wizards or whatever they were could do whatever they wanted

to me, but eventually, I would find a way to get back to my pack. I was their alpha, after all, and I had a mission. One way or another, I would find a way out.

Back to my pack.

Back to Ven.

It was with her on my mind that I allowed myself to fall into the blissful nothingness. Because unlike so many other times in my life, I wasn't truly alone.

How long had I been held in the strange prison I'd ended up in?

I didn't know.

Part of me thought it could only be days, yet another part felt like it could be years.

I was so darn hungry it felt like my stomach was eating itself, yet it felt like I was constantly nauseated to the point of losing whatever I had last eaten. They didn't feed us, at least as far as I could tell, just kept us attached to those cursed IV bags. It didn't always hurt, which suggested that some were for experimentation, and some were for sustenance, but I was still wary of them.

Not that it really mattered.

I hated how weak I was, but whatever they were pumping into me severely limited my natural abilities. If I had to guess, I would think I had worse senses than a human now. I felt about as weak as a toddler. It was humbling, that was for certain.

But I still tried to fight. Granted, the keyword was tried. I wasn't exactly successful, considering my heavily-damaged state. However, when they came to my holding cage to pull me out yet again, I made another attempt.

“You think he’d get the point by now,” one of the larger handlers said. Although I was often out of my mind from the drugs, I had been lucid enough to figure out that there was three classes within the staff of the medical facility.

First were what I called the scientists. I didn’t know if that was their actual classification, but that’s how they seemed to me with all of their poking, prodding, and writing down the results on their notepads, or typing them furiously into a tablet. They were clearly the head honchos of the day-to-day stuff, and my torturers.

Next were the handlers. The muscle. It definitely seemed like if you were mindless enough, they bewitched you somehow. Perhaps by a mindwalker or the remaining brothers. Considering the broad expanse of mindwalker abilities—humans knew them as psychics—I couldn’t really say one way or the other. But the handlers were the ones who got us in and out of cages and fought whenever anyone mustered up the strength to resist.

And lastly, the janitorial staff. There were only a few of them, and never more than two on one shift, but I got the feeling that all of them were there against their will. Maybe it was the soulless look in their eyes, or the way they were always working, monotonously trudging to their next task. It wasn’t like I could ask any of them—the muzzle around my mouth prevented speech. They didn’t want me to bite either them or myself. I couldn’t help but wonder how many they’d lost from that particular trick before figuring out a way to stop it. Normally, even chomping through one of the thick veins toward the broadest part of the tongue would heal before it could do much damage, but our situation was far from normal. I was pretty sure someone could stab me, and my wound would heal even slower than a human’s.

“Yes,” the other handler said so flatly, it pretty much confirmed my suspicion that not all of them were in full control of their faculties. That made me burn with even more rage for the brothers. They really had a knack for absolutely ruining people’s lives in the worst way possible.



Even though it was clear the more lucid one was mocking me, I still tried to fight as best I could, and just like every other time, it didn't stop anything from happening. I still ended up strapped to that damn medical table in those impossible silver bonds.

I wanted to sneer at the scientists who only came in once I was fully secured. Wanted to taunt them about their cowardice and show them I wasn't scared of their disgusting methods. But with the flat metal holding my tongue down, I could only glare. God, I hated them. One day, I would tear out all their throats.

Surely Ven would understand.

I tried to stay alert as one of the assistants disappeared into that first room with all the vials and returned with an IV bag that was a completely different color than any other they'd used before on me.

That was probably not a good thing.

God, after I'd been trapped in my wolf body for so long, I never would have thought I'd yearn to have it again. But being trapped in my human form wasn't much better, and although I liked being sentient, I despised feeling vulnerable.

I could only glare at them as they hooked the IV and inserted the line into my arm. The first couple of times I'd woken up cold and exhausted in my holding cage, I'd ripped the IV out just to make their life a little more complicated. But every time they simply put a new one in, and in more inconvenient places than the last, so I'd given up on that particular method of resistance.

Sometimes it took a couple of minutes for me to feel the effects of whatever concoction they were giving me, but not this one. After being deprived of both halves of myself for quite a while, I could feel the call of my wolf almost instantly.

Joy rushed through me, a strange feeling in the hellscape I was in, but it was quickly snuffed out when I realized what was actually happening. I wasn't shifting because I had suddenly gained the ability. I was shifting because the liquid pumping into my veins was forcing me.

Ah, so it seemed that we were doubling down on that whole not-a-good thing.

Although I had no idea why they would possibly want to try to force me into my wolf form, it wasn't something I wanted to hand over to them. I tried to fight it. I tried to resist, but it was like trying to subvert gravity. My wolf was an inevitable, primordial force rushing toward me, trying to swallow up everything I was.

Once more, I was struck by how much they could pervert everything about being a shifter. My wolf and I were supposed to be two halves of the same coin, working in conjunction with each other. We were the same yet different. One mind, one soul, spread across two forms.

But the drugs were subverting that, turning my wolf into a mindless beast ripping my thoughts in two as it tried to claw its way to the surface. It wasn't me at all. It was something else.

I couldn't shift. I couldn't . I needed to fight it as long as I could, even if it felt like I was trying to fight the urge to breathe. As inevitable as it seemed, I had to try.

Fur began to ripple down my body, and at that exact moment, the entire world seemed to shake. It was subtle at first, the warning before a storm, but then a true furor broke out.

Was it an earthquake?

No, that didn't make sense. I was pretty sure we weren't in a part of America where

that was an issue. Whatever was happening shook me so hard that my teeth—an uncomfortable combination of wolf canines and human bicuspid—rattled.

Everything was a haze of chaos as the lights around me flashed red and the staff straight up fled from the room. I tried to lift my body to see what was going on, but the restraints kept me in place. My fingers were beginning to crack and bend, unsure which form they were supposed to be, and I got the impression it was supposed to be painful, but I was so hopped up on whatever they'd given me, I couldn't really feel it.

I hated how much they messed with my mind. I didn't know if it was resisting the shift or the chemical cocktail that was causing my thoughts to begin to melt into each other and turn unintelligible. I only knew it was growing harder and harder to think by the second.

Thoughts were sliding into each other, as were the few colors I could make out through the haze of red lighting. My tongue was still sloppily trying to form words, fighting against the flat metal attached to my muzzle that was keeping it in place. Everything was a cacophony, a sheer torrent of sensation and information that my brain simply wasn't capable of understanding.

But then, like an angel parting through all the fire and brimstone surrounding me, Ven's face came into view.

She was so beautiful.

I'd always known that, but it struck me in the moment. Everything else was a blurry, confusing mess, but her face stood out in perfect clarity.

I tried to say something, although I didn't quite know what. Not that it mattered as it couldn't get past the metal in my mouth. Ven, the specter that she was, murmured something, then very real hands were on either side of my head, undoing the

restraints that kept me in place.

Ven produced a key from God only knew where, then undid the rest of the restraints. With every shackle falling off me, more slivers of clarity began to sink in until I could finally understand some of what she was saying.

“Don’t worry, I’m here. We’re going to get you somewhere safe, okay?”

Safe? Of course, I would be safe. I was with her, wasn’t I?

Of course, seeing her meant I was likely in the deep throes of torture, but that didn’t really matter if I couldn’t feel it, right? Even the wolf that had demanded to be let out was easing back, settling into its usual territory within my mind.

“The others are making it safe for us to go, so all you have to worry about is sitting up when you can. Don’t try to speak now. Just focus on your breathing, please? For me?”

The others?

As if on cue, Ricky appeared within my field of vision, along with two other people I’d never seen before. I’d read somewhere once that our minds couldn’t make up new people in our dreams, so maybe I hadn’t slipped into a torture-borne disassociation.

But if that was true, it meant Ven was indeed right in front of me.

“Okay,” Ven said, voice still so soft and syrupy. “We’ve got all the restraints off. Do you think you can sit up?”

Sit up? Sure, even babies could sit up, and I most certainly wasn’t—

Huh.

I tried to sit up, but my muscles weren't receiving signals from my brain. I lay there, tongue slack in my mouth, staring up at my four rescuers. If they were real, they had to be having some wild thoughts about me at the moment.

"I don't think you can," Ricky said. Even in my messed-up state, I could hear the concern in his voice. "You two carry him. I'll make sure to clear the path. Ven, you bring up the rear."

"Will do."

They picked me up off the table that had become so much of my world and carried me through the chaos. There was more screaming and what sounded like fighting, but I couldn't really focus enough to see it. It wasn't until we were nearly out the very door that had first locked me away from Ricky and Ven that I managed to get my wits about me enough to speak.

"Wait!"

I would have cringed at my weak and reedy voice if I was physically able. Ven was at my side in an instant, gripping my hand.

"What is it? Are you okay?"

"The others..." I wheezed, hoping that would be enough, but when I saw confusion on their faces, I knew I needed to say more. It was difficult considering how fuddled and slipshod my thoughts were, but somehow I was able to grab on to an idea enough to get it out of my mouth. "We have to free the others. We can't leave them behind."

Ven's voice was only soothing as she brushed my sweat-soaked hair off my forehead.

“I know, dear. We’ve got people on it.”

People? What people?

As if she could hear my thoughts, she stroked my hair one more time. “We learned our lesson and came with a whole lot more than just the four of us. We’ll make sure not a single person is left in a cage.”

Oh.

Relief flooded me as heavy as any drug, and whatever fight I had left in me faded. I could only barely cling to consciousness as we hurried to the elevator I’d thought I would never see again, then up and out of the building. I wanted to ask more questions, but even without the metal contraption in my mouth, I couldn’t quite work up the wherewithal to speak.

However, my vision cleared up enough to see that there were four vehicles waiting for us, engines all running. They placed me in the back of the van, where the seats had been flattened and blankets laid out. The two who had been carrying me hurried up front while Ven and Ricky settled beside me. They slammed the doors shut and peeled out before I could say a word. There was still plenty of room for others.

Worried, I raised my head enough to see more figures rushing out of the building and piling into the other vans and truck before also speeding off. Had we really done it? Were they all free?

I didn’t know, but I took solace in the fact that all the vehicles were taking off in different directions. Even if one of us got caught, the majority would make it.

I couldn’t believe it. As I watched the facility get smaller and smaller in the distance, it suddenly exploded.

I stared, dumbfounded, until one of the strangers from the front spoke. He was missing an eye, but his other one shone with malevolent glee as he twisted in his seat to look back at us.

“I always said I was gonna burn that place down, and I always keep my word.”

I stared at him in confusion, then a memory triggered. Right, he’d been there when I’d first been captured. I’d caused such a ruckus and so much damage then that about ten experiments had escaped their cages. He had to have been one of those who got free.

And he came back for me.

Well, he came back for all of us.

I was touched. I had spent so much of my life taking care of others and had largely considered myself expendable, but Ven, Ricky, and a stranger had risked everything to save me.

Even though I’d forced Ven to abandon me.

Yeah, I’d have to face the consequences of that, but it could wait. Everything could wait. For the moment, I just wanted to close my eyes and enjoy my freedom.

VANESSA

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked, trying to sound casual as I poked my head into my own room. It was hard not to believe I was dreaming as my eyes settled on Leo’s worn figure.

He’d only been a prisoner for a week and five days, but the effects of the experiments on his body were visceral. He’d lost so much weight in that time I couldn’t help but wonder if they ever fed him. I had hypothesized before that starvation was a pretty good weapon against shifters, and it definitely looked like I was right. Most of Leo’s muscle was gone. His cheeks were gaunt and hollow, and his eyes looked sunken in. What would have happened if it had taken us another few days or a week to rescue him?

I didn’t need to go down that rabbit hole. He was safe. He was here. In my bed. Hopefully, his body was quickly burning through the remnants of the drugs they had given him.

“Do you have more of that iced tea you made a week ago?”

The tea he was talking about was something I’d made him a month earlier, but I didn’t correct him. I figured being a little confused about the timing of things was perfectly justifiable given everything he’d gone through.

“The hibiscus ginger tea for nausea?” I asked.



While his smile was shallow, it was so damn sweet as it spread across his features. He was still handsome. Still my Leo. Sometimes it was hard not to see the way his body had been ravaged and feel entirely responsible.

It had been incredibly reckless and stupid to think the three of us could waltz into some secret lab and come out unscathed. We'd only managed to do that with the party at Chadwicke's estate because I had a special skill, there were lots of other people to blend in with, and a whole bunch of other mitigating circumstances lined up at once. Leo had quite literally paid for my hubris, and I wasn't going to let that happen again.

It embarrassed me that it took until Ricky and I had the honest-to-God agreement to come up with a plan for me to come up with the oh-so-brilliant idea of "let's find help". Yeah, a real Einstein moment there.

Both Ricky and I had gotten used to being on our own, although in very different ways, and we'd forgotten that we didn't have to do everything within our own little bubble. That night I had reached out to America while Ricky went on runs to see if he could find any other allies. He'd ended up running into one of the escapees that Leo had somehow managed to free when he was captured. According to them, after we'd escaped, almost the entire lockdown staff had been focused on trying to contain Leo. And of course, the alpha being who he was, he'd used every opportunity to damage or break cages. Apparently, nearly a dozen different experiments managed to get out of their holding area, but only the one Ricky found, and another, had managed to go the full distance.

They were starving and still very weak when Ricky brought them to me, but I did my best to fill their bellies and treat them however I could. A difficult thing to do considering I didn't know everything that had happened to them, but I figured I could help with the headaches, the nausea, the pain, and the bone-crushing fatigue.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Leo said, still smiling, although his eyelids were beginning to flutter. He’d pretty much been asleep since we brought him back, but that was fine with me. Sleep meant he was healing, and it gave me time to adjust to him being back.

For so long I’d been terrified that he’d never come home. I’d spent so many nights lying in bed, replaying everything that had gone wrong, worrying that would be the last time I’d ever see him. Thankfully, I’d been given a second chance.

I wasn’t going to take it for granted.

“I’ll get that ready for you right now. And perhaps some toast?” Although I would have loved to fill him up with some roasted rabbit or even fresh greens from the garden, I was pretty sure those would be a little harsh on his stomach. After all, he’d only been back for a little less than a day. He still needed some time on the B.R.A.T diet before I moved him onto richer solids, but that would happen soon enough. He was a shifter, after all, and I had no doubt the more calories we got into him, the faster he would heal.

“Sure, I can take a slice.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I hurried downstairs, stepping over the two shifters who had made makeshift beds for themselves on my living room floor. I felt bad that I didn’t have more room to accommodate them, but they seemed more than happy with the arrangement. It was likely a marked improvement from their cells at the facility or the forest floor.

If my presence bothered them, they didn’t so much as stir. Like Leo, they needed a lot of rest so their bodies could heal properly. When I entered the kitchen, I wasn’t surprised to see Ricky washing dishes from the night before. Normally, it was no problem for me to keep up with my own stuff, except when my depression got really

bad, but with all the guests I currently had, I really appreciated his help.

“I’m going to make some tea and toast for Leo. Do you want some?”

“Nah,” he said, wearing the same grin he’d had on ever since we’d gotten home safely. It hadn’t been a straight shot from the lab. We’d driven quite far on the highway before getting off at a random exit, hopping onto another highway, then going through back roads until we reached the interstate. I’d held onto Leo the entire time, even when my eyes fluttered closed somewhere around two in the morning. We’d arrived at America’s soon after that. The rest of the rescue vehicles had beaten us there. As far as I could tell, we’d all managed to get away without being followed. Pretty impressive, if I had to say so myself.

I wasn’t a shifter, but even I could tell that shifters had pack rivalries and inner tensions, so they didn’t often work with each other, and that sort of assumed separation was the best thing we could take advantage of. Eventually the brothers would catch on that we were all uniting, but the longer we could stop that from happening, the more likely it was that our plans would work. Because as much as I would have loved for all the drama to end, we still had a whole lot of pack numbers to recover.

Not to mention a whole lot of brothers to deal with.

That thought was daunting, so I pushed it out of my head, and just in time, too, because I realized Ricky was still talking to me. Whoops.

“—hunting again. I’ll have to go a bit farther than usual, but I’m pretty sure there’s an issue with deer overpopulation a couple of hours away from here. I want to help curb those numbers before it gets bad. I imagine with all of us shifters going missing, there’ll be more and more issues like that cropping up in the tri-state area.”

Oh. I hadn't even thought of that. Naturally, shifters, with their high needs for protein, would eat a lot of meat. It would likely make all of them go bankrupt if they had to get it from the store, and I got the impression that their wolf side needed the enrichment of the hunt as well. So, with all that considered, it made sense that they put a dent in the local wildlife population. Man, I very much doubted the brothers cared that they were disrupting the ecosystem, which just showed how their insidious greed disrupted everything right down to the way nature was meant to work.

"Be safe, okay? Leo would kick my ass if anything happened to you."

Ricky let out a good-natured laugh and gently elbowed at my side. "Please, we know Leo would never lay a hand on you. In fact, I'm pretty sure he'd cut his own arm off before doing something like that." Then he wiggled his eyebrows. "Except for, you know, in a fun way."

"All right, that's enough from you. Off you go," I said hurriedly, feeling my face heat. What he was saying was true, and I did like the intense bite of Leo's fingers when he held my hips while fucking me, but that didn't mean I wanted to talk with Ricky about it.

"But I'm not done with the dishes."

"I'll do the rest. Go on. Those deer won't hunt themselves."

Ricky was still laughing as I ushered him out. I couldn't stop the grin that formed on my face. The moment might have started on an awkward note, but it had certainly ended on a fun one. I liked that I could mess around with Ricky. We still had a ways to go in getting to know each other, but I could understand why Leo made him his righthand man. He had a good head on his shoulders.

Once he was gone, I put some water on to boil and finished the rest of the dishes. Not

having Ricky here for dinner eased some of the issues of not having enough food, because I wasn't sure how much pasta my two additional guests could tolerate. While they weren't on the same B.R.A.T diet that Leo was, it wasn't like they'd been eating well in the wild, so I still tried to be considerate to their healing digestive systems. That was becoming increasingly difficult to do with the last few dollars I had. I really needed to get to work, but how was I supposed to go back to stocking shelves full time when I was trying to save an entire pack?

That was something I would worry about later. Right now, I needed to take care of Leo.

So, that was what I did. Once the tea and toast were ready, I took them up to him and made sure he drank and ate before falling asleep again. I tried to spend most of the day at his side, which was definitely easier to do since my cats were also lingering on the bed. Except for Goober, who seemed to have decided that Leo's chest was his territory. The Maine Coon lived on it pretty much every time Leo fell asleep, purring away like there was a motor in his chest.

It was a sure sign that my cats accepted him, and it made my heart swell. If they could accept a wolf shifter as part of their colony, surely there was nothing too weird about a wolf shifter pack accepting a human as one of their pack members?

Was I getting too far ahead of myself? Leo and I had made promises before everything had gone to shit, but what if something had changed? What if me letting him get captured had changed the way he felt about me? What if he had PTSD and that changed the way he felt about me? A million and one questions all flew around my head, but as much as I wanted them answered, I wouldn't be selfish and trouble Leo with them. No, he needed to concentrate on getting better. Once he was solid on his own two feet, then we could worry about my massive insecurities and fears.

Easier said than done, of course, but every time the urge to word-vomit on him grew

too strong, I would look at the peaceful expression on his face while he rested, and that would give me the fortitude to hold on a little longer. Leo was my top priority. Even if his feelings had changed, I still wanted him to be his best. To be happy, healthy, and whole.

So, my day passed with relatively little drama. The biggest discomfort I endured was sleeping on a pile of blankets on my bedroom floor. I was sure Leo would be more than happy to share the bed with me, but that would make me far too anxious. I was an active sleeper, often tossing this way and that, so the thought of my nighttime antics making Leo lose even a few moments of sleep was simply too much. No, I could sacrifice a few nights of sleep to ensure Leo healed properly.

Ricky arrived at about noon the next day, hauling two deer carcasses. My mouth watered at the thought of so much fresh venison.

“Please tell me you know how to process that?” I said as he made his way past my greenhouse.

Thankfully, he did know, and by dinner that night I had a whole venison roast in the oven, and Ricky went into town to buy potatoes. It required the last of the cash I had on me, but I took comfort in the fact that my bills were paid, and I still had a hundred dollars in my bank account thanks to the money I had deposited from my time gardening at Chadwicke’s estate. Was that enough for the coming month? No. But I still had time. And once Leo was on his feet, I would go back to working full time at the grocery store. Hopefully, I’d also be able to pick up one or two extra shifts. The overtime would definitely help me.

Just before dinner, Leo sat up in bed, his nose in the air. “That smells delicious. What is that?”

It was the first time he’d commented on smelling anything or shown much interest in

food since we'd brought him home.

"I'm roasting some venison. Ricky brought two deer back from his hunt." Thanks to his huge haul, I was pretty much set on protein for at least the month if I was smart about it, even with four shifters in my house. Granted, if it was only me, two deer probably would have lasted me nearly a year.

"Venison?"

I swear to God, Leo actually licked his lips. If it were any other moment, I had no doubt my eyes would greedily follow his tongue, but considering the situation, I managed not to be a complete hornbag.

"I can't even remember the last time I had venison in my human form..."

The sterner, more anxious part of me insisted he was still in far too delicate a position to handle something with butter, so many spices, and the thick gaminess to it. But that part ultimately lost out to the mother hen inside me.

"You know, as long as you have some water with it and chew very thoroughly, I don't see why you couldn't have a small piece."

The smile that spread across Leo's features made my stomach flip. "Well, if the doctor says so."

And there I was, grinning back at him like a buffoon, but I didn't care. Because only a couple of days earlier, I'd wondered if I'd ever joke or laugh with him again.

Then Leo's smile faded ever so slightly.

"What is it?"

“I... I don’t want to push things, but I would like to sit at the kitchen table with everybody else.”

I hesitated. While I knew it was quite beneficial for humans to have positive interaction during the healing process, I worried about pushing things too far too soon. But really, since wolves were pack animals, what if that healing effect was even more exaggerated?

“I’m a little concerned about the stairs,” I answered honestly. If Leo had earned anything at that point, it was honesty.

Leo grimaced, and I was relieved that he understood where I was coming from. “You’re not wrong on that point. I think I could get down them, but I don’t know if I could get back up.”

While I appreciated that he took my objection seriously, his crestfallen expression made my heart ache. He asked for so little, I had to find a way to accommodate him.

“I’m sure Ricky would be more than happy to help you down and up the stairs, if you’re comfortable with that.” I said it gingerly, because even though Leo and Ricky were close, I would understand if the alpha’s pride was a little fragile. Leo took pride in being a large, strong man who could take care of others. While I liked to think he could trust his beta enough to help him up and down the stairs, I’d understand if it was too much for him right now.

To my relief, Leo’s smile returned full force. If only all of our troubles could be resolved by leaning on a friend.

“As long as he doesn’t drop me, I’m game.”

“I’ll go ask him. But first, I need you to promise me that you won’t push yourself too



hard. If you feel yourself starting to tire out, if sitting up becomes painful, I need you to tell me immediately. Will you do that?"

"I sure will. Scout's honor."

"I'll go talk to Ricky, then. He's out watering the plants."

I'd told myself that this was the year I got sprinklers for all the parts of my garden, but my unexpected guests and their considerable dietary needs had pretty much postponed that until the next growing season. However, it was quite difficult to be resentful of that when they were more than happy to water my garden for me. Hell, it certainly saved me a lot of time.

"Sounds good."

I hurried down the stairs and outside. While I definitely felt plenty of trepidation about Leo leaving bed and eating solid food so soon, I was ecstatic that he actually had an appetite. That was definitely a good thing. Besides, I could serve him some plain chicken stock and tea to soothe his stomach, along with his small piece of venison. It was a win-win all around, as long as he didn't push himself too far.

"Really?" Ricky said in surprise when I told him what Leo wanted. "He wants to eat?"

I didn't miss the excitement in his tone. It was the same excitement thrumming through me. "Yep. He sure does, and it's all thanks to you hunting down those deer."

Ricky flushed slightly and looked down at the ground. "Nah, I'm pretty sure it's the way you've been cooking it. Smells so good, it's been torturing me for the past hour."

"Ah, so that's why you're watering my garden."

“I’m afraid you caught me red-handed.”

I chuckled. “I suppose I can forgive you this one time. When you’re done, will you go get Leo? I’ll set the table and rouse our two guests.”

“They sure do sleep a lot, don’t they?”

“They do, but they’re healing just like Leo. I don’t think we’ll ever know everything they went through, but it doesn’t surprise me how much they need to recover from.”

Ricky’s expression turned grim, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if it mirrored my own. I tried not to think of the horrors of the lab very often, but it was hard not to. Every time I looked at Leo, I was reminded that the world was quite a cruel place, and sometimes it was our own people who made it that way.

I understood there was a difference between shifters, wizards, and whatever a mindwalker was, but in the end, they were all magical people trying to hide from humans. I would have thought they would be more united, but from what I’d seen so far, that wasn’t the case.

However, that was something I could worry about another time. Right now, I had to get the dinner table ready.

I woke our guests first, standing a good distance away at the entrance of the room and gently calling to them, slowly increasing my volume until their eyes cracked open. I wasn’t stupid enough to approach a sleeping shifter who had escaped a very dangerous situation. The scent of the roast did the job, though, and I was free to set the table.

I knew if I asked, my guests would set it for me in an instant, but I rarely ever had company, and I wanted to make it fancy. So, I broke out the nice set of plates I’d

never used, as well as the matching cutlery and teacups.

For the first time since I moved here it felt like I had a real home, and I couldn't help but be entirely delighted as it all came together. Twenty minutes later, I was pulling the roast out of the oven and setting it on a couple of dish towels on the kitchen table. As everyone gathered around it, it kind of felt like we were a family. A family who barely knew each other, but a family all the same.

The escapees, Jason and Miranda, weren't the most talkative pair, but I had learned a little about them in the few days we had known each other, and I wanted to know more. Ricky was feeling more and more like a sibling or best friend that I'd known my whole life. And Leo? My heart fluttered every time I saw him, and I often found myself daydreaming about the different futures we could have together.

I lost myself in those daydreams while we all ate, joining the conversation when I had something to say. Everything was quite chill, and it felt so completely normal.

At least, it did until Jason spoke up.

"So, are you open to taking new pack members?"

I didn't say anything—it wasn't really my conversation to have—but I did listen intently. I got the impression I had been accepted into Leo's pack by default because of our relationship, but I had no idea how it would work for the two shifters he had saved, and who had saved him in return. It all seemed pretty complicated.

"Do you not wish to return to your own packs?" Leo asked.

I didn't miss the caution in his voice. I worried he wasn't up to having this conversation when he was still recovering, but I bit my tongue. Leo was the alpha, and I needed to trust him on whether he could handle this or not. He'd promised he

would tell me if anything got to be too much, and I had to trust that he would.

“Ain’t never had one,” Miranda said.

It was only the third time I’d ever heard her speak. She wasn’t standoffish, just not very talkative. Understandable. I’d read a lot about selective mutism after trauma, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she had something akin to that. Or perhaps she was simply the quiet type. There wasn’t anything wrong with that.

“And mine’s dead,” Jason said. “We were small, only a dozen members, living up in the mountains about a four-hour drive away from here. We ran afoul of one of them brothers. He wiped all the adults out and took all the kids.”

My eyebrows shot up. While Jason did look younger than me, he certainly didn’t look like a child. “How long ago was this?”

“About four years.”

Moments ago, I had resolved not to get involved, but I couldn’t help the curiosity sizzling through me. “But you’re not...?”

“A kid? No. I ain’t. But most of the kids didn’t go to the lab. They took me and my brother because we were twins.”

“Twins?” Ricky exclaimed. “I didn’t know that. Don’t you want to be with your brother now that he’s out?”

“Aye, I would have liked that, but he never got a chance to escape with us. Died about two years back.”

“Well, shit.” A very apropos statement from Leo, because honestly, I couldn’t

imagine it. Yes, I'd lost my mother, but even that couldn't be as bad as losing a twin. That was a bond I truly would never understand. "Look, I have no problem with either of you joining our pack, but before you do, you should know what you're getting into. This isn't an easy road we're on, and honestly, I can't promise all of us will survive. Me, Ricky, and Ven here are working to recover the rest of our pack from the brothers' clutches and break the curses holding them."

Miranda and Jason looked at us with wide eyes.

"You really want to go up against them? Some of the most powerful warlocks the world has ever heard of, and probably the most powerful ones on this continent?"

"I do," Leo answered firmly.

"And I do, too," I said, surprising myself. "I know I'm only a human and a gardener, but I will do my best to break the curses on whoever I can and help on the sidelines like I did with the breakout."

"Unsurprisingly, I'm dedicated, too," Ricky finished. "We're going to get our pack back, one way or another. And it's completely fine if you don't want to join us, but our alpha is right. If you want to be a part of our pack, you have to be a part of the fight."

"I..." Jason took a deep breath and pushed his food around on his plate. I took no offense to it, as to me it seemed like he was taking the entire situation very seriously. "I reckon if we're going to do something like that, we should also try to find as many allies as we can. I haven't been out long, but I've heard whispers about a shifter pack that's taken down a few brothers."

Leo shot him a wolfish grin. "We might have had a hand in that."

“I figured as much.” With that, Jason stood, and Miranda followed a beat later. “If that’s the case, I pledge my loyalty to you. You will be my alpha, and I will be your follower. Through war, through famine, we are stronger together than apart.”

I could practically feel the crackle of energy in the air as Miranda repeated those words. I definitely got the impression that Jason wasn’t simply saying it off the top of his head, but rather that it was an oath passed down over generations—one that held more weight and meaning than I could understand.

Leo stood. I jolted, but thankfully Ricky was beside him in an instant. “Then, you, Jason, and you, Miranda, are now our blood. I am your alpha, and you are my pack. I swear to protect you, I swear to guide you, and I will keep you safe.

“So mote it be.”

“So mote it be.”

While there was no crack of lightning at the end, no boom of thunder, the air still held a heavy finality, like it had stilled itself to respect the moment. While I made no such pledge, my heart was full of happiness. Yes, there was a lot of evil in the world, but in our own way, it felt like we truly were fighting it.

After all, someone had to stop the brothers.

Why couldn’t it be us?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:53 pm*

4

LEO

My body hurt.

Not that endless agony consuming every moment of my existence like at the lab, but a steady ache still permeated all my bones.

It had only been a week since I had returned, so perhaps it was naïve of me to expect to be fighting fit by now, but even Ven seemed puzzled. A day or two after I'd accepted Miranda and Jason into our pack, she cautiously approached me to ask if I had a theory as to why my healing was taking longer.

I hated that she was walking on eggshells around me. It was as if she was afraid even her voice would rattle me, or perhaps she simply didn't trust me. I had been quite violent when I was fighting against being captured, but surely she understood that. At least I hoped she did. Of course, I could ask her outright, but part of me was afraid of the answer.

Then came the matter of me giving Ricky orders behind her back. While she hadn't brought it up, Ricky had told me he didn't appreciate being put in the middle like that. I didn't blame him, but I was immensely grateful he'd gotten Ven out of there. As crazy as it sounded, I would go through that entire torturous experience three times over if it meant keeping Ven safe.

I didn't use the question about my healing taking longer as an opportunity to talk

about such heavy topics. Instead, I told them I must have been consistently dosed with wolfsbane so the scientists could test my limits as a wolf. Hopefully, Jason and the others blowing up the lab meant all their research had been destroyed.

One could only hope.

Ven had seemed satisfied with that at the time, but we still tiptoed around each other. I was happy to be around Ven again, and I was sure she felt the same, but we were avoiding very specific conversation. I knew we had to have them eventually, but surely after everything I'd gone through there was no harm in procrastinating a bit.

Well, that was what I told myself.

“You really want me to pluck the heads off your flowers?”

I sipped at my tea as I listened to Ricky and Ven tending her flower patch. It was difficult not to resent Ricky for taking my place as Ven's helper, and I wondered if I should go out and help. Then again, what if I was more hindrance than an aide?

“Ha-ha. I know it may sound counterintuitive, but dead heading makes sure your flowers continue to reproduce.”

“How's that work again?”

I leaned toward the window, eager to hear Ven's explanation. While I was glad to have Ricky back, I missed when Ven and I fooled around in her garden, when she taught me about all the little things I never even knew existed.

“Well, you see, basically all plants want to reproduce. That's kind of their whole purpose. The way most flowers reproduce is by the seeds that come once their flowers dry up and die. Not all, but a majority. So, if you cut off the blooms right



before they start to dry out, it tells the plant it needs to make more flowers in order to produce more seeds and make more babies.”

“Huh. That’s so crazy. I never would have thought of that.”

Ven chuckled. “Plants are fascinating.”

It was a sweet moment between my beta and Ven, but I wanted to be the one out there with her. Even though we were both so happy to see each other again, and I knew I loved her down to the bottom of my heart, there was an awkwardness between us. Something a conversation would fix, I was sure, but I simply didn’t have the energy for it.

Funny how I could face off against powerful warlocks with little-to-no trepidation, but speaking to the woman I was in love with seemed like a monumental task.

Come on, Leo, get yourself together.

Easier said than done.

I stood there, waffling for several moments about whether to go outside, until I felt a very deliberate thunk against the side of my leg. I looked down and met Goober’s wide, beseeching eyes. He had one of his streamer toys in his mouth. I’d never met a cat who would drag a toy to its owner like a dog, not even Andromeda’s, but Goober clearly didn’t care about his canine leanings.

“Well, I suppose I am free.”

Was it exactly what I wanted to do? No. What I wanted was to be out in the garden with Ven, acting like nothing had happened, like I hadn’t been captured and tortured for days on end. But I had to admit, playing around with the giant Maine Coon wasn’t

a terrible consolation prize.

Just when I thought we were having fun, Goober abandoned all interest in the toy and marched to the back door of the kitchen.

“What, was my technique off?” I teased. I knew the cat couldn’t actually understand my words, but all of Ven’s furry charges had a very strong grasp of tone.

Goober looked at me with those big eyes of his and let out a truly egregious meow. It was almost accusatory in nature and demanding as well. Certainly not the usual gentle giant sounds I heard from him. Whatever he wanted, he was adamant about it.

“Oh, I don’t think you’re supposed to go outside. Don’t you have a kitty tunnel for this?”

Before I met Ven, I probably would have felt like a dolt talking to a cat like a human, but Ven did it all the time, so I figured they were used to that sort of communication. It was kind of comforting, like having three little nonverbal friends who found increasingly creative ways to share their opinions.

And boy, did they have opinions.

But apparently, my gentle parenting wasn’t working because the large cat continued to chew me out like I had offended him. If it was Mud Pie or even Fork—the eternal chaos goblin that he was—I would have chalked it up to a temper tantrum. But Goober wasn’t so temperamental, so after several long moments of absolutely no negotiating with him, I opened the door, hoping I wasn’t about to piss Ven off by letting one of her indoor cats out into the great outdoors.

Strangely enough, Goober didn’t try to go out the door. Instead, he practically ran away from it and went out the flap to his tunnel.

“That was weird,” I said, and made to shut the door, only for Goober to race out of the tunnel and back to my side. “Buddy, what do you want?”

After a few more head butts to the back of my legs, I guessed he wanted me to be outside for some reason. Obliging, I took a step outside. Goober gave a satisfied meow, then ran right back into the tunnel, until he was parallel to me in his protected passage.

“Well, you got me out here. What now?”

At that, the cat let out a chirp and began to strut through the winding structure, pausing after a few feet to look behind him. Those big eyes of his landed on me, almost as if he was asking why I wasn’t following.

I shrugged. Even alphas had to follow the orders of a very determined cat.

More amused than anything else, I followed him. It amazed me how much personality each of Ven’s cats had. What amazed me even more was how fond I’d grown of them. I’d never been against cats, but I’d always preferred canines, what with kind of being one myself. However, there was something so comforting and entertaining about having three family members who didn’t speak my language but still loved cuddling with me and purring every chance they got.

I was so fixated on Goober and how he continued to stop every few feet to ensure I was still following him, that I didn’t realize how close I’d gotten to Ven and Ricky until my beta called out to me.

“Hey, man. You sure you’re ready to be walking out and about?”

I smiled at Ricky, but my gaze was fixed on Ven, who had shot up from the flower starts she was planting. Did I know what they were? I had a feeling she’d shown them

to me when they were smaller, but I wasn't nearly the expert she was, so I couldn't identify them.

"Probably not, but a certain someone was pretty insistent I get some fresh air."

With the type of timing that could only come from a sitcom, Goober gave a very proud meow from within the greenhouse, poking his large head out of the window.

"I didn't know Goober had gotten his medical degree," Ven joked with a smile. Although her grin was genuine, I could see the apprehension in her eyes. Was that because she was angry at me? Did she pity me? Did she think I was weak for becoming a prisoner and needing her to help me? That last one didn't seem likely, but my ego had taken a huge hit after everything that had happened. I was used to being the rescuer, not the rescuee. What kind of alpha was I if I needed my pack to save me? It was hard to sort through my dark thoughts. I didn't know when my anxiety had gotten so powerful, but I hated the hold it had on me.

"Hey, not that I'm not having a rip-roaring good time," Ricky said, "but I want to go on a run with Miranda and Jason to connect with one of America's cousins. They're close by. If you two don't mind holding down the fort, I could actually get a head start now."

And there it was, the two of us being forced into close proximity with no polite way to disengage. I couldn't tell if Ricky was doing it on purpose, or if he simply didn't pick up on the tension between Ven and me.

"Sure, I would love to help. That is, if I have my doctor's permission."

I looked at Ven, trying to analyze everything about her expression. She definitely looked conflicted, and I liked to think that was because she was worried about my health, not because she was uncomfortable being alone around me. Really, she hadn't

done much to make me feel so insecure about everything between us, but I supposed it was an aftereffect of being so powerless for over a week.

“Let me go get a chair for you to take breaks in,” she said finally. “And you gotta promise that you’ll stop the moment you start to feel too tired or sore.”

“I promise.”

And I meant it. While I didn’t feel up to all the tasks I used to do—hauling dirt, watering, or digging deep holes for her tomato starts—I would be more than happy to sit in a chair and hand her different plant starts so she wouldn’t have to twist her back constantly. Even if things were a little strained between us, it would be nice to be by her side while she was in her element again. She’d spent many hours sitting in her room with me—reading, talking, or joking—but none of that quite compared to bonding with her when she was in her element.

“I’ll get the chair,” Ricky said with a clap of his hands. “Y’all get yourselves situated. You need more water, Ven?”

“No, there’s still plenty of ice in my canteen.”

That wrinkled feeling rose in me at the thought of Ricky taking care of my mate, which, really, I should’ve been grateful for. He’d helped her and took care of her when I couldn’t. He’d ensured she was safe, even when she was crazy enough to concoct a plan to get me back. I owed him more than ever, and jealousy was not the right way to go about it. Still, it ate at me. My inner wolf was more bombastic than ever, and it definitely wanted to bare its teeth at my beta and remind him of his place.

Ugh. When had my own head become such a complicated landscape?

I didn’t know, but luckily, my love for my best friend allowed me to keep those

stupid instincts in check, so when he brought me the chair, I gave him an appreciative pat on his back. It was a simple touch, but it felt far more affirming than it probably should have.

Once he was gone, we quickly got to work. Ven sat on her stool, digging holes for different flower starts, seeds, and tubers. Thankfully, her labeling system was pretty great, so I only had to read the little marker to make sure it was what she'd asked for. The seeds were also labeled, which made the tubers the most difficult to identify. Those I had to identify by their shape, since the piles weren't as organized.

For a while, we didn't say anything outside of her asking for the next plant. Every moment that passed felt like an opportunity to say something, but whenever I opened my mouth, the words died on my tongue.

I'd never been a verbose person, but I'd also never been so tongue-tied. I ended up more in my head than ever, enough so that I nearly jumped out of my skin when Ven cleared her throat and stood up.

"That's all I had planned for this area today. Thanks for the help."

Damn it. Had I missed my opportunity? "Is there anything else you wanted to do today?" I asked, my tone bordering on desperate. I wasn't ready to go back inside. Ready to be an invalid who was too scared to talk to the woman I was in love with.

"You sure you don't need a break? This is the most you've been up and about since you got back."

"I know, I'm just not ready to go back inside."

"That's fair. You have spent a whole lot of time cooped up inside." Ven let out a sigh that had so much weight to it. "It's not that I don't appreciate your help, but I don't

think I have the brain power for any more tasks today. I'm a little fried."

That was understandable, and I felt a little sliver of relief that Ven still trusted me enough to tell me as much. "Maybe we could just sit outside and chat for a bit? Soak up the sun?"

When was the last time that we had just hung out in her garden? It hadn't been all that long ago, and yet it felt like an entire lifetime.

"Sure," Ven said after a beat. "We can do that. I'll go get another lawn chair. Do you want me to get you a drink while I'm at it?"

My first instinct was to say no, that I could get it myself, but the practical part of my brain told me that going to the kitchen and completing that small task would use up too much of my energy. There was something magical about Ven's garden—there always had been—and it was hard not to feel like the green space and its cultivator couldn't fix everything that was wrong with my head.

"I would like that, yeah. Perhaps some of that ginger tea if you have more?"

"I do," she said with a smile. "Coming right up."

With that, she hurried off. Although I longed for her company, I certainly didn't mind the view. Thankfully, she returned before I could lose all my gumption and scuttle away to my safe but boring haven of the bedroom.

"Would you mind holding my tea for me while I grab the other chair?"

"Not at all."

I held our steaming mugs while she got herself a seat, warmth spreading through me

when she settled her chair beside mine. Although she spent many hours at my bedside, sometimes it felt like we were so far apart. Which, again, was probably from all the things we very much needed to say.

The two of us sat there for a while, sipping at our drinks and staring at the beauty around us. Once more, I wondered if I was going to be a coward and let the moment slip by, but Ven spoke first.

“You ordered Ricky to take me away if things went sideways.”

Well, it looked like we were jumping straight into it. I always liked that about Ven. She was direct.

“I did.”

“That was wrong of you. It broke my trust in you.”

Sometimes Ven had such a matter-of-fact way of saying things, it was easy to assume she wasn't affected by the topic at hand. But I knew her well enough to tell she was very much bothered, and my nose caught the stress rolling off her in bitter waves. I hated that I made her smell like that.

“Ven, I did it for?—”

“I know why you did it, and ultimately getting me out of there was the right call, because it allowed me to put together the group that freed you and everyone else. I'm not objecting to having a backup plan to make sure that Ricky and I got out safe.”

Oh, she wasn't? I felt like I was misunderstanding something.

“Then, what...?”



“What I’m upset about is that you thought you couldn’t discuss any of this with me. That you had to baby me and go behind my back like I’m a moron who doesn’t understand logic.” The stress in her shifted into something with a bit more brimstone. She was angry. Had I ever experienced her being angry at me? I didn’t think so. It was a strange sensation, and I didn’t like it.

“Look, I get that you and Ricky are shifters, and I’m a human. There’s a whole bunch of things you guys can do that I can’t, and I’m fine with that, but when we make a plan together, every one of us needs to be included in all aspects of the plan. Going behind my back like that told me you didn’t trust me to make the right decision, which I do find pretty ironic considering that twice now I have had to clean you up after our plans went to shit.”

She had several points, and I did feel quite a bit guilty for assuming she would be difficult about retreating rather than practical. But as much as I respected where she was coming from, there was a deep truth that neither of us were acknowledging.

“I’m sorry I went behind your back, Ven. However, I do have to ask...” I reached over and put my hand on her wrist. Although so much of her was soft, large, and lovely, I couldn’t help but marvel at how small and delicate her hands were compared to my massive palms. “Can you honestly tell me you would have been able to leave me behind?”

I appreciated that Ven didn’t scoff and immediately rebuff my question. I hated when people did that in a discussion, because it usually showed they weren’t really hearing what I was saying. But Ven remained quiet, and I watched a litany of emotions cross her beautiful features. Although she might not have agreed with me, I could tell she was truly pondering what I’d asked. That meant a lot to me.

“I...”

My senses pricked, and I lurched to my feet, arm out as if I was going to protect Ven even in my weakened state. An eagle spiraled out of the sky and crashed in front of us. Ven was on her feet in an instant, running over to the animal as it quickly shifted into a battered-looking human.

“Oh my god! Are you okay?”

The shifter looked woozy as she tried to sit up, so Ven and I knelt on either side of her. Our conversation definitely wasn’t over, but even in its interrupted state, I felt like we were one step closer to getting it back to our normal rhythm.

“Hey, don’t move. Let me take a look at you, okay?”

“America...” the girl wheezed. I had no idea how old she was, but she looked like she was barely out of high school. “She told me not to go. She told me.”

“That’s okay, honey, we got you,” Ven said. “We’ll call America and have her come pick you up. But let me take care of you first, okay? Keep you on track until that healing of yours kicks in.”

The girl shook her head. “No. I went there, you see. I got in and out. I did it!”

Even though she was half delirious, I could hear the steady conviction in the young girl’s voice.

“Did what?” I asked, adding a rumbling subharmonic into my alpha voice. It wasn’t a command, more of a soothing mechanism. It didn’t always work, especially across species, but I figured it was worth a shot.

“One of the brothers’ compound. I found out what he’s planning.”

Ven and I exchanged concerned glances, wondering how much of what the girl said was true and how much was delirious rambling.

“He’s gonna auction us off. Like fucking eBay.”

Ven gently stroked the young girl’s head, and the eagle shifter’s pale and clammy skin pinked up a bit. “Auction who off?”

“Shifters and other magic folks in various states of enthrallment. They’re going to sell us like cattle to the highest bidder.”

I swallowed hard as I thought back to the first time we’d encountered the enthralled harem of our kidnapped people, and the idea of more victims like that being sold to anyone with a fat wallet made me physically ill. Once more, I exchanged a heavy look with Ven.

It was time to start planning again.

5

VANESSA

I dabbed at my forehead, commanding myself to calm down before I drew attention.

After two weeks and two days of planning, I'd thought I would be a bit more assured in our plan. I'd learned a lot since I first looked up Chadwicke on the internet to see how I could help Leo, but I was still very much a novice.

Even though I wasn't a spy, I kind of felt like one. We'd reached out to America, who hooked me up with a mindwalker who helped magical people running from bad situations get somewhere safe.

Mindwalker was basically a catch-all term for anyone who had magical abilities that manipulated the mind or came from the mind. So, telepaths, telekinetics, mesmers, oracles, mediums, psychics... all that stuff. It was crazy to me that on top of shifters there was an entirely different class of magical people who were basically akin to the omega-level mutants from X - Men . Considering how powerful they were, I didn't understand why they weren't ruling the world.

I'd waited until we were in private before asking Leo that very same thing, and he'd explained there were far too few of them. Apparently, magic users like witches, warlocks, wizards, and the like were very adamant about holding the majority of what little social power there was amongst different sects.

I really didn't understand the world I had stumbled into. Maybe I was na?ve, but

shouldn't all magical folk want to be a united front against the ever-present encroachment of humans and our technology?

“Hey, Glenda. You mind grabbing that box of glasses and hauling them back to the kitchen?” My team lead's voice jerked me out of my contemplation. I hastily tucked my hanky back into the pocket of my server uniform.

“Not at all. I'll get right on that.”

I was, once again, employed by the enemy for our shenanigans. Naturally, Leo had been against it. He was worried we were risking my life for no reason, and while I wasn't ignorant of the danger, there was something I had that no one else in our network did.

I was human.

The same thing that put me at such incredible risk also gave me the ability to fly under the radar. The brothers hadn't hired a fancy shifter-only catering business for their little gala event—the cover for the auction. I didn't quite understand why what should have been a secret event amongst only magical folk needed such a cover until America's brother, Alejandro, had explained that there wouldn't only be magic users at this event.

Apparently, some humans also had knowledge of the magical underbelly of the world and profited from it. Alejandro had chuckled at my look of shock and horror, gently patting my shoulder before telling me it was just as bad as I was thinking.

Gross. So gross. Humans were bad for Leo and everyone like him—we were really bad for the environment—but I'd been relieved that we weren't the main bad guys for once. Now that I knew at least a handful of humans were involved in shifter trafficking? Well, it was like a punch to the gut.

That had motivated me to swallow down any fear and agree to be in for pretty much the rest of the plan. I got hired by the catering company and put on the team thanks to the mindwalker who set up the fake identity. She'd sat outside the hiring office while I was interviewed and worked her magic. We didn't know her name, which I guessed was on purpose. She was powerful and in the business of helping people in trouble. It wouldn't surprise me if she had a lot of equally powerful enemies.

Still, I'd have liked to get to know her and for her to feel safe enough to join our rapidly growing ramshackle community.

"You said the kitchen, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, right by the pile of other boxes."

"Got it."

Although I didn't have the ability to sense magic, it was hard not to feel as if the very walls of the place were leaking evil. I tried not to think of what horrific things went on underneath all the finery.

The estate we were on was even grander than Chadwicke's, except it had more of an old Hollywood charm. Everything was glamour, prestige, and opulence. The grounds were all English gardens and sprawling in nature, but meticulously maintained in a way that a layperson wouldn't recognize. The valet area was behind the mansion and yet it was more decorated than some quinceaneras were, with beautiful floating lights leading the way in. When I'd first arrived, I'd tried to figure out what kind of gadget would allow them to do that before I remembered that we were entering the territory of warlocks and witches. I was sure floating lights weren't exactly all that demanding for their magical ability.

As usual, I made mental notes of any useful information: the position of the guards,

points of interest, possible areas to hide. I tried to make sure I didn't forget anything, because if something slipped my mind and got one of our friends killed, I would never forgive myself.

So, yeah, no pressure.

It wasn't like I had a lot of time, either. We'd tried to get the mindwalker to help us with actual plan, but she told us that was a step too far and it could endanger her entire network of contacts. I was intrigued at some underground magical brotherhood, but the woman had gone tightlipped after that. Although it was frustrating, I had to appreciate how much she valued the safety of the people who relied on her. Maybe with several years of consistent contact, we would be able to win her trust. If only that could have happened before the auction.

This was only the second day I'd had access to the site since the caterer had done a rehearsal the day before hiring me. I'd never known there were actual rehearsals for something as simple as serving food, but apparently the level of grandiosity the brothers required meant every detail had to be gone over once, twice, thrice.

Rich people were absolutely wild.

Still, I was grateful for the extra time, and once I set the box down, I headed off toward one of the doors on my list, gripping the can of air cleaner in my apron pocket.

One of my jobs was to break locks on certain doors. It wasn't like we had a hard and fast list of which ones would be useful, but we had found records from when the mansion first was codified, and we were going off those to eliminate choke points or places we could get cornered.

So, yeah, it was a pretty damn important job for someone who worked in a grocery

store.

Just stay cool , I thought to myself as I walked toward my target. I intended to simply pass the door, since there had been a guard right by it every other time I'd checked, but it seemed he'd either moved to another position or gone to the bathroom, because the coast was clear.

I pulled both my phone and the can of air cleaner out of my pocket. Hopefully, if someone did stumble across me, I could play it off that I'd found a quiet corner where I could text while on the clock. Still risky considering our client could possibly turn me into a frog, but better than being caught in act of subterfuge.

With my cover established, I turned the air can upside down and pulled on the trigger. Not everyone knew it, but when you did that, it let out a freezing spray that could do a lot of damage to anything with tiny mechanical parts. Like a lock. I emptied the whole bottle as quickly as I could, then turned the knob back and forth until I heard a slight cracking sound.

Perfect. Maybe it wouldn't be enough for a human to open it, but a shifter? It definitely weakened it enough that they could break it with a hard jerk.

Pleased with myself, I slid the air can back in my pocket, only to hear footsteps rapidly approaching me.

Shit!

"What are you doing? You're not supposed to be in this area."

I whirled around to see one of the staff. Thankfully not a guard, but not exactly great, either. I opened my mouth to say I was texting my friend, when they kept right on speaking.



“What’s that you’re holding in your pocket?”

Jeez. Observant, weren’t they? Time to go with Plan B.

“I was just trying to find the bathroom,” I said, trying to force a blush to my cheeks as I subtly let go of the can and pulled out one of the tampons I’d shoved into my apron. “I’m kind of in a hurry.”

The woman’s expression changed entirely, and I cringed at using the girl code like this, but I had to do what I had to do to make sure the mission went off correctly. Besides, if abusing girl code meant that a lot of shifters and magic users didn’t end up trafficked to who knew where, I considered it worth it.

“I warned them that not having any menstrual disposal in the staff restroom by the kitchen would bite them in the ass. Don’t tell anyone, but I’ll show you my favorite bathroom to use when I know I’m going to be a while.”

Yep, definitely abusing girl code, but I wasn’t going to stop her. I nodded eagerly, and she took me down another hall, then through a mini library, before we reached a dead end.

“If you go gabbing about this, I will make sure you are removed immediately,” the woman said sternly before gripping the frame of giant painting hanging on the flat wall. She pulled it, and it opened to reveal a polished, cherry-wood door. I couldn’t do anything but gape at it. It was like something out of a movie.

“There you are. Make sure to close it when you’re done. And if you leave a mark, I’ll know who it was.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Us girls gotta stick together. And I wouldn’t want you to have to try to move through some of the party areas to get to one of the other bathrooms.”

Although she said it politely, I couldn’t help but wonder why she wouldn’t want that. Certainly it couldn’t have anything to do with the awful caliber of guests that were going to be there.

Thankfully, the woman left quickly after that, and I went into the bathroom so I wouldn’t ruin my cover. I lingered there for a moment, catching my breath and staying out of sight. I was in a situation that was far more high stakes than one would ever expect of me, a college dropout with social anxiety, but I felt like I was doing really great. Who knew, maybe I’d missed my calling in life. It was too bad no one had ever mentioned being a spy on career day.

Hopefully, the woman wouldn’t check the wastebin after I left. Otherwise, she would probably be curious as to why there was no dirty tampon in there. Maybe I could convince her I was starting my period a day early, but still, I had to cross my fingers and hope she wouldn’t be that meticulous.

When an appropriate amount of time had passed, I slipped out of the bathroom and went back to work. I was fortunate enough that no one seemed to have noticed I was gone, and I got back to the little tasks I needed to do until it was time for the grand event.

Normally, people were usually either set up back of house or front of house, and that was that, but the mindwalker had worked her magic to make sure I would be able to help with setup on both, which gave me time to scout and work back of house during the event so I could be in the proper position once things happened.

As scary as it was to be the only human on our side, I wasn’t completely alone. I had two allies who were on the campus with me. One being the young eagle shifter who

was hiding somewhere in the trees toward the edge of her field of vision. Although America was furious that her adopted teenage niece had gone off on her own, she had allowed her to play an auxiliary role. Her only task was to fly off and sound the alarm if something went south early, but it was still a comfort to have her there.

My other ally was a guy named Chris, who Miranda had contacted. I didn't know whether they were family, but they obviously had a connection. I had been surprised when I heard he was a wolf shifter and would be helping out with the setup, but then Leo explained what a latent shifter was and how it made the man a perfect teammate to help set up with me.

Apparently, some shifters never got their animal form. I didn't really understand it—how could one be a shifter if they couldn't shift?—but essentially he smelled so much like a human and had no shifter tells that he was the perfect addition to our forward team. I was grateful to have him, but it was yet another thing that reminded me I had so much to learn about the world I had fallen into.

I wished I could say that the rest of the afternoon passed quickly, but it didn't. While there was relatively little downtime, having the constant threat of being caught along with the ever-present worry that our plan wouldn't work made the minutes stretch out pretty painfully. I believed in our plan, I really did. Leo, Ricky, and I had put it together with America, all of her connections, Jason, Miranda, and pretty much everyone else in our little ragtag community. Surely with all of our skills and experience combined we had come up with something that would work.

Then again, the biggest reason we were getting away with it was because we were so completely under the radar, but that could only last for so long. Maybe Chadwicke could be considered an unfortunate and unpredictable tragedy, but once we killed another brother, it would be far more obvious that someone was taking direct action against their family. I didn't know what we were going to do once that happened, but we'd cross that bridge if we survived the gala and the auction. And I sincerely hoped

we did. Not just for us, but also for all of the magical folks who were currently depending on us.

Finally, after what truly seemed like an eon, the music began to gently play from the main area of the party, and guests started to arrive. I wasn't in a position where I could see them, but that was okay. That wasn't my job. My job was to begin phase one of the active part of our plan.

First, I switched out a couple of the normal mounted heaters with the special ones I'd stashed underneath a counter. Those were filled with a scent suppressing oil that would diffuse as it heated. I didn't quite understand what scent blockers, scent spray, or scent-suppressing oil were, but I understood enough to know they would help prevent the enthralled shifters or even turncoats on staff to smell the rest of my team as they came ever closer. And I knew my other feet on the ground were lighting the scent-blocking candles we'd peppered throughout the decorations.

It wasn't like the candles and oils would magically make all my friends odorless, but according to Leo, some shifters could scent an enemy at a truly mind-boggling distance. Far enough that they'd never be able to get close to the manor without everyone already being on high alert. Obviously, we didn't want that, so hopefully our little trick would allow us to set up for the attack.

Needless to say, I was nervous about that. I'd thought we'd strike during the auction, but during the planning phase, America's father and several other people had pointed out that it would put the enthralled captives at risk of getting hurt. So, we would strike at the party before the auction could even happen. The less battle-hardened of our group would get the prisoners out, hopefully without encountering any direct danger. It was unlikely that everything would go according to plan, so we were all ready to improvise if necessary, but still, I had faith. I had to.

When the music nearly doubled in volume and I heard an egotistical voice boom over

the speakers, I knew it was time for step number two: opening a couple very specific doors to let my friends in. These were doors that were traversed so often I wasn't able to do any noticeable sabotage on them earlier, so it required an in-person visit. My counterpart, Chris, had the eastern wing while I had the western. Unfortunately, we had no way to keep in contact with each other, so all I could do was hope he was doing his part.

Moving like I belonged there, I hurried to the first of my targets and inched it open. Six pairs of eyes glowed in the dark, all rapidly approaching. There should have been guards around here, but the text I'd sent on my break must have been informative enough, because I couldn't see any opposition between me and the luminescent gazes rushing toward me.

I wished I had time to greet them, but I didn't. Instead, I rushed to the other servants' entrance toward the back of the house. It faced a hedge maze, which was really ill-advised considering how much of a security risk it was.

When I opened the door, I instantly recognized one of the dark forms racing toward me. I stood to the side, not sure if he would take the time to greet me, but as soon as he was close enough, Leo shifted into his human form.

"Are you all right?" he asked, worry lacing his tone. I didn't blame him for being concerned—this was a dangerous situation—and I certainly didn't take it as him commenting on my ability to do what was needed. I looped my arms around his shoulders and risked giving him a quick peck.

"I'm fine." I was being as honest as I could in the moment. Would I rather be in my garden, growing food and feeding my friends? Of course. But seeing as we were in the middle of enemy territory, about to perform one hell of an ambush against possibly the vilest people I would ever meet, I was doing far better than I'd expected. If only my aunt could see how I was doing now. It turned out the useless

little girl who had killed her mother had some skills going for her.

“All right, you and Chris head out now. Esperanza is waiting in the weeping willow on the southern edge of the estate. She’ll show you a safe path home.”

I nodded. I wanted to linger, to stay, but there was far too much to do. So, after giving him one last kiss on the cheek, I hurried to the last door. This time, once all the shifters were in, I hurried out into the darkness. While I couldn’t see as well as they could in the dark, I had already memorized the exit path I was supposed to take. I had done my part. Now it was time to get out of the way and let the shifters do theirs—even though I really wanted to stay.

I sighed. That had been part of the compromise. Leo was so against putting me in any danger that the only way he, and Ricky, would agree to the plan was if I promised to leave before the fighting started. Part of me had wanted to argue, but another part knew I would be useless and only get in the way. One of the brothers might find me and use me against Leo. It was an unnecessary risk, albeit one my heart and pride most certainly wanted me to take. After all, I’d been the linchpin when we’d dealt with Chadwicke. Ricky wouldn’t have been rescued, and Leo wouldn’t have won his fight if I hadn’t run the asshole over. Granted, that situation was a lot different than this one. The people at that party hadn’t been there to buy magical folks. Those in attendance had also been mostly human. This, though? These were magical beings taking advantage of their own kind. Sure, there were humans in attendance, but it didn’t sound like they were going to be majority.

Chris caught up with me, and we followed the path I’d memorized to the weeping willow. The night was so dark I could barely make out a thing, especially after being inside under the bright lights all day, so I was super grateful for my companion’s slightly better night vision.

But as we crept to safety, a deep, sinking feeling formed in my chest, constricting my

lungs. A nagging voice at the back of my head insisted I was doing the wrong thing. I told myself it was only my ego, that it would be best for everyone if I was far away from the danger, but that feeling in my chest, in my gut, wouldn't dissipate. Something in me knew there were people who needed protection, and it was hell-bent on making sure they remained unhurt.

I ignored it until we reached the tree, and the eagle shifter who had crashed in my yard stepped out from beneath it. Even with my limited vision in the dark, I could see she wasn't a happy camper.

"There you are! I can't believe they're exiling us from all of this. We could be useful. I'm the only eagle shifter on our team. Surely that's gotta count for something."

I felt for the young woman, I really did. Esperanza was incredibly brave and determined. She'd infiltrated this estate completely on her own without getting caught. The unfortunate run-in she'd had with the enthralled wolf walking the perimeter was what had gotten her in trouble and injured. Thankfully, most of the bespelled shifters weren't great at communication. They followed orders well, but they didn't have the wherewithal to inform their masters of an intruder.

"You're still a kid." I had to be responsible even though I really, really didn't want to be. I wasn't exactly a fan of battle, nor was I really that good of a fighter, yet the call to return to the manor was as irresistible and persistent as a siren song.

Maybe it was because I'd lost Leo not so long ago and was terrified of that happening again. That made sense. Yet no matter how much I tried to dismiss it, it stayed right there, beating alongside my own heartbeat.

"Yeah, I'm young, but I'm not an idiot. I wouldn't get directly involved, but there's no reason I couldn't provide some auxiliary support. After all, some of the shifters they're selling are probably younger than me."

Ugh, what an awful but very true point.

“It’s too bad we don’t have any smoke bombs,” Chris said. Our attack team had a whole bunch of the handy gadgets Jason, with his somewhat arsonist tendencies, had made out of household items. I’d added a few herbs to them that would hopefully sedate any non-shifter who breathed in a steady dose of it. The few in our crew who weren’t shifter had gas masks to keep them safe.

Esperanza’s eyes glinted mischievously. “Speak for yourself.”

She grabbed a bag from one of the branches and unzipped it, proudly showing us about two dozen smoke bombs, along with a bunch of bang snaps.

“Where did you get all that?” Since I had helped make them, I knew they had all been carefully stored and accounted for.

Esperanza’s grin turned surprisingly wolfish for an eagle shifter. She’d definitely fit in with the rest of the pack, that was for sure. “I made them. Jason said he didn’t care what I did with the extra supplies. He also said there was no way he could use them all before he ran out of time. As for the bang snaps, well, it’s amazing what you can find on the internet.”

Her drive and ambition impressed me. I didn’t know if I would have been so resourceful if I was her age and in such a position. Hell, I didn’t even know if I was that resourceful now.

“You’re too young to be going into battle,” Chris said with about as much conviction as I had, which was not exactly a lot.

“I won’t be in the battle; I’ll fly over it. I’ll drop some of these, then get out. Maybe also let a few loose around the exits so our people will have some cover when they



get out. You two would be the only ones actually going inside. That is”—I didn’t think it was possible, but her grin grew even toothier—“if you guys are up for it.”

Chris and I exchanged glances. We knew what was, technically, the right thing to do. What we’d promised to do. But it was so, so difficult to ignore the temptation of going to help our friends. Jeez, were we really being swayed by someone who had graduated two weeks earlier?

It seemed so, because when Chris and I looked back at Esperanza, I spoke first.

“You have to swear you will only stay above the battle and won’t touch the ground at all, and that you’ll get away at the first sign of danger pointed toward you.”

“I swear,” she said. “Scout’s honor.”

I tried not to think of how recently the girl would’ve been in the scouts as I grabbed a few smoke bombs from the bag. Leo would be so pissed at me, but it would be worth it if I could ensure we would have a future where he could be unhappy with me. We had an impressive number considering all the allies we’d called—about thirty of us in total—but I didn’t see how three auxiliary helpers would hurt anything. In fact, I was hoping we would be a pretty big boon.

“All right, then,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

VANESSA

The sound of glass shattering reverberated through the night mere seconds before chaos broke out. Chris and I sprinted toward the manor while Esperanza shrieked in the air above us. It was a primordial battle cry I wasn't even sure she knew she was making.

Chris and I burst through the door, and all my worries that someone had heard Esperanza's cries vanished. The catering team and some of the staff members barreled past us, looking for a place to hide or a way out. Good. That was fine with me. It meant fewer people would get hurt.

Esperanza dived overhead, a smoke bomb in each of her claws, and we raced after her.

"I can't go into the main area," I said, gasping for breath. "I don't have a gas mask."

"Why don't you head to the kitchen then?" Chris said. Like me, he was out of breath. It made me feel better about my own lack of athleticism. I could ride my bike for hours with no problem, but running took a lot out of me. "You can always pretend to be staff if anyone questions you, but that way you can help get the escapees and the injured to safety. You know, cover their tracks with a bomb if you need."

Now, that was a good idea.

“Okay, I’ll do that. You’re sure the smoke won’t affect you?”

“It shouldn’t. I may not be able to shift, but I’ve still got a lot of the perks regular shifters have. My body will metabolize it way too fast for it to have any effect on me.”

“All right, then. Stay safe.”

“You, too. Do us proud.”

I intended to. When we reached the next junction, I peeled off down a servants’ corridor that opened into the pantry connected to the kitchen. Honestly, helping innocent bystanders get out felt like the right thing to do rather than running and getting myself to safety. Leo would probably disagree with me, and I would have to deal with the consequences of breaking my own word, but that could wait until everyone was safe and sound and another brother was dead.

Priorities and all that.

As I entered the pantry, I immediately had to duck a skillet that was aiming straight for my head. I rolled forward, crossing my arms over my head for protection.

“It’s just me!”

Thankfully, no second hit came, and I recognized a girl from the catering team. I couldn’t quite recall her name, but I knew she was a college kid who had absolutely no idea what was going on.

“Oh my god! I’m so sorry. I thought you were...” Her voice broke, and she let out a sob. I scrambled to my feet and pulled her into a hug. Perhaps it was an overly familiar thing to do with a complete stranger, but she clung to me and began to weep

into my shoulder. “I was serving champagne to the guests when a bunch of animals started jumping through the windows! And then some of the guests turned into animals, too, and our clients started flying!”

Flying? Oh, right. Chadwicke had used that trick. I still had a lot to learn about warlocks, but it seemed they could do anything if they could come up with a spell for it.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay. You’re away from the fight now. Let me help you get out of here. We’ll go through the back entrance.” Although I kept my tone steady, that small voice inside me screamed at me to run. To hide. That I was just a silly girl playing a game with monsters, and there was no way I could win.

Except I’d already learned what came from giving in to cowardice. As long as I was able to help, I would.

For my mother’s sake.

For my sake.

For all our sakes.

“W-w-what if one of them finds us?”

“They won’t,” I said with a confidence I didn’t feel. “And if they do”—I pulled out one of the smoke bombs from my apron and brandished it in the air—“I’ll cover us. You’ll have to hold your breath for as long as you can while you run away, okay?”

“What is that? Why do you even have it?”

“Don’t worry about it. Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

I didn't give her much of a choice. I grabbed her hand and pulled her along with me. I paused at the door to the kitchen, cracking it open an inch and peeking inside.

It looked like a bomb had gone off. Food littered the countertops and floor. The fancy setup I'd helped with that morning was in shambles. The back of house employees must have knocked it all over when they'd fled. They'd gotten away right when everything had gone down, but those who had been in the main room, like the girl I was helping, had only had a chance to run for safety rather than fully escape.

"You see that door?" I said, opening the door wider so she could see past me. "You get through that, then run diagonally left until you reach a line of trees. The path there will take you to a bridge that leads to main road. Use your cell phone to light your way if you need, but get there fast."

"What about you?"

It was sweet that she would ask in her panicked state.

"I'll watch your back. I need to see if there's anyone else who needs help, too."

"Why?"

Okay, that was a little less sweet, but everyone handled crises differently, and the girl had just had monsters scare the shit out of her.

"Because it's the right thing to do," I said before hauling her out of the pantry and shoving her toward the door.

Just like I'd hoped, she bolted for it without a backward glance. Good. One person down, who knew how many to go?

I knew a thing or two about blind panic and hiding in unsafe places, so I headed to the walk-in fridge. Sure enough, I found two people there—someone from the catering team and a staff member I'd seen on the grounds earlier. They were huddled under a couple of tablecloths. Kind of smart, but not smart enough.

Much like the other girl, they screamed when I entered, but quickly calmed down when they saw I was human. They didn't argue with me when I told them to follow me and gave them the same directions I had given my first rescue. A moment later, my count was up to three.

A terrifying shriek tore through the manor, making the hair at the back of my neck stand on end.

I took off toward the sound. Was it insanely stupid? Yes, but I couldn't ignore someone who was clearly in distress. I threw open the door that led to the last prep room before the main event area, smoke bomb already in hand.

I hadn't been expecting anything good, but even so, I wasn't prepared for what I saw. A woman dressed in body jewelry and a barely-there negligee clung to the door handle for dear life. Something that looked like a half-bear, half-man had its jaws clamped around the woman's calf and was trying to yank her back into the grand hall.

For the briefest of moments, my mind short-circuited, rapidly trying to absorb every detail it could. I could see out into the ballroom, where smoke hung thick in the air, adding an otherworldly quality to the scene.

Blinking, I shook my head and whipped my arm back, pressing the button on the smoke bomb and throwing it at the bear-man's face.

It wouldn't put him to sleep, but it would distract him. That distraction was all I needed. I rushed him, then put all the force I could muster in to a kick. Pain coursed

through my leg, but the double whammy of the smoke bomb and the kick was enough for him to let go. When smoke seeped into the small vestibule, I used that opportunity to grab the girl and get her to her feet.

“What...? I...?” She frowned as if she were drugged, and that solidified my impression that she was likely one of the magical folk we were saving. I didn’t know if she was a shifter or not, so I pushed her in front of me and into the kitchen. “Hold your breath and run! Out the back door!” I wasn’t exactly thrilled she was alone—coming out of such deep enthrallment would probably be incredibly traumatic and confusing—but maybe whoever had helped save her had gotten caught up.

Fortunately, she was coherent enough to understand my command. She ran out the door, hitting her hip against one of the counters. I was a step behind her, pausing to close the door behind me, but I was a smidge too slow. Suddenly, a hand gripped my ponytail and yanked me backward into the smoke.

Shit.

Unlike the shifter who was attacking me—I was sure he was enthralled—the smoke would affect me, and fast. I took the deepest breath I could and clamped my lips closed even as my back hit the floor with far too much force. I had no time to react before the bear shifter was on top of me, his face rapidly losing all trace of human features.

Fuck, I was in so much trouble.

I fought to get out from under him, but he was getting heavier, and heavier, and heavier. Not to mention his claws were growing longer and sharper to match his muzzle, which was sporting more and more teeth with every passing second.

Damn, so this was how I went out. At least I wouldn’t be alive long enough for Leo

to lecture me. Silver linings and all that.

For all my rather dry thoughts about the whole situation, energy surged and roiled within me. I supposed it simply wasn't in my nature to give up, because suddenly, I desperately wanted to live.

My lungs burned from the lack of oxygen, but I kept holding my breath as I reached down into my apron and grabbed another smoke bomb. As the bear opened its jaws wide to either eat me or bellow right in my ear, I shoved it right into his spread maw.

The shifter reared back, and an even thicker cloud of smoke filled the space. Scrambling to my feet, I sprinted to the door, my straining lungs screaming in protest.

As soon as I was through the door, I sucked in air, and only then did I realize I hadn't gone through the door to the kitchen. In my fall and our tussling, I must have gotten turned around, because I was in the middle of the grand hallway that led to the ballroom. The ballroom which, from the sound of it, was a full-on battlefield now.

Whoopsie.

I needed to hide before the bear shifter recovered. Because he would recover. Sure, his tongue and gums would burn like hell for maybe five minutes, but that was about it.

I took maybe a handful of steps before a shape came crashing through the wall to my left and slamming into the opposite one. Shrieking, I jumped back, then frowned when I recognized the shape as one of the two mountain lion shifters America had connected us with. They called themselves Klandagi.

I was about to rush to his side and try to help him when a man floated casually through the hole in the wall.



I didn't need to be a magical being to sense the strange energy crackling around his raised hand. Quickly, I thrust my hand into my apron pocket and pulled out another smoke bomb. I only had two more after this, but what was the point in saving them when someone needed my help right then and there?

"Hey, fuckwad!" I cried as I lobbed the bomb, grateful for the couple of summers I'd spent at softball camp.

The man—I was certain it was one of the brothers because he was freaking floating—turned his head to the side just in time to get beamed right in the forehead.

Yeah, that was satisfying.

It fell to the floor, and smoke started to erupt around him, but he flicked his wrist, and the next thing I knew, the smoke became a living creature, coalescing in a wild and fearsome form...

And it was coming straight for me.

There was nowhere to run. A bear shifter behind me, the chaotic and dangerous ballroom to my right, and one of the brothers who had destroyed so many lives front of me.

Well... those weren't exactly great options, were they?

So, I did the only thing I could do. I braced myself and pulled my shirt up over my mouth, as if that would help.

The smoke hit me with a physical force, pushing me backward so hard that my feet actually skidded along the carpet. I've barely been able to draw in a full breath before it did, but I did my best not to breathe now.

But my best could only be my best, after all, and I was only human. My lungs were already burning when the smoke circled around me like a tornado, completely enveloping me. When it began to pick me up, I knew there was no hope for me.

Under any other circumstances, having magic lift me off the ground would have been fun, but this was most decidedly not fun . Far sooner than I would have liked to admit, my self-preservation instincts forced me to open my mouth, and I dragged in a deep breath of the smoke. It smelled surprisingly pleasant.

I thought the sedation effects would be pretty instantaneous, that my eyelids would grow heavy, and I would pass out fairly quickly, but I felt as alert as ever. I felt even more alert when the swirling vortex of smoke around me began to haul me toward my enemy.

Wood shattered behind me, and I crashed to the floor. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes clear just in time to see two wolves had burst through the wall, the larger one landing squarely on the floating man's back, his teeth sinking into the luminescent purple shield that had suddenly appeared around the warlock's head, and the other going straight for his crotch.

Yeowch.

Between the two of them and the mountain lion shifter who had managed to get up, they overpowered him. One minute, he was screaming curses, his hands glowing with pent-up energy that didn't know where to go, the next, the purple shield protecting him vanished, allowing the wolf—which I now realized was Leo—to snap his jaws closed through the warlock's skull.

I shuddered. Holy shit, it was bloody. Gory. I'd seen a lot since Leo had entered my life, but nothing could have prepared me for the rush of blood and brain matter that dripped from my lover's mouth. My stomach lurched, and I turned away in case I

really did throw up. That would be embarrassing.

“Ven!”

I turned back toward the gruesome scene to see that Leo was back in his human form. I swallowed hard. He was completely soaked with blood from his chin down to his legs, so seeing him wasn't as comforting as it would have been.

“What are you doing here? You were supposed to get to safety.”

I grimaced. Not exactly the best timing. It would suck if I died and got chewed out by Leo. It was really supposed to be an either-or situation.

“I...” I wasn't really sure what to say, and it turned out I didn't need to say anything, because a surge of energy suddenly sliced through the air, knocking us all to our asses.

“But didn't you just kill the brother?” I asked, more confused than ever. Everything had happened so suddenly, I'd hardly had time to process any of it, but I was pretty sure those were the guy's brain staining the carpet that probably cost more than I made in a year. If not, then I was doing some serious hallucinating.

“There's more than one of them here,” Leo hissed, already getting to his feet. “Get out of here! You promised.”

Hmm. I had, hadn't I?

Maybe I was naturally a coward, because running seemed like a fucking good idea. Before I could so much as turn on my heel, six security guards barreled through the hole in the wall. Some were still in their uniforms while some were shifted, and maybe I was wrong, but it didn't look like they were all enthralled.

Huh, I guessed everyone had a price. Even shifters.

Leo shifted back into his wolf form so fast that the steam he produced was physically hot. By the time it had evaporated, he'd dealt with two of the security guards, and the wolf with him had another one down.

"Leo!" I cried out. "I know that some have to die, but not all our enemies have a choice. Please, don't kill them all unless you really have to."

He didn't respond—he couldn't in his wolf form—but I could have sworn he lessened the pressure of his teeth on his opponent's shoulder. Instead of tearing through the half-shifted man's muscles, Leo simply shook him a few times until the shifter's eyes rolled back and he went still

Was it impractical to have asked that in the middle of a battle? Perhaps. But there were slaves amongst the brother's battle fodder, so if we could afford to be careful, why wouldn't we? Besides, I was sure Leo would be able to tell when lethal force was necessary and when it wasn't.

At least, I hoped so.

But I'd promised him I would trust him, and if there was ever a time to put that trust to the test, we were in it.

A groan sounded from down the hall, and I tore my eyes away from my lover to see the Klandagi shifter had lost her animal form and was struggling to her feet. She had an open wound on her side. It was so deep I could see her intestines. If she weren't a shifter, she'd be dead already. If her enhanced healing was going to save her from what would have killed a human, she needed time, and time wasn't exactly easy to come by in the middle of the battle.

It looked like I'd have to delay my escape a wee bit longer.

"I got you," I murmured as I rushed over to her, ignoring the stinging in my eyes from the thick smoke around us. I wasn't sure if that was my fault or the warlock's, but I'd worry about where to pin the blame later. "I need you to take a deep breath because this is gonna sting, okay?"

The woman managed a very weak nod. If she said anything I didn't hear it over the din of battle. I pulled a small bottle out of my apron pocket. When it became clear that patching up shifters would become a common occurrence in my life, I'd mixed an elixir I could use on the go. It wasn't anything too special: distilled water, witch hazel, willow bark, vitamin E oil, calendula, aloe, and a little echinacea. I'd added tea tree oil to the first batch, but strangely, it had irritated Ricky's skin instead of soothing it, and I didn't want that to happen to anyone else.

The woman hissed as I poured half the bottle over her wound, but the graying flesh began to pink up within seconds. I found the rapid healing of shifters fascinating, but now was not the time to marvel at how her insides rearranged themselves and her skin stitched itself together. If we all lived through the battle, I'd give her some immune-boosting supplements to make sure she had no infections or contaminants inside her.

"Come on, let me help you out of here," I said once her breathing wasn't as shaky. "Esperanza can get you to safety once we're outside."

"Yeah," she rasped, holding her arm up to me. I was impressed that she was even able to do that and quickly crouched next to her to drape it over my shoulders. "How are you still up?"

"Pardon?" I asked as I stood carefully so as not to jostle her.

“The gas,” she said simply.

Oh, right. That. A thick cloud of gas still surrounded us, and considering I’d inhaled a fair amount of it, I really should have been snoring on the floor, like all the non-shifters in the ballroom.

“Maybe the smoke bombs I threw were duds,” I said, focusing on getting out. Thankfully, the bear shifter I had barely escaped from wasn’t anywhere to be seen. That did make me worry that we were going to run into him under even more inopportune circumstances, but there wasn’t much else I could do about it.

“Just one step at a time,” I murmured under my breath. It wasn’t exactly the quickest escape, but luckily she had a pretty small frame. She was several inches shorter than me and at least fifty pounds lighter.

Once I had her outside, I didn’t have to wait long before I heard a bird cry and Esperanza landed beside me.

“I’ve got her,” Esperanza said. “Chris already got a whole chunk of the prisoners out, but he went back in and said there were more.”

More? How many magical beings had the brothers taken?

“There were two of the brothers in there,” I murmured, not quite sure what else to say.

“Holy shit, two? Do you know which ones?”

I shook my head. Technically, the only brother whose name I knew was Chadwicke, and he was dead as a doornail.

“Get her to safety, I’m going back in.”

“Okay. But be safe, now. I kind of like you,” Esperanza said.

“Ah, the approval of a teenager. Exactly what I’ve always needed in my life.” I knew sarcasm was hit or miss with some people, but she grinned at me.

“Don’t take it for granted.”

We chuckled for a few seconds, then I was running back into danger. What was that, three times in one day? It looked like it was becoming a habit.

Leo would be upset with me, but it wasn’t like I was running directly into battle. Not at all. The closest I had gotten was the hallway next to it, and that was only because the werecat and Leo had brought it to me.

I doubted Leo would agree with my logic, but I couldn’t leave Chris all alone. He’d risked his life to go back and save more of the captives, so why shouldn’t I? The two of us were a lot more likely to survive together than on our own. Besides, with one brother down, the majority of the forces would be focused on protecting the other brother—and I hoped to God those efforts would be in vain. It was a huge stroke of luck that we had the opportunity to take down a pair of the warlocks instead of just one.

When I entered the kitchen again, it was somehow even more of a wreck than it had been. I slipped down the hallway to the door at the end that led to the prisoners downstairs.

When the door burst open, I screamed in surprise. A hulking, roaring man blocked my path, and my mind started firing on all cylinders. If he was standing in the doorway, then Chris and all the other prisoners were pretty much trapped downstairs

somewhere.

I needed to get him away from the door.

But how? He had at least a foot on me, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he was pushing four hundred pounds of muscle, because his fists were nearly the size of my head. Was he some sort of gorilla shifter in the middle of transforming? Did gorilla shifters even exist? I had no idea.

Doing the first thing that came to mind, I roared and charged at him. Apparently, the element of surprise added a whole bunch of bonus damage to my attack, because the giant man stumbled back into the staircase, and I managed to swing the door shut.

Normally, I would have locked the door and trusted that the behemoth would take the time to break it down, but unfortunately I'd sabotaged the lock. I glanced around frantically, trying to come up with an idea. My gaze landed on the heavy statue next to the door. I braced myself against it, then pushed with all the strength I could muster until the statue was in front of the door.

Normally, this would be an awful idea, as it would trap the prisoners and Chris with whatever that giant man was, but I had no doubt he would move my obstacle out of the way in no time. Hopefully, it would give me enough time to get to the end of the hall.

Because I actually had a plan.

Internally chanting a whole bunch of prayers for luck, I sprinted down the hall as fast as I could, which wasn't really all that fast. I was built for endurance, not speed. When I was about halfway down the hall, I heard thumping on the door behind me, and sure enough, I'd only barely skidded to a stop at the corner when the statue went flying into the wall, and the door half-broke off its hinges.



Well, that worked out better than expected.

The mammoth of the man stepped out, his head swiveling this way and that as if he was looking for something.

Something like me.

“Over here!” I called before booking it down a path I’d only been through once before.

I didn’t wait to see if he would follow me, mostly because I knew he would. I ran with all I had, breath rasping in my chest, until I made it to that hidden bathroom the maid had showed me earlier. Hoping I’d put enough distance between myself and the giant and that he didn’t have the same extreme sense of smell that shifters did, I opened the hidden entryway and quickly went inside, closing it behind me. I wasn’t willing to leave anything up to chance, however, so I grabbed the lid of the toilet tank and waited beside the door.

And waited.

And waited.

It seemed to take an age before I heard heavy footsteps approaching me, but instead of the thundering storm of someone chasing down their prey, the steps were slow.

I frowned in confusion. Had I lost him already? I’d expected this to be more difficult. Not that I was complaining, of course, but I was a little surprised. It seemed my battle instincts were pretty all right for being a college dropout and grocery store clerk.

Just when it felt like I might be stuck in the tiny space forever, another crash sounded from somewhere far away, and I heard the heavy footsteps take off. Could it really be

so easy? Somehow, it seemed like I'd wiggled out of danger again. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought I had someone watching out for me. I hadn't had such good luck in my entire life. In fact, I would say having bad fortune was my norm. Sort of like a cosmic punishment for causing my mother's death.

Cautiously, I left the bathroom and made my way back to the door, but once again, I didn't make it to my destination. Right as I rounded a corner, the entire wall exploded.

The force of it threw me back against the wall, knocking the breath out of me. Even my vision went gray. For a moment, everything was a faint echo, and all I heard was the sound of my blood rushing in my ears. My whole body throbbed with an unpleasant sensation, the blow having rattled my entire being.

It felt like it took forever for the ringing to stop and my vision to return, but when it did, I found myself looking through a sizable hole that led all the way to the ballroom.

Well, if there was such a thing as a security deposit for mansions, the brothers definitely weren't getting that back.

Strangely, the walls didn't look like they'd been burned or blasted through in my direction. It was like something had been ripped away from the walls and into the ballroom.

Frowning, I got to my feet and took a shaky step forward before I stopped myself. Now was not the time to investigate. It was time to get the hell out of dodge.

I should have known better, however, because just like every other instance where I had the opportunity to flee, something happened to make me stay. A coyote shifter flew through the air, a long piece of rebar protruding through their hip. The metal

slammed into the post, trapping the coyote shifter.

Naturally, I had to help.

Someone needed to study my complete lack of self-preservation. I was only a human, for God's sake. Why did I feel this incessant need to help magical beings? All I could do now was hope I survived this battle like I'd survived the one at Chadwicke's estate. I knew I was being reckless, but I liked to think it was worth it. And it wasn't like I was being too stupid about it... other than throwing a smoke bomb at a powerful warlock's head. Not exactly my finest moment, but it had worked.

I raced forward toward the injured shifter, but I stopped short when I was finally close enough to see the full scope of everything going on in the ballroom.

Oh, my God .

It was so much worse than I could have imagined. There were bodies everywhere. Some of them slept peacefully, some of them were wounded, and some were very obviously dead. There was so much blood, I could smell it in the air and practically taste it on the back of my tongue.

Servants. Party guests. Shifters. Enemies. Allies. All of them mixed together in various states of consciousness. In the corners, the enthralled security fought against my friends, but those were barely skirmishes compared to what was happening in the center of the giant room.

It was the other brother. Alric. What a stupid name. But unlike his dead sibling, he wasn't floating. No, he stood on a platform of writhing metal. It looked like the very pipes had been ripped from the floor and turned into snakes beneath his feet. When I saw the strange fissures all across what had once been polished marble, I realized that was exactly what he'd done.

Did the warlock have some sort of metal power like Magneto from the X - Men ? I didn't know that that was even a type of magic. I had so much to learn.

Pure, undiluted terror coursed through my veins as the realization set in. Not only had the warlock quite literally ripped all the metal from the walls, but he had used it to ensnare at least a dozen of my allies around him, and he was squeezing the life out of them.

Including Leo.

This time it wasn't a blast of magic that made my vision go fuzzy and my ears ring, but rather Leo's choked-off howl and the sound of cracking bones.

No!

No, no, no, no, no!

"Stop it!" I screamed, rushing toward him as if that would do anything. Now I really was being stupid, but what other option did I have? Run away and let this asshole murder all my friends? Maybe I could distract Alric long enough for someone stronger to do something. I'd lost my childhood because I was a coward. I refused to lose the first true love I'd felt in years because I chose to run away. "Let go of him!"

My blood rushed furiously through my veins once more, and every step I took sounded like a clap of thunder to my ears. I wasn't even halfway to Leo when Alric looked at me, seeming more curious than threatened.

A reasonable enough reaction, since I was an unarmed human sprinting straight toward a powerful warlock. What possible threat could I present to him?

"And who is this?" he asked.

I wasn't quite prepared for how melodic his voice was. I didn't bother to answer as I kept running toward Leo, but then I suddenly pitched forward as something wrapped around my ankle. I hit the floor hard as the twisting metal wrapped around my leg and yanked me down to the cracked marble. Thank God I hadn't been pushed into one of the crevices. I didn't even want to think what that would feel like. Perhaps it wouldn't feel like anything at all, because I would be dead after being impaled on something sharp and pointy.

Not that I was in all that much better a situation at the moment. I was no longer being dragged backward, but rather hauled up into the air. Pain shot up my right leg as all the blood rushed to my head. I really wasn't a fan of viewing the world from this upside-down angle.

"Looks like a human, smells like a human, but doesn't feel like a human." Feel like a human? What the hell did that mean? "Not a shifter, either, but also not one of our thralls."

Perhaps it was a bit egotistical of me, but I couldn't help but notice that, at least for a moment, Alric had stopped squeezing his multiple victims. I had no idea what he was going on about, but, hey, if it helped my companions, I was all for it.

"What was it you were saying?"

It was so strange how the man was talking to me like this was our meet-cute. His smile was charming, his tone pleasant, and there was even a cheery glint to his bright, blue eyes. It was such a strange juxtaposition that I didn't answer him until he gave me a good hard shake that made my knee pop.

"Let them go," I rasped, hoping I was indeed providing the perfect distraction for someone to come in from the wings and save us all. Because I had to admit, I was doing way better at holding Alric's attention than I had expected.

“Ah, see, I thought that’s what you said, but then I was sure you had to have some compelling argument. You may have taken down my brother, but Nikolas was a spoiled baby. The years our mother spent coddling him and telling him he was her most special prince were bound to have consequences.”

Wow. I hadn’t expected him to sound so callous about his brother’s death. This family clearly had drama. But also, his reaction made me think he didn’t quite know who we were. That was probably a good thing, but maybe I could use it to further rattle him? It was a gamble, that was for sure.

“It wasn’t just your precious Nicky,” I said, my lips curling back from my teeth. “It was Chadwicke, too. And...” I reached deep into my memory for the names I’d only heard a couple of times in passing. “Kirklin and Finneus. Your whole family is falling one at a time. This is your chance to head for the hills before we take you down, too. Consider it a rare mercy.”

I didn’t know where I got my chutzpah , but Alric’s magic wavered, and the bond around my leg loosened a bit. Unfortunately, that meant I suddenly dropped a few inches, which sent a bolt of fiery pain jolting up from my ankle to my hip, but the metal bindings tightened before I could bash skull-first into the floor. As I’d hoped, that momentary lapse in power was enough for Leo and two others to burst free from their bindings and charge at Alric.

For a brief moment, I allowed myself to think Leo was going to leap onto the man and end yet another evil warlock.

I should have known better.

Alric was so much more experienced than anyone we’d fought before. He paid full attention to all of his surroundings instead of focusing on one target. I couldn’t help but wonder if he was the eldest and everyone else we’d gone up against so far had

been easy mode.

That hypothesis flashed through my mind and was almost instantaneously proven true when more metal pipes burst from the floor and shot up to impale the limbs of the three shifters rushing toward him. A look of unbridled fury crossed over Alric's handsome features.

"T-that's impossible! We..." he trailed off, and his writhing mass of living metal carried him over to where Leo was hoisted, spiked through his left foreleg. "It's you! But how? We cursed you!"

As if to prove his point, metal tendrils like the tentacles of an octopus reached out from the mass of material at the brother's feet and pried Leo off the spike. I watched in horror as they wrapped around each of his limbs and began to pull in separate directions. It was like he was being drawn and quartered right in front of me.

A raw, animalistic sound tore out of my throat, but my screams were cut short when a wad of metal wrapped around my head, sliding between my teeth like a gag.

Alric turned his attention from me to Leo, squeezing and shaking him harder. I tried to protest, to beg, but all that came out of my mouth were muffled noises.

Leo's wolf form slipped from his grasp as he turned into a battered and bleeding human. My heart lurched in my chest, but no matter how much I struggled against my bonds, I couldn't escape.

"I don't know how you did it, but I'm going to end this right here and now," the warlock seethed, his pleasant expression having shifted into an unhinged snarl. "No more of this drawn-out nonsense. I'm going to rip you limb from limb and burn every piece, then use the ash to fertilize my mother's gardens."

Fear surged up within me as I saw the metal coils around Leo tighten, the tension already evident in his limbs. But there was something else... a roiling, undiluted, virulent rage . It was unlike anything I had ever felt before, scalding the back of my throat and coating my tongue in acid. My stomach roiled, and the blood rushing through me turned into an inferno. It felt like I'd run ten miles, but instead of being exhausted, I was pumped full of adrenaline.

And just like that, I was done.

Done with being a victim. Done with having to run around the sideline because everyone was so much stronger than me. Tired of evil people getting away with hurting so many just because they could.

And I was done watching the man I loved get hurt.

Yes, maybe I had been a coward when I was younger. Maybe me running and hiding had resulted in the death of my mother. But my origins were not my prophecy. I could change it if I really wanted to.

And I really, really wanted to.

“Let them all go,” Leo choked out. Deep, red marks marred his skin where his limbs were being stretched, and I had to swallow down the bile that crept up my throat at the sight. “It’s me you want to hurt. It’s me you want revenge against. None of them had anything to do with this.”

Pain laced every syllable in Leo’s words, and it fed the frenzy within me. I felt like I was cooking inside my own skin, something bubbling up from my gut that I couldn’t describe. It was like that wonderful, magical feeling I got when planting a seedling, except it was defensive rather than jubilant. It wasn’t quite bloodlust, but it was an adamant inner demand to protect. To finally get justice for all the terrible harm these



warlocks had caused.

“You think you have any room to bargain here? No. I’m going to make them watch you die, and then I’ll kill them all one by one.” Somehow, his gaze took on an even more malicious gleam as his grin widened. “Who knows, maybe I’ll keep a few. Replenish that harem you stole, fill out the ranks of my security again.”

His words continued to fuel the fervor within me. The rage had grown so much it felt like it was pouring out my skin, spilling across the ground and spreading through the earth like actual blood from a wound. It made me burn so hot I was surprised I didn’t combust. At the same time, I felt so connected to the world around me. Like I was hearing it’s heartbeat and truly feeling its lifeblood for the first time.

“You’re disg—” Leo screamed as the metal coils pulled even tighter, and a sickening crack filled the air. That was a dislocation if I ever heard one.

He was going to kill Leo unless someone stopped him.

Suddenly, the rage within me snapped, and the tempest that had churned so fervently beneath my skin exploded out in a shockwave. At least that was how it felt. In reality, nothing happened for several long beats besides Alric continuing to torture Leo. My alpha. My lover.

“Stop!” I shrieked, though it was no use. The metal in my mouth held my tongue down, and all that came out was a garbled cry. With everything in me, I just wanted the warlock to stop .

Then the most peculiar thing happened. A rumble started and grew rapidly. It was enough of a disturbance to give that bastard of a warlock pause, and Leo slumped against the bonds at the sudden lack of tension.

Suddenly, vines erupted through the cracks in the floor.

It was as if I had copied the warlock, except my pipes were made of greenery instead of metal. Other plants joined the fray, bursting up from the floor in waves of verdant emerald.

It was a visual cacophony of green as every plant grew rapidly, some developing spiny points that oozed with a sap I had no doubt was poisonous. Bushes popped up, growing wide and high enough to provide stable footholds for those who were still dangling in the warlock's grip. Leaves whipped this way and that as if challenging someone to box them.

And the vines ... Oh, the vines.

They weren't like the pipes at all, in that there was only a finite amount of metal things Alric could summon, whereas my vines were growing and reproducing of their own volition, rapidly climbing over everything to reach the warlock.

My vines? Why did that sound so right? It scratched a part of my brain I didn't even know needed itching. Although, they couldn't be my vines because I wasn't magical. I was just a grocery store clerk who was in way over her head. And yet they were mine in every sense of the word. They were feeding off me, but not draining me. No, if anything, they were adding to me.

The vines wrapped around me and righted me, and all the blood rushed away from my head. Once I was in a more stable position, the vines slithered to the coil of metal biting into my skin. I watched in awe as the vines wound themselves throughout the pipes and pried my limbs free.

Alric's sharp shout of alarm drew my attention back to him.

He had a barrier around him, similar to the ones his brothers had used, but a literal torrent of foliage raised around his protective bubble, like piranhas descending on a carcass. It was beautiful, yet horrifying to watch.

“Ven?” Leo’s weak voice barely registered on the periphery of my senses.

I glanced over at him. The metal bindings had stopped pulling on his joints, but he was still suspended in the air.

That wouldn’t do.

Getting a handle on the energy surging within me felt a bit like trying to hold on to a wet bar of soap that had been soaked in oil, but somehow I managed to get enough of a grip on it to get a large bush to grow under him. Vines shot up from the floor and freed him the same way they had freed me. The vines carefully set Leo down on his new leafy bed.

“Enough!”

The plants had only just let go of Leo when another shockwave burst out of Alric. It was unlike any other I had experienced. It ripped me out of my comfortable arrangement and threw me back so violently that every cell in my body braced for an impact that was going to hurt like hell . My hands automatically cradled the back of my head, because my instincts were telling me the force I was traveling at wouldn’t be survivable if I collided with something hard or pointy.

Thankfully, no such fate awaited me. I collided with something that felt like a net, and it slowed my momentum until I came to a completely safe stop.

Glancing behind me, I saw a lattice of smaller vines had caught me. I was only a foot or so in front of jagged pieces of wood that had been ripped free from the wall. Yeah,

that definitely would have hurt.

Not everyone was so lucky. The plants had tried to help several, but many others had been flung to the far corners of the room or even through the windows. Leo's limp form lay across the doorway, one of his legs hooked up over a chair like he'd had a little too much to drink and was falling over. Thankfully, he wasn't impaled on anything.

That shimmering rage inside me redoubled. Once again, he'd been hurt after I'd almost gotten him to safety.

The plants sensed that anger, or maybe they fed off it—I couldn't tell. My brain was so awash with adrenaline, anger, fear, and everything else going on, that it was all a mishmash of input and sensation.

But what I did know was that I was somehow communicating with the foliage—the very much alive foliage. The plants suddenly grew faster, moved faster, were faster.

The next thing I knew, all those thorny growths from before shot through the air straight at Alric. Magic burst from his hands, knocking away the thorns. He was so concentrated on everything coming at him, he forgot to think about things that could come from below .

One moment he waved his hand and caused a volley of thorns to burst into flame, the next, there was an awful screech as the metal below him split in two, and a giant flower suddenly bloomed below him.

It was magnificent, all resplendent golds and corals with yellow dots, almost like a sunrise breaking through the twilight sky. Then it snapped shut like a Venus flytrap around Alric's lower half.

He screamed in terror. “What is happening?”

I had no idea what I was doing, yet I unequivocally knew it was me who was making everything happen. I felt connected to every single plant around me, not in a solid, definable way like a limb, but that connection was there, nonetheless.

It was almost like a phone call, albeit a phone call with hundreds of different non-sentient entities that didn’t exactly speak English.

Huh, maybe not like a phone call at all.

But I didn’t waste too much more of my mental faculties worrying about the semantics. All the vines in the room surged toward Alric, grabbing his arms and binding them tightly to his side. The vines wrapped around his chest, squeezing so hard I could hear his ribs crack, and then finally, his neck.

His face turned red as he coughed and writhed, but he couldn’t free himself. All the magic stopped, and for a moment, it was calm.

Well, the room was calm. I certainly wasn’t .

There was still the fireworks of something unnamable within me as the vines wound around the rest of Alric’s body, tightening, and tightening, and tightening.

“A drya—” He panted before devolving into a coughing fit, spittle flying from his lips. “You’re not sup?—”

He couldn’t get the words out as new vines, armed with thick, long thorns, joined the fray. Blood seeped out between the verdant green as Alric screamed in agony.

The sound was awful. Coupled with the sight and smell of blood, it sent ice through

my veins. The fire inside me went out, the rage dissipated, and suddenly I was looking at a man being tortured to death.

Fuck.

Nausea swept through me, and it took all my control not to throw up. The thing was, I knew Alric was evil. If he died, we'd be saving an innumerable amount of innocent lives. But there was a difference between dispatching a dangerous foe and outright torturing them. And sure, he had done much worse things to other people and most likely deserved whatever I could do to him, but that was the difference between him and me. He wanted to hurt people.

I wanted to save people.

"Stop! That's enough!" I called to the plants, and the energy within me completely fizzled. I half-expected them to lose all their vigor with that, no longer fueled by the storm inside of me, but they went on as if I hadn't said anything at all. Still squeezing. Still hurting .

"I said that's enough! Just end him!"

The plants didn't listen to me, and when I tried to grab hold of that same energy I'd had before, I simply couldn't find it. It was frustrating. It was horrifying. And I couldn't help but feel like a giant hypocrite for chewing out Leo for what happened at Chadwicke's.

What if the plants kept going after destroying Alric? I clearly didn't have any control over them. What if in my desperate attempt to save my love, I'd created a force that would kill us all?

"I said stop! Just end it!"

Maybe it was in my own head, but it felt like a ripple of energy went through the plants. A moment later, the vines around Alric's neck tightened even more, then jerked to the side, and a sickening crack echoed through the room.

It was finally over.

I stood there, trembling, as the reality of everything that had happened rushed through me. I didn't know what to say, didn't know what to do, could only watch as the plants slowly reverted back to normal and disappeared into the ground. At least my fears about them turning on us turned out to be unfounded.

Still, as I looked around the carnage of the room and at Alric's mangled, bloody corpse, I couldn't help but wonder what I had just done.

What the hell was I?

7

LEO

Something was wrong with Ven.

It had only been a day since our encounter with Alric, and I figured at least half of it had to be stress from the battle, but I sensed it was more than that. She was so jumpy, and despite the fact that the house was full of pretty jubilant celebration, my love seemed withdrawn. She smelled stressed as well, almost like she was grieving.

None of that made any sense. While I was still upset with her for getting so involved in the battle, she hadn't been hurt. I couldn't remember chunks of what happened, and a lot of it was blurry and unfocused, but as far as I could recall, she'd been a huge help. Also, she'd had incredible aim with those little smoke bombs. They had been incredibly effective on all the non-shifter enemies apart from the brothers.

"Hey, where should I put this leg of lamb?"

I looked away from the kitchen window to the shifter who had entered. He was a large, strapping fellow, and related to America in some way, but I couldn't remember his name.

"In the freezer. We've got enough fresh food that we won't be able to get to it for a bit."

That was certainly a change for us. Although Ven had been a truly incredible host and



worked quite hard to make sure we had enough to eat, I knew it had been difficult on her. She didn't make a lot of money, and the demands of the shifter diet were intense, to say the least. Thankfully, Ricky's hunting had really supplemented things, taking the expensive protein demand off Ven's beautiful shoulders, but now... well, we were practically swimming in food.

A lot of shifters and magic folk were grateful we'd returned their kidnapped family members. It hadn't been easy as some of the enthralled ones had fought us tooth and nail, but those effects wore off as the hours passed after we'd eliminated the two brothers. As for all the shifters stuck in their animal forms, it had taken a simple kiss on the snout from Ven to break the curse.

I still didn't understand how that worked, but I knew better than to question it. There had always been something more to Ven that I couldn't quite explain. She wasn't a shifter, and I knew for a fact she wasn't a witch or some kind of mindwalker. But that didn't mean she wasn't something. After all, I knew better than most that the world was full of strange and unexplainable things. Why couldn't the woman I was desperately in love with also be a little strange and mysterious? I owed her everything, and I would quite happily spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

"Sorry, man, your freezer is full."

"Huh?" Oh, right. The shifter with the leg of lamb. My memories about the prices of things were still pretty hazy, but I was fairly certain that lamb was an expensive treat Ven couldn't usually afford. Definitely not something I wanted to waste.

"Perfect timing!" America said, popping her head in from the living room. "One of my tías is bringing a big ol' standalone freezer for you."

I smiled. That was one problem down. "You really don't have to."

“I’m not doing anything. She insisted. Says it’s the least she can do for the pack that brought her niece and nephew back to her. Honestly, you’re gonna have to get used to this stuff. Those warlocks have been wreaking havoc over several states ever since your pack first went ‘poof’. I don’t think you quite understand how many people you’re helping.”

I didn’t really know how to respond to that—words still weren’t exactly my strong suit—but I did feel my face flush.

Although I tried my best, I’d never really felt like I was that great of an alpha. The role had been pushed on me when I was far too young. I’d had to take out the usurper who had killed my father, and I’d made a lot of mistakes that hurt my pack. But now? Now, it felt like I was finally becoming the alpha I was always meant to be. Someone who could be relied on. Someone others looked to when they were in trouble and needed protection.

“Thank you, America.”

It was strange to think how the random coyote shifter Ven had run into at Chadwicke’s estate had helped our cause so much. We never would have been able to stage the attack on Alric’s auction without her. Hell, we wouldn’t have even known about it if it weren’t for Esperanza’s reckless actions. That eagle shifter was just a kid, and yet she was already responsible for saving so many lives.

“Ain’t nothing to thank me for. I’d still be that asshole wannabe drug lord’s property without you and Ven. You got me back to my family and freed all of us from the contracts he had us locked into. The very least I can do is help you free others.”

“Not everyone would be so generous,” I said, wanting to make sure America understood how much I valued her.

Before the curse, I'd never really thought about it, but now I was beginning to think the way different shifter species were so insular and stayed so far apart from each other was more harmful than helpful. Why were we so separated? Why was there so much tension between us? The deep divisions that went so far back made us much more vulnerable to people like the brothers. And the benefits of banding together had already been proven. We'd successfully destroyed the medical facility where I was trapped and killed two more brothers while stopping an auction where many of our magical kind would have been sold off to humans and others with duplicitous ideas. That was a pretty big deal.

Perhaps too big of a deal, and something to tackle at a different time. Right now, I needed to make sure a certain gardener was okay.

"If you'd excuse me, I'd like to check in on Ven. Make sure all that curse-breaking isn't wearing too heavily on her."

"Good idea. I did say hi to her a bit ago, and she smells very stressed. I figure she's not used to having so many of us boisterous types hanging around her quiet place."

Oh. I hadn't even thought of that, and I felt stupid for not doing so. Ven's place had been cramped for a while with me, Ricky, and our two rescues from the medical facility. But now there were close to two dozen people on her property. Not all in her house, of course—there was no way everyone would fit. Some of them were camped out in tents, others had brought campers, and several more were still struggling with adjusting to having their freedom back that they slept under the stars in their animal forms. Not to mention there were still several shifters whose memories were so fuzzy that they couldn't remember their names or where they'd come from. My heart ached for them, since I knew what a personal hell that was. So, yeah, maybe my worries about something deeper were unfounded and Ven was simply stressed from having so many people in her space and talking to her at random.

Perhaps it shouldn't be so surprising that she had escaped to her garden. It was her safe space, after all, but I doubted it was quite able to do its job as effectively as usual considering people were walking up to her every ten minutes or so.

Now I was about to join the fray. Oops. Hopefully, my presence would be more of an assurance than a hindrance.

With a nod to America and her cousin, I headed out. Ven was on the far side of her garden, where her newest vegetable bed was. It was the one we'd built together for growing longer-term tubers, garlic, and other things that took more than a season.

It was funny. Before I met Ven, I knew almost nothing about plants or gardening. It simply wasn't my field of interest. But now? Now I knew so much, and I found it all endlessly fascinating. Granted, all the knowledge I'd gained was only a drop in the bucket compared to Ven's, but she never made me feel stupid when I asked a question. She never acted impatient or annoyed. In fact, most of the time she seemed pretty excited to share with me. Her joy was infectious, which was why it was so troubling for me to see her clearly perplexed and uncomfortable. If she was burdened, I wanted to share that with her as much as I wanted to share all the lovely garden things.

"Hey there," I murmured as I approached her, not wanting to startle her if she was deep in thought. With so many shifters around, it was easy to forget that Ven's senses weren't quite as enhanced as mine. The last thing I wanted was to make her jump if she was feeling prickly, overstimulated, or vulnerable.

"Oh, uh, hey."

I didn't quite understand the trepidation in her tone. She sounded like a teenager who had been caught doing something they weren't supposed to, which was weird since she was just puttering around in her garden. But it did cement the fact that something

was definitely going on with her.

“Are you all right?” I asked as gently as I could. As worrying as her strange behavior was, it also felt kind of edifying that I knew her so well I could tell something was wrong from a few words. It wasn’t all that long ago when I was locked in my animal mind, completely on my own and disconnected from everything. Now? Now, I had so much.

And I would do whatever I had to do to protect it.

To protect her .

“Of course, I’m all right. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Well, that was about as convincing as a scam call from an unknown number.

“Because we all just went through a fairly traumatic battle, and you ended up saving my life, yet again. At this point, we’re gonna need to start keeping a tally.”

She offered a nervous giggle at that, but it wasn’t the laugh I knew and loved. I couldn’t quite figure out what was bothering her. Granted, I had a lot of gaps in my memory of what had happened. I didn’t actually know who had struck the final blow to Alric. Maybe it had been especially violent and Ven was struggling with that. While she did want the brothers dead, she struggled with blood and the grittier side of things.

“Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“I do.”

She sent me a soft look, but I knew her well enough to see the pain behind it. But

there was also a wall, and I was barely peeking over it. Something had happened to put the beautiful woman I adored on guard. I knew from experience how isolating that could be, and I desperately wanted to help her.

“Would you like to go on a walk with me?” I questioned, holding out my hand. I tried to say it in a way that put zero pressure on her; if she wasn’t ready, I wasn’t going to insist. “We haven’t been to our cave in a while.”

That was how I thought about the cave now. As ours. And how wonderful the last time had been. Despite everything that had happened, I remembered it as if it had happened a couple of days ago. The two of us laughing as we ran through the rain. Going into the house completely drenched and taking a blessedly hot shower together.

Bliss.

I missed that kind of physical intimacy, craved it even, but we didn’t have the time and certainly not the opportunity. I hoped that would change soon. Maybe when there were a fewer people with exceptional hearing around and less slave auctions we had to bust up.

“A walk?” Ven asked uncertainly, her eyes flitting this way and that.

It didn’t sit right with me to see my confident, normally cheery mate so off-kilter. Even when she’d sat next to me when I was stuck in my wolf form and espoused about things I couldn’t quite grasp, I’d always gotten the sense she was sure of herself at her core. That didn’t seem to be the case now.

I wanted to assure her, to get my Ven back, so I gently cupped her chin and tilted it up.

God, those eyes. They still struck me speechless. Those deep, deep pools of chocolate brown shone amber whenever the light struck them. They contained so many emotions, so many thoughts I wanted to tap into.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, my love, but I thought it might be nice to step away from all the... personalities we have visiting.”

Ven heaved a sigh, and I swore I saw a glimpse of the normal her. “You know what? That’s a great idea.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

I yearned to kiss her, but I could tell it wasn’t the right time. Truthfully, it was hard to think of a time when I didn’t want to kiss Ven. She was everything I could ever want in a match and more. For all the bad luck I’d had in my life, I would always be grateful that the path I’d been on led me to this amazing woman.

I mean, I wouldn’t have minded a little less turmoil and struggle, but I would go through all of it again if it meant it ended with me at Ven’s greenhouse door.

Reluctantly, I let go of her chin, and she took my hand. As we walked off into the trees, I reminded myself to slow my strides. Ven’s legs weren’t nearly as long as mine, and if I didn’t pay attention, I’d drag her along—the exact opposite of a relaxing walk.

We didn’t speak much, but that was okay. We didn’t need to. Ven was definitely processing things as we made our way to our secret cave. It was a bit amusing how a place meant to be an emergency shelter had turned into a secret fort for us. A getaway from the hustle and bustle that had developed in Ven’s cabin. It definitely wasn’t a quiet place any longer. Part of me hoped that, in time, Ven would be more comfortable around large groups of people. After all, packs weren’t small. At least,

they weren't supposed to be. At the moment, mine consisted of four shifters and the beautiful woman I was in love with. Not exactly an impressive force.

And yet, we'd accomplished a hell of a lot.

I kept that thought to myself, however, and waited for Ven to initiate conversation. I had expected her to relax once the sound of rushing water became audible—it was one of her favorite sounds—but even when we were close enough for a human to hear it, she was still agitated. My concern grew with every passing second, and I couldn't help but wonder if something terrible had happened while she had been on her own in the mansion.

I cursed myself because I had been worried about that possibility. I hated the idea of putting Ven in any danger, but I had to respect that she was one of the few people in our group who could do what she did, and she did have an incredible knack for getting others to safety. She'd definitely proven that time and time again.

“Ven, you don't have to tell me anything, but I can see something is bothering you. I hope you know you can trust me with whatever it is. I'm here for you.”

Although words were still very much not my thing, they always came easier whenever Ven was involved. Her very presence made me a more insightful person. Or maybe it was just that it was so easy to communicate with her. I didn't know which it was, but I wanted her to talk to me.

“I...” She swallowed hard. While normally I would watch the column of her throat bob up and down, now was not the time for it. “Do you not remember what happened?”

What happened?



“You’re going to have to be a little more specific than that. It was a long fight, and I was in really rough shape there at the end.”

“Yeah, you were,” Ven agreed, although she didn’t sound happy about it. “He was going to tear you limb from limb.”

Oh, was that what she was so upset about? It probably said quite a bit about me that her concern made my inner wolf preen. I didn’t exactly enjoy being in danger or being hurt, but I was incredibly lucky to have a partner who was so torn up about it. Ven truly did care for me. To her, I wasn’t just an alpha who had to protect the entire pack. To her, I was Leo.

“But I’m here now, and I’m safe. I know I got a little hurt, but not nearly as bad as at the medical facility.” It had taken me more than a week to recover from that. While all my joints were pretty sore, I would be right as rain in maybe another day or two. “And I’ve got you to take care of me.”

“Of course, I’ll take care of you,” Ven said, but she sounded defensive instead of relieved. Or maybe not defensive, but... guilty? It wasn’t a tone I was used to. Maybe I hadn’t hit the nail on the head like I had thought I did.

“Ven, did something happen when I was unconscious?”

“You really don’t remember?”

She sounded so tortured that it was my turn to feel guilty.

“I remember being surprised to see you in the hallway when we took down Nikolas. And then I remember ordering you to go before I had to deal with another wave of Alric’s personal security detail.” I racked my brain, trying to put the foggier pieces together. I used to pride myself on my sharp memory even in stressful situations, but

ever since the curse, recall wasn't nearly as easy as it used to be. It was frustrating, and I hoped I could get it back in time. Whole chunks of that night were gone or obfuscated by an impossible-to-navigate haze.

But I kept trying, because something was clearly bothering Ven, and it seemed like she expected me to know what it was.

"Wait, you came back, didn't you?" It was barely there, but I felt like there was a mental image of her standing in the middle of what had once been a wall. "I... I think I remember you trying to distract him."

"I did," she said, still so softly. "Because he was going to kill you."

"Clearly it worked. I'm here and all in one piece."

"No, you don't understand." Suddenly Ven whirled to face me, tears shimmering in her eyes. "He was going to kill you right there in front of me, and then kill everyone else he didn't take as a slave. I had to stop him."

Had to stop him ? "I... I'm not following. What am I missing, baby?"

"You really don't remember at all? You don't remember his pipes wrapping around my ankle and yanking me up into the air? You don't remember offering to trade yourself if he let the rest of us go?" Her voice grew more high-pitched as she spoke. "You don't remember that he was literally tearing you limb from limb and making all of us watch?"

Oh.

Now that she mentioned it, I could see how it would be upsetting.

“I’m sorry,” I said, ardently trying to access those memories. They had to be somewhere in my cavernous head. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the picture she was painting, and to my surprise, some blurry moments rose to the forefront.

I had been so shocked when she showed up again that I’d mentally begged her to run. There were flashes of metal chasing me, catching me. Alric’s malevolent sneer, so sure he had all of us dead to rights.

Because he did. Faintly, I recalled saying something when I saw that Ven was strung up like the rest of us, hanging upside down like a fish about to be gutted at the market. Panic had swamped me, and I’d outright begged because nothing mattered as long as Ven was safe.

And then... I remembered waking up.

Clearly, I had missed a lot. Like what had actually happened to Alric? How had we all escaped? How was Alric even dead? Because the last thing I remembered was him not only alive and well, but kicking our asses.

“I had to save you, okay? I need you to understand that. I didn’t do it on purpose. I just wanted him to stop.”

Tears fell freely down her cheeks, and I was well and truly baffled. I thought harder, reaching into the depths of my mind to figure out what had upset her so much. I had been so elated when I woke up and heard of our victory, I hadn’t even thought about the greater details of what had happened.

Then I saw it in my mind’s eye. Flashes of green. Vines moving like snakes. Moving like the metal pipes the warlock manipulated. Wait. That couldn’t be right... Could it?

“You did something.”

“I didn’t just do something, Leo. I killed him. And it wasn’t like I just ended it. I made it painful. I tortured him! I didn’t mean to. I wanted to save us all. And I’m not sad that he’s dead, I just... I can’t help but feel like a monster for how I did it. I don’t even know how I did. None of this makes any sense.”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Ven, Ven, you’re not a monster. I don’t understand what you could have?—”

“It was the plants! I can’t explain it, but somehow, I... I summoned them. They went wild, and it was like they were listening to me.” She winced. “Well, kind of listening to me. I didn’t want them to do quite what they did, but it was like they developed a mind of their own. And like I said, I’m not sorry that he’s dead. I... Leo, it was so awful .”

She grabbed my wrist and stared deep into my eyes, her voice utterly beseeching. At the contact, a wave of soothing coolness rolled through my body. It was a pretty strange thing to feel when my partner was so distraught.

Even stranger was that the more she spoke, the more I could remember. How the ballroom had practically turned into the set of Jumanji . How vines moved of their own accord, how thorns flew through the air.

Had Ven done all that? Surely that was impossible. And yet what other explanation did I have for what happened to Alric? If someone else had killed him, I was sure they’d be bragging about it. But then again, if Ven had somehow harnessed some insane green witch powers, wouldn’t someone have told me?

Or had everyone assumed I knew and that we’d kept it a secret for her protection?

There were a lot of discussions to be had.

But first, I needed to take care of my love.

“Hey, hey, Ven, you did what you had to do. We’re all alive because of you. That’s something to be proud of. No more of these tears, okay? You’re not a monster, baby. You’re a hero.”

“But how did I do it, Leo? I’m human. I’ve always been a human! And as far as I know, humans don’t have the ability to spontaneously control plants.”

“Honestly, I don’t know. The only beings I’m aware of who could have anything like that ability are green witches and nymphs.”

“Could I possibly have gotten through this much of my life without knowing I’m a witch?”

“No, I don’t think so. From what I’ve heard it becomes very obvious during puberty. Spells accidentally going off during sleep, prophetic dreams, magic leaking out if they get too angry. Besides, I’d be able to smell if you were a witch, and I can tell you most decidedly that you are not.”

Although I made sure to exude only calming pheromones and keep my tone level, I was incredibly puzzled. That night had been awash with blood and violence, but I had tried my best not to lose control like I had at Chadwicke’s. I’d killed those who needed to be killed and spared those I could, and the only reason I had done that was because of Ven. She had shown me so much generosity and kindness since the day she’d found me in the woods. I knew down to the very marrow of my bones that she made me a better person, and in turn, a better fighter, so it tore me up inside that she thought she was some sort of monster for doing what she had to do with a strange power that came out of nowhere.

“A nymph, then?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure you’re not that, either.”

“How do you know?”

“For starters, they’re green, and they don’t really have feet or a corporeal form. Humans sometimes mistake them for ghosts, but really nymphs are elemental entities that live within a lot of natural structures—large trees, lakes, sacred rocks.”

Ven’s eyes widened, and I realized there was still a lot about my world she didn’t know. Maybe once things calmed down, I’d give her a proper run down, but that seemed impossibly far off in the future.

“I suppose it may be possible that you have nymph blood somewhere in your ancestry, but that would possibly be the rarest thing to happen on this continent. I don’t think they’re able to crossbreed, considering their rather intangible nature.”

“So, you have no idea what I could be or how I did what I did?”

Hating the fear in her voice, I pulled her into my arms and hugged her tightly.

“No, I don’t, but I’m not exactly a scholar. I’m sure we can find someone who knows what you could be, but for the moment, I’m not worried about it. I’m proud of you.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you saw what I did. I eviscerated that man. Shredded his skin up like he was confetti.”

It was hard to imagine my sweet, thoughtful Ven doing something like that, but at the same time, I didn’t doubt it. My love had a fierceness to her, a never-ending determination to take care of those around her. If some ancient power had randomly manifested in her, it made complete sense that it would be unstoppable against an enemy.

Although I was insanely curious about what could possibly be going on, that took a back seat to making sure Ven was okay—as okay as she could be considering the situation.

“I would say it even if I saw all that, Ven. You shine a light on everyone around you. You’re a true gift to me and pretty much everyone else you touch in your life. I know you can’t see it right now, and I won’t tell you how to feel, but I will be here every step of the way to remind you that you are not the monster that mean voice in your head says you are. You were a desperate person in an impossible situation, and you saved our lives.”

“Thank you,” Ven murmured before squeezing me back even harder. It was the longest we’d had physical contact in ages, and I cherished it. Our situation wasn’t exactly ideal, but I was determined to be the best partner I could be anyway.

“Anytime. And I mean it. Why don’t we go back to the house and get you something to eat? I think you’ll be amazed at how stocked the fridge is.”

Ven let out a shaky laugh. “Jeez, it was already chock-full before I went out to the garden. Is there even more now?”

“There’s enough now that one of America’s tias is bringing us a spare freezer.”

“Holy shit!”

Holy shit, indeed.

The two of us held each other for a bit longer before returning back to the house, still hand in hand, and although she was still quite stressed, I could feel that some of Ven’s internal struggle had eased. I knew there would be flare-ups and other pitfalls on our journey, but I was determined to be there.

Fate had already separated us once. I wouldn't allow it to happen again.

There were only two warlock brothers left.

I couldn't believe it. After all the harm their family had caused, and with how impossibly powerful they seemed, only two of the original seven remained. That never would have happened without Ven, and I made sure she knew it. Sometimes my praise embarrassed her a little, but I figured I was making up for lost time. Far too many people in her life had taken her for granted, and I wasn't about to continue that pattern.

So far, no random plants had burst into life in the house, and no vines had tried to strangle us. After our little talk, I asked around, and it turned out three or four of my battle companions had seen her use the ability and assumed we'd been keeping it secret. I played it off like we had, but on the inside I was as puzzled as ever. Not for the first time, I wished I was a bit more educated on magical beings. I knew wolf shifters inside and out because I was one, but as for every other magical type? I only really knew their weaknesses and how to kill them. Not exactly a great way to exchange culture.

With our expanded numbers, we were able to cast out a lot more tendrils to look for leads on the remaining two brothers. They now definitely knew someone was hunting them down, because the last two had disappeared, and no one had a clue where they might have gone. It was frustrating, but not entirely unexpected. Their own hubris had allowed us to take down three of them in such a short time. If they had done their due diligence, they'd have stopped us after we took out Chadwicke.

"Any report from the eagle shifters?" I asked Ricky as I pored over a couple of the reports from our scouts. The reports were detailed, but it had some southern and Latin slang I wasn't familiar with. I could usually puzzle it out with context clues, but it took me a little longer and demanded more concentration.



“Esperanza is banned from doing anything until she finishes her college admissions essay, but the new one, Alicia, is following up a lead in Wisconsin.”

I glanced up at him. “Wisconsin? You really think they’ve gone that far?”

“She seems to, and considering her background as a mercenary, I figured it’s best not to question her instincts.”

Right. It was getting harder for me to keep an active roster of everyone helping us, but Alicia was one of the shifters who had come to us after we’d started returning the formerly enthralled shifters to their families. One of the victims who’d had memory problems was Alicia’s sister. As soon as the woman’s memories had returned about three-and-a-half days after the gala, we’d gotten her back to her family. A couple of days after that, Alicia showed up, swearing fealty until we took out the last remaining warlocks that had plagued our kind for so long.

She wasn’t the most talkative, but she didn’t have to be. She knew what to do and how to get things done. I was honestly surprised she’d never tried to go after the brothers on her own, but apparently she had been overseas when her sister was taken and had no idea who was behind it until we’d reunited them. Again, another way that evil family profited off the separation between the different species of shifters and other magical beings. When everything was said and done, if we survived, I would make sure things changed. I would make sure we were united as magical entities.

“Let’s hope they’re not. It’ll be difficult to get a sizeable force out there without being noticed.” I paused, then stood up to study the map America had hung on the wall of the living room. It was littered with sticky notes where important events had happened and at areas that had special significance to our search.

“Hey, Ricky?”

“What’s up boss?”

“Do you ever wonder why the brothers have always seemed so determined to stay in this tri-state area? Chadwicke was the only one who traveled, and he was still always within four hours. Is there something significant here we don’t know about?”

“It’s hard to say. We don’t know a lot about these guys beyond the fact that they get a real kick out of subjugating every other type of magical person they come across. Mindwalkers, shifters, even other witches. We found pretty much all of them amongst their victims.”

“Huh. Something to keep in mind. Maybe there’s an angle here we’re not seeing.”

“I’ll look into it and see if anyone else has any ideas. No stone left unturned, right?”

“Right,” I agreed before my gaze went to the entryway of the living room. I smelled Ven before she entered the kitchen. “I’ll be right back.”

“Yeah, yeah, take your time, you lovesick puppy. I’ve got to sort through these reports anyways.”

“I am your alpha, you know,” I said, even though I took absolutely zero offense at what Ricky was saying.

“Yeah, my lovesick alpha. Now, get to your lady.”

I huffed a laugh, then did exactly that.

“Hey there,” I said, ducking into the kitchen. Ven wasn’t alone—I was pretty sure the only place any of us got any privacy was the bathroom, or the two of us in her bedroom—but the two shifters sitting at the table were both reading books and idly

munching on trail mix.

“Hey!” she said, putting a bundle of greens in the sink and turning the water on. “How’s planning going?”

Ever since the gala, Ven had taken a step back from being involved in our rather ramshackle process of finding the last two brothers, but I knew better than to comment on it. She had a lot on her mind, and I knew she was still grappling with the strange plant powers that had come and gone out of nowhere.

“It’s going. No significant updates. What’s all this you’re washing here?”

Although I was glad we were one step closer to ridding the world of the awful band of brothers who had destroyed so many lives, I missed the simpler times of hanging in Ven’s garden and learning everything I could from her. I missed the days when it had been just her and me, slowly reconnecting to who I was and how we could be together.

“Some fresh herbs I wanna use for a roast tonight. I’m about to put it in so it can cook all day.”

“Wow, that’s quite a lot of them. I’m sure it’s gonna be delicious.”

“It’s not just for dinner. There’s a lot of the stuff I use for healing balms and teas in here. I’m going to hang some up to dry in the greenhouse. I swear, my herbs are growing faster than ever.”

I didn’t say anything, but Ven still stiffened. We hadn’t really talked about her spontaneous plant abilities, but I got the distinct feeling she was hoping it was a one-and-done thing. As much as I would love that for her, I didn’t think it was all that realistic. Although I’d heard of a few cases of people randomly finding out they had

magical heritage, I'd never heard of anyone developing abilities for one night. No one-night stands with magic if you were a magical being.

"It's gonna be okay," I murmured, coming up along beside her and wrapping my arm around that lovely plush waist of hers.

"I hope so." She let out a heavy sigh before resting her head on my shoulder. I appreciated that neither of the shifters in the room chimed in, as I knew they could hear us no matter how softly we talked. Shifter etiquette could be tricky in that way.

We were quiet for a while as Ven washed her herbs and I set them in a colander to dry. Was my help all that productive? Not really. But it was nice to spend time together. After everything that had happened, I cherished our limited peaceful time more than ever. Although I was hopeful about us going after the last two brothers, nothing was ever guaranteed.

Ven moved on to starting to prep the roast, and I was even less useful to the point of being in the way, so I sat down and kept her company while she did her thing.

Like usual, time passed incredibly quickly, and the next thing I knew, she was sliding the prepared roast into the oven to cook for several hours. I knew from experience that the whole house would smell absolutely incredible by the time it was done, and I couldn't wait.

At the same time, though, I could wait, because I didn't want to waste a single second with her. And since she was free for the moment, I didn't feel bad asking to monopolize her time.

"Hey, do you wanna go on another walk? See if we can find any mushrooms in the woods?"

She smiled softly at that, which was exactly my intention. Mushrooms tied all the way back to that very first time we'd met, when she'd found me barely clinging to life after I'd managed to escape from the pair of enthralled bear shifters hunting me down.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Fantastic. Then, let's go."

For the second time in a few short days, we held hands as we strolled off into the woods. I might have been wrong, but it looked like there were even more tents than before, which didn't make sense considering how many people we'd sent home. Had more supporters shown up? Or were our more long-term guests expanding their lodgings? I should probably ask Ricky so I could stay on top of things.

"There sure are a lot of people here," Ven commented as we made our way to the tree line. Her tone was ambiguous enough that I couldn't quite tell how she felt about it.

"Does it bother you?"

"Sometimes it's a little loud, and it is definitely much more crowded than I'd like. But... it's kind of what I imagine having an actual family is like. It's nice, all of us being together, on the same side, working toward something important, knowing we have each other's back. It makes the world a lot less lonely."

I couldn't agree more, and for a moment, I was struck by the realization that Ven had never truly experienced pack. Because pack was more than a group of people hanging out together. It was even more than family. It was a spiritual connection that went right down to our deepest instincts, binding us all with a camaraderie that could rarely ever be broken. The closest thing humans had were their direct family, but from what I understood, Ven had never had that either. No wonder she'd been so lonely. I didn't

understand how someone so kind and so incredibly wonderful had spent so much time rejected by those meant to cherish her.

“It is nice,” I agreed, letting the conversation fade.

I resolved that as long as it was in my power, I would never, ever, let Ven be alone like that again.

### VANESSA

That energy returned. It was nothing like the overwhelming, powerful deluge that had caused such chaos at the gala, but I could feel it simmering inside me, like a battery slowly charging. As the days passed, I became more and more aware of it. There were signs all over. My garden flourished like it never had before, even with all that free compost we'd stolen from the Chadwicke's estate.

I also noticed that my healing balms and teas were far more potent. The burn salve I made for a couple shifters and mindwalkers had them healing within a day rather than three. My headache tea had the recipients marveling at how fast the storm in their head died down. Even my own period had been noticeably affected. Normally, I suffered from bad cramps, exhaustion, and a blinding migraine or two for days, but when I drank my soothing tea, took my supplements, and used my heating pad, I was right as rain a couple of hours later. Definitely different from the norm.

I didn't say anything to anyone except Leo. I took immense comfort in all of his assurances, and it was helping me come to terms with whatever was building inside of me. As scary as it was, and as much as it confused me, it was nice to feel more like an active part of something. I was no longer the single human who clung to the periphery of all the shifters around me. No, whatever I was, I was one of them in a way. Which was nice. I just couldn't think too hard about the mystery of what the hell was going on with me.

Luckily, I didn't have a lot of time to sit and marinate in it. I was always doing

something. Between my cats, my garden, and work, I was pretty occupied. Occasionally, I was tempted to help chip in with the search for the two remaining brothers, but since I already had so much on my plate I figured it was time to let the more experienced folks take over. Still, it felt like there were never enough hours in the day to get everything done—and it wasn't even like I was working forty hours a week anymore.

After some not-quite-so-careful consideration, I'd reduced my work hours to part-time, much to the chagrin of my manager. I'd told him it was nonnegotiable, and he could either fire me or deal with it. He'd chosen to deal with it, so I was now only working two six-hour shifts a week.

At first, I'd never thought such a thing was an option for me because I needed money to pay my bills. Even with all the food being handed to us, I still needed to pay my phone, the heat, the electricity, and perhaps most importantly, the internet. But the grateful families of those who returned had donated a lot more than food.

I now had a sizeable nest egg that would allow me to take a year off work if I wanted to. That idea was far too mind-boggling for me. I'd had a job pretty much since I was fourteen, and I couldn't imagine being completely reliant on others, so the part-time transition was my compromise. And thank goodness for it, because there was an uncanny surrealness to being a grocery store clerk by day and an unknown magical entity hunting down a group of evil warlocks by night. To make it even better, Tiffany was leaving me alone, too.

I didn't know if it was because management had told her to ease off, or because I radiated a new don't-fuck-with-me energy, but I was grateful for the reprieve. Considering everything that had changed since meeting Leo, I couldn't see myself rolling over and being the doormat I'd once been for her. Now, I knew my worth. I knew I was loved, and I was worth standing up for.



A screech sounded from the sky high above me, and I looked up to see a large eagle descending. While I was fairly sure it was a shifter and not a wild animal, I was still awed at the beauty of the creature's wings as it cut through the golden light of the afternoon. I wasn't surprised when it landed and shifted into a woman, but I was surprised when I didn't recognize her. Not Alicia, and most definitely not Esperanza, who was apparently still chained to her studies. Honestly, good for America and her family for enforcing that. While college hadn't been for me, Esperanza had mentioned a couple of times that she wanted to get her degree in journalism. Passion like that needed to be encouraged, and maybe if I'd had the support of a family like America's, I'd have finished college.

"Are you the one they call Vanessa?" she asked, and the slight accent to her deep voice told me she was probably from the reservation. That was a pretty big deal. Leo had told me there were several different shifter packs hidden in the reservations across America, and they were even more insular than anybody else. They rarely came out or engaged with other magical communities. I couldn't really blame them. From what Leo had said, they were long-lived, and some of them had parents who were around during colonization. I didn't imagine that those wounds were much healed considering that they were only a generation ago.

"I am," I said, standing and wiping my hands on my ratty sweatpants. It had gotten to the point where it was seriously time to prune my tomatoes considering I followed the one-stem method, so my fingertips were sticky with brown tomato tar. "Can I help you?"

I probably shouldn't have been admitting my identity to any stranger who stopped by, but since the eagle shifter had landed right in front of me, she likely already knew who I was and was only asking as a formality.

"From what I hear, you already have. I have a gift for you from our family. One of our young men disappeared on his journey to meet his ancestors from a different

tribe. Yesterday, he returned to us, and he told us how you and the people you gathered saved him and many others.”

“Oh, uh, we more came together as a matter of circumstance. It wasn’t like I went and recruited them.”

But the woman was already reaching into her pocket. She pulled out a beautiful necklace with polished-wood beads and what looked like several hand-shaped geodes. It was truly stunning in a very antiquated manner.

“This is for you,” she said. “If you are ever need help, hold this tightly and whisper your need into it. As long as our people live, we will come to help.”

She said it so matter-of-factly, but my eyes went wide, my eyebrows shooting up to my hairline. I couldn’t tell if she was being literal or not, but still, what a gesture.

“Wow, I don’t know what to say.”

“You need not say anything. Your actions have spoken. You returned one we thought lost, and we will never forget that. We are the old Dinè, and we do not forget kindness.”

I took the necklace with trembling hands. The woman gave me one more brief nod before she was enveloped in a thick cloud of steam. A moment later, she took to the sky in her magnificent eagle form.

Huh. Word really was getting around.

I didn’t know what to think about the whole situation, and to be honest, I was quite touched. Tomatoes momentarily abandoned, I hurried inside to find Leo and tell him what happened. I was pretty sure he would be just as amazed as I was, if not more so

considering how ingrained he was in the shifter community.

But as soon as I got in the door, a deep, rumbling voice I could feel through the floorboards distracted me. It was the kind of voice that went viral on streaming channels for being so masculine and foreboding. But hearing it wasn't what made me stop, rather it was the words themselves that had me frozen in my tracks.

“Yeah, you're just a cute guy, aren't you? Just a little, cute guy. Look at these fuzzy, widdle ears. Look at your fuzzy, widdle face. I could just eat you up, but then the world would be so much less cute, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it? Yeah, you know it would! You know that you are the cutiest of patootiest, yes, you arrreeee.”

That might have actually been the most adorable thing I'd ever heard. I hurried around the corner of the kitchen to see a truly giant of a man sitting in the living room with Ricky, America, and Leo.

He was sitting on the floor, his legs splayed out, taking up half of the space, and between the trunks of his thighs was none other than Goober himself, who was clearly having the time of his life as the giant enthusiastically stroked the Maine Coon's back.

“Hello there,” I said, trying not to laugh at the sheer camp of it all. Considering it was the first time I was meeting the man, I didn't want him to think that I was making fun of him. I was delighted at someone so blatantly loving on one of my cats, as well as the completely goofy look my big, old cat had on his very contented face.

Granted, Goober didn't look all that big between the legs of the man who was fawning over him. God, the stranger had to be nearly seven feet tall.

Still, as pleasant as I tried to keep my tone, the man blushed crimson when he saw me. “Ah, are you the mother?”

Some people hated when pet parents refer to themselves as parents, or their charges as fur babies, but that single sentence from the man told me he was one of my kind. A dyed-in-the-wool, true animal lover. Not someone who was preachy about it or who used animals for moral grandstanding, but genuinely enjoying the company and personalities of all sorts of critters.

“I am,” I answered with a smile. “That’s my precious Goober you’ve got there. He loves back scratches and booty pats. And you are?”

The man stood, and yip, he really was seven feet tall. Holy halibut, what did his family feed him?

“I am Gichigami, but most of my friends call me Chiga. I heard from one of my old connections that you and your band of friends here have a huge lead on the assholes who have been kidnapping shifters and other folks. I know it’s a long shot, but my niece vanished without a trace two years ago. She went on a walk and never came back. Figured I could lend a hand, and worse comes to worse, I end up helping a lot of strangers.”

His voice was even deeper and more rumbling now that I was in the same room, and it carried a gravitas that was echoed in his dark, brown eyes. If I had to guess, he was at least part Native, which made me wonder how many of the shifters were Indigenous and how many came over from Europe on boats. I imagined almost every wolf shifter family that had been around for more than a hundred years had to have been some form of Native, otherwise a full moon on the boat in the middle of the ocean would have been awkward for everyone around. Although Leo had explained to me that wolf shifters weren’t forced to transform during the full moon, he had said it made everything far more heightened, and their caloric needs increased even further, which probably would have led to quite negative reactions to the strict rations of maritime vessels back in the day.

“We appreciate that,” I said, and goodness, it was really beginning to feel like my house was the headquarters in the middle of a secret war. Never in a million years had I imagined helping a wounded wolf in the middle of the forest would lead to a growing organization of almost fifty magical folks all conspiring to hunt down two serial killers and end their tyranny. It really was the stuff of fantasy novels. “What kind of connection? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“He means Alicia,” Leo answered absentmindedly as he looked over the map pinned to the wall. I did wish that I had a nice table they could all sit at, but that was in the kitchen, and we needed it for meals. Besides, I liked that the kitchen was a communal space and didn’t really want to turn it into a war room. “He’s a mercenary. He’s worked with her several times.”

“A mercenary?” I echoed, feeling a little embarrassed. “So, you’re like a professional? Hope you don’t mind that we’re a bunch of amateurs. We’ve kind of been flying by the seat of our pants for most of this.”

Chiga looked relieved, as if he’d been afraid I would judge him from his work. To be honest, I had no idea really what being a mercenary entailed, so I didn’t have an opinion on it. Besides, I figured the important thing was that both he and Alicia were pretty adamant about helping, and we could use all the loyal hands we could get.

“Considering you’ve taken down three of the brothers, I don’t think I have room to judge anything. I’m happy to help however I can. But in the meantime...” It was quite an interesting thing to watch such a strapping giant of a man blush a bright, cheery pink. “I have a couple of cat harnesses in the car, and I’d love to take your little guy here on a bit of a walk. I’m supposed to FaceTime my fiancé back home, and I know he’d get a huge kick out of getting to see this cutie patootie get to play around in nature a bit.”

Well, that was about the last thing I expected. No one had ever asked to take one of

my cats on a walk before. I'd been tempted to try myself, but when I looked online at cat harnesses that were truly secure for a feline, I'd tamped that urge down. Those things cost an arm and a leg. I could have made one myself, but there were some things I didn't want to DIY.

"Are you absolutely sure he wouldn't be able to get out of it?"

"One hundred percent. I have seven cats at home, including a sphinx, and none of them have ever been able to get out of the harness."

Seven? Oh yeah, this man was a cat lover if there ever was one. Secretly, I kind of hoped he'd stick around. I had a soft spot for gentle giants, as well as people I could fangirl over cats with. Even though there were about fifty in my bit of the property, there was never such a thing as too many friends.

Especially too many friends who loved cats.

"All right, I trust you. I'm sure Goober will love it."

"Perfect! I'll be right back."

With that, Chiga hurried outside, his excitement evident by the way his large steps stomped across my hardwood floors.

Leo edged closer to me as soon as the man left, a smile on his face.

"That's a moose shifter," he said with a broad grin. "Built like a brick shithouse, isn't he?"

"He's pretty big. Is that common for moose shifters?"

“For sure. I’ve only met a few, and they were all gigantic. Even the women. With that, and him being a professional, we probably gained our ace in the hole.”

“You think so?” I questioned.

“I’d put money on it. You know, if I had a job.”

“You act like running a rebellion isn’t full-time work,” Ricky teased.

“True. It is pretty demanding of my attention, but it’s not like we’re in this alone, right, Ven?”

Leo gave me a look, then winked, which made my knees far weaker than they had any right to be. Goodness, was he flirting with me? Even though we were officially together, I still wanted to giggle whenever he got playful.

But thinking about him being playful made me think about what happened afterward. Usually when we were horizontal on my bed.

Or upright in the shower.

Or on my kitchen table.

... Had I ever sanitized that properly?

I mean, I knew I had cleaned and disinfected it almost immediately afterward, but that was to human standards. Had any of the shifters in the house been able to sniff out what had happened there?

God, that thought was mortifying.

Leo grabbed my waist and planted a firm kiss on my lips. “Don’t go to bed without me, okay?”

“Okay.” And I knew I flushed even brighter than Chiga had. Leo and I rarely got up to anything more than cuddling considering all the sensitive ears around, but it still made my stomach flip to think I was going to get to spend the night in his arms.

I hoped that never changed.

“Hey, Ven. Leo called a meeting and wants us all there.”

I looked up from the glass bottles I was filling with oil. I was finally restocking my deadnettle salve. I’d gone through it like water with patching up everyone, so I figured it would be prudent to have a fresh batch ready for after the next big scuffle. It wouldn’t do any heavy hitting, but I’d found that, with shifters, it was excellent at soothing the terrible itching that came along with rapidly healing wounds.

“Why do you seem so excited?” I asked Ricky, who was grinning from ear to ear from where he stood in the doorway of my greenhouse. It had grown warm enough that I had all the windows and doors open, which meant the cat tunnel was closed—much to Mudpie’s chagrin. With so many people in the house, she’d made it clear she preferred to hang out with me and only me, but that was something that could only happen at night time. And even then she had to deal with the Leo. Poor soul.

“Because Alicia and another scout she was working with are back, and I think they’ve got some big news.”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?”

I screwed the lid onto the jug of oil, then rushed along behind Ricky. Sure enough,



my living room, the hallway, and my kitchen were full of bodies as I came in through the back door. I wasn't surprised to see some faces peering in through the window, as most of the shifters would have no problem hearing with their enhanced senses.

"Ah, there you are," Leo said once his eyes landed on the two of us. "Now that we're all here, you can begin, Alicia."

The rather nondescript woman gave a nod. "Of course. I know I basically went ghost for the past week, but I promise the results are worth it. Vincent and I figured out where the two surviving brothers have gone."

My stomach practically pole-vaulted with elation, and I had to tell myself to chill out. There was still a chance there was bad news, that Alicia might be wrong. It was important to keep a level head and not get too carried away with anything. Still, talk about some good news.

"They have, indeed, sussed out that someone, or multiple someones, are systematically wiping their bloodline out. From what we could tell, they've called in several huge favors and have holed up together in an ancient estate that was purposely built over sacred grounds. All sorts of nasty spells and security there. Basically, the gala auction was child's play. Getting in with any sort of sizeable force without the two brothers destroying us will be a challenge."

Leo nodded along, his face a mask of concentration I only ever saw when he was in full alpha mode. "The two remaining brothers... Do we have a profile on them? The ones I interacted with the most are dead, so I don't remember much about these two. Other than... does one of them have a woman's name?"

"That would be Millicent Carlisle, the second youngest. His father is Winston Carlisle, a rather traditional warlock who is rumored to have been killed and eaten by Katarina Morgana after she found him with a mistress."

Wow, what? When did the crazy world I had been dumped into turn into an episode of Real Housewives ?

“Word has it is that he insists people call him William or Bill, however, most of his family refused this name as Bill isn’t exactly the intimidating name of a magic user, and Millicent was traditional. This is probably why he’s still alive, as it seems there was a pretty large rift between him and the rest of his siblings.”

Not large enough for him to stay out of cursing Leo’s pack and scattering them to the seven winds. Even with all of our victories against the brothers, we’d still only found Ricky. As far as I knew, there were at least twenty other people missing. I knew Leo felt the pain of their absence every single day. He was good at hiding it and occupying himself with the responsibilities of running a pseudo-rebel headquarters, but occasionally, I’d catch him staring out into the night sky, and I always knew exactly what he was thinking.

“He has an affinity for the weather, and while I couldn’t find any direct reports of the style he prefers to battle with, I did manage to uncover a few people who say his go-to move is summoning a particularly malevolent lightning cloud indoors. Oh, and blinding his opponents by causing thick, overcast skies, then suddenly clearing them to reveal full sunlight.”

That was a pretty neat trick. But finally, I saw a chance to ask Alicia a question that had been lingering in the back of my head for quite a while.

“These brothers have all had specialties,” I said cautiously, trying to project that I belonged and knew what I was doing. Of all the fantasies I’d had about my faraway future, none of them really involved working as a military coordinate for magical people. “Chadwicke had luck. Alric had an affinity for metal manipulation. This Bill has the weather. But they can do other stuff, too, I’ve seen. Like generate shields and throw people around.”

“Yes, because they are all warlocks. Each one of them has sworn fealty to a different spirit, god, or otherwise mystical force that has granted them special abilities as long as they remained faithful. Originally, they were all witches born to their extremely powerful mother, but one by one, they all made their different pacts to try to gain more power. Still couldn’t compare to her, however. Thankfully, there hasn’t been a single public sighting of her since her youngest came of age. Most think she’s retired back to the old world.”

I had to wonder what kind of mystical woman had birthed such a group of certifiable sociopaths. Surely, she had to be just as terrifying and monstrous as all of them. Or maybe she was just a powerful witch going about her business and living her life, only for all of her sons to end up jealous of her power and mutate themselves through magical contracts that still left them weaker than the matriarch they were trying to surpass.

I hoped I never found out.

“The remaining target is Frederick Plutus, son of the witch Dominic Plutus, who apparently broke it off amicably with Katerina and was living somewhere on the Polynesian Isles before he ran afoul of some Maero after trying to bewitch the heart of their forest. They crushed him under rocks and planted a tree over him.”

Well, that was one way to deal with a colonizer. Not that I knew what it meant to bewitch the heart of the forest, but it seemed pretty serious. Also, I couldn’t help but wonder at all the different types of magical entities that lived outside of America. Did every land mass have their own unique, indigenous magical folks? That would make sense, and it was awe-inspiring.

“Frederick is the third youngest and he has an affinity for plant life. From what I’ve heard, his go-to is poisons or suddenly spawning carnivorous plants that have somewhat cognitive abilities.”

Wait.

They had a plant guy?

Leo and I exchanged a look, and I wondered if he was thinking exactly what I was. Probably not. Part of me couldn't help but wonder if he had anything to do with what happened at the gala. Was there any way that this Frederick could have caused all the plant nonsense, and I was just the scapegoat?

No. As easy as that would make things, I knew without a doubt that I had been connected to the plants I had summoned. That one of the brothers was also connected to them had to be a coincidence. But still, how uncanny. I had to admit, it did kind of appeal to the part of me that thought everything that happened so far was fate—an inevitable path I'd been chosen to walk upon. But the greater majority of my mind didn't believe in frivolous things like fate, so I tucked those thoughts away and kept listening.

At least I tried to listen. Once the general information dump was over, multiple people started suggesting different strategies, and my frustration amped up. Alicia hadn't even finished telling us about the location or anything else she'd found out. It was definitely rapidly growing to be too many cooks in the kitchen, even with Leo cutting in regularly to shut people up and get us back on track.

Given that I wasn't very military-minded, and my anxiety was rising with every interruption, after an hour or so I dismissed myself with the excuse of a headache. Leo gave me a concerned look, but I squeezed his arm in assurance. I wasn't going to have a breakdown or anything, but I needed a bit of a break. Yeah, I had planned out our whole Chadwicke escapade, as well as the first raid on the medical facility, but now we were way past my pay grade. We had people better suited for the job, and I was happy to focus on making sure our healing reserves were stocked.

I got myself a glass of ice water and made sure my cats were fed, then headed up to my room for a nap. I hadn't been napping outside of my cycle, but a quick thirty-minute refresh would do me well.

I set my alarm and changed into some house clothes before crawling into bed. Not a moment later, Mudpie sprawled against my side, purring up a storm as I petted her until we both slipped into sleep.

I wished I could say it was restful, but I was shoved into a nightmare the minute sleep took me. It was nothing solid, like me showing up naked to work or having somehow enrolled in college again, but it was still awful. Slipshod and full of horrific, disjointed images and scenes, ranging from being stuck in an inescapable fire, to being at the gala and watching all the plants I'd summoned shred apart my friends instead of Alric.

After watching Leo be drawn and quartered for the umpteenth time, I finally managed to rip free from the nightmare. I jolted awake, soaked in sweat from head to toe, my throat aching as if I'd been screaming.

Holy fuck on a stick, that was terrifying. Hadn't I experienced enough trauma in life without my mind needing to make up fantasy situations to make it worse? Sleep was supposed to be my escape, not another way to torment me.

"Hey there." Leo stuck his head around the door. "Are you okay? I thought I heard you crying."

"Crying? No, I—" I touched my face and found that there were indeed tear streaks on my cheeks mixing with the sweat from my nightmare. "Huh, would you look at that."

Leo stepped in fully, gently closing the door behind him. I thought about insisting I was fine and sending him on his way, but then he leveled me with one of those

concerned looks, and all my resolve crumbled.

“Can I help you, baby? I know things are a bit crazy right now, but you don’t have to go through this alone. I’ll always make time for you.”

Wasn’t that the truth? Despite everything on his plate, Leo had been quite attentive ever since the gala. Even before that. He seemed so in tune with my emotions in a way no one in my life ever had been. Strangely, it had taken a shifter to make me feel more human.

Although, whether I was actually human was up for debate at the moment.

Once more, the instinct to pretend I was strong and nothing was wrong flared up, but it withered and died almost instantly. If there was anyone I could be vulnerable with, it was my cats and my boyfriend.

“I’d really like to be held right now.”

The gentle smile that spread across his handsome face was exactly what I needed. “I can do that.”

He got into bed with me, pulling the covers over us. The man awed me. He basically had a war to plan, but he still acted like it was no problem to help me with my nightmares. Realistically, I should probably take the noble path and tell him I was fine so he could go back to working on saving his pack. But for once, I wanted to be selfish. I wanted to admit that I was scared, weak, and wanted a really nice hug from the man I was in love with.

“Do you want to spoon? Or do you want to sit between my legs and lean back against my chest? I could brush your hair?”

Something so simple shouldn't have had a fresh wave of tears coming to my eyes, but it did. No one had ever taken care of me like this, and the thought of having my head petted while surrounded by his scent was highly appealing.

"I'd really like the second one. I think I've had my hair up in a ponytail for two days."

"I think so, too. Your scalp has to be pretty tired, so let's give it a break, shall we?"

I nodded, and Leo reached over to open one of the drawers of my nightstand and pulled out my wet/dry brush. It took him a moment to arrange himself, but once he was comfortable with the appropriate amount of pillows behind his back, I crawled between his legs and settled myself.

Leaning back against his chest was so simple, yet it was so incredibly comforting. The warmth of his body combined with the firmness of his muscles was an assurance that he would always be there for me. I didn't know what I had done to deserve a man like him, but I would be forever grateful.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, brush forgotten, and held me while his chin rested on my shoulder. Once more, I was struck by how incredibly simple it was, and yet it meant so much to me. It was like the kiss of domesticity I'd always thought would be denied to me forever. But no. Despite losing my mother. Despite what my aunt had said. Despite the evil warlocks so eager to spread harm. Despite all of them, I was loved, and I had a future to look forward to.

Eventually, Leo shifted so he could brush my hair and, goodness, he was right about my scalp needing a break. It felt like heaven as he moved the brush through my hair, working out knots, starting from the bottom and then going up. Clearly, he had some experience with this, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was because he'd done this for an ex-girlfriend, or if it was a pack thing. Either way, I was quite grateful for it.

Tears welled in my eyes, but I kept them from falling. While I had no problem expressing emotions, I didn't want to deal with the runny nose and itchy eyes that usually came after tears. That meant I would have to get up to get a tissue, and I was pretty sure all the money in the world couldn't convince me to move my ass.

"Your hair is getting longer," Leo remarked as he ran the brush through one more time, then set it to the side. He'd probably gotten the last knot out half an hour earlier, but had continued to gently run the brush through my hair. It was pure bliss.

"Is it?" I murmured. I really didn't pay much attention to my hair. I cut it short in the summer, then let it grow the rest of the year, but with everything going on, I hadn't given it the usual trim.

"Yeah. If you want, I can cut it for you. But if you're growing it out, I like it."

"You know how to cut hair?"

"I'm a shifter. Of course, I do."

I furrowed my brow at that, trying to recall if there was a tidbit of data I'd been told and was currently forgetting. "I don't understand the correlation."

"Our hair grows incredibly fast. Probably two or three times faster than a human's, so frequent haircuts are a necessity, especially if we're interacting with the human world. I'm not amazing or anywhere near hairdresser level, but I kept mine, Ricky's, and even Andromeda's hair presentable for quite a while after the usurper took out most of our parents."

That was a lot to digest. I knew Leo had become alpha quite early, and that there was a lot of strife in his pack when he was younger, but it made it so much more real to hear how he'd had to resort to cutting his and his friends' hair so any humans they'd



had to interact with didn't get suspicious about so many young people running around with obviously no one to take care of them. I couldn't imagine being in their shoes. Yeah, my home life hadn't been great, with my aunt making it clear what she thought of me, but at least I'd had a home. I was never worried about some rival alpha coming and killing everyone I loved.

Though that was probably because everyone I loved was already dead.

"If that's the case, I wouldn't mind it at all. A trim would be nice. But I do wanna grow it out. Now that I don't have work stressing me out so much, I have a bit more time to take care of my hair."

"I'm really glad you were able to take a step back from that place. I know I'm one to talk, considering I've never had a job in the human world, but it did seem especially awful."

"Oh, it was. Is. But, yeah, I'm glad, too."

We sat there for quite a while, returning to our previous position of his arms around my waist and chin on my shoulder. It was so warm, so secure, that all traces of that awful nightmare left my mind. I was safe. I was cared for.

There was silence between us, but it wasn't uncomfortable. No, it was the epitome of peace. Enough so that I nearly jumped out of my own skin when someone gently knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Leo asked in a tone that told whoever was on the other side this interruption better be damn important.

It was Ricky, who sounded quite enthused.

“I’ll make it quick, boss. I’ve organized a run for most of our visitors here, so the house will be pretty empty, and those who are sticking around have some tasks they’re going to do outside. Just thought you might want to know that you’ll have this place to yourself for a little while.”

The subtext of what he was saying was so blatantly clear I had to hang my head and breathe through my nose to keep myself from breaking into hysterics. What a good wingman. No wonder Leo trusted the guy so much as his beta. Not only did they know each other incredibly well, but they looked after each other. Maybe one day, I’d have a friend like that, too. One who wouldn’t move to Europe, end up in a whirlwind romance, and forget to reply to my text messages.

“That’s good to know, Ricky. Thank you.” Although Leo’s tone was still quite serious, I didn’t miss how the corner of his lip quirked up.

“No problem. See you guys later. Hope you feel better, Ven.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I will.”

That time, Leo did actually choke on the laugh, and I was grinning like a Cheshire cat as Ricky’s footsteps faded.

“You know,” Leo said after swallowing a few times, trying to shake off the laughter. While it wasn’t the most hilarious thing that had ever happened, it was pretty amusing that his best friend basically kicked everyone out of my house so we could hook up. I supposed some things were consistent across species. “We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to. I’m fine staying like this.”

I thought about it for a moment. I didn’t want to rush into anything just because we had the time and privacy. But I desperately missed the intimacy Leo and I had shared before, and it would be silly to waste an opportunity now. Besides, being close to Leo

always made me so acutely aware of his body and how physically attracted I was to him. It was pretty rare for me to swoon over someone's personality, their mind, their heart, and their looks, but Leo had aces in every category.

I tilted my head back, looking up at him with the best doe eyes I could muster.

“But what if I want to?”

That was apparently the right thing to say.

Abruptly, Leo spun me around, which was a physical feat that happened so fast I had a visceral reaction to it. I'd never realized that I enjoyed being manhandled so much, but, God, when Leo did it, it turned me on. I didn't know if it was the display of strength or because it made me feel petite like other women, but whatever the reason, it definitely got me going in the best way possible.

“Then, I think we're on the same page,” Leo growled.

God, I loved when his voice got like that. It gave me legitimate goosebumps and made me feel so incredibly desired. Crazy how a simple change in octave could do that.

And then he kissed me.

It wasn't anything like those sweet, romantic pecks we sometimes shared, or the stolen, lingering kisses we tried to make time for whenever we had a spare moment of privacy. This kiss was all heat and passion. A ravenous desire that made me want to squeeze my thighs together, but they were on either side of Leo's hips, making me all too aware of the strength in his legs and the heat radiating from him.

He kissed me like a man starved, and I answered back with the same urgency. My

hands started on those firm shoulders of his, but quickly slid down the front of his shirt, reveling in the landscape of all that he was. I didn't know why the incredible heat he radiated always enticed me, but it did. It fueled the fire brewing within me.

Leo's hands weren't idle either. They'd started at my waist, gripping me tightly, but then they started roaming. At first, they slid up and down my back, somewhere between a massage and something else, but then they went down to my ass and squeezed possessively. I moaned into his mouth, and he greedily swallowed it down.

The world narrowed to our heated lips and fervent touches, as if we were indulging ourselves with all the simple, physical touch we hadn't been able to share with the house as crowded as it was. It was greedy, but I loved it. I loved that both of us wanted to be greedy with each other.

As blissful as kissing Leo was, I was hungry for more. So, when I felt his erection hardening beneath me, I rocked against him. Not too hard, considering that both of us were still wearing clothes, but enough for it to be a promise of what was to come.

The hiss I got out of Leo was so damn satisfying. I loved that I could affect him like this, and from the heated look in his eyes, I was really affecting him. It really did wonders for my ego.

"I can feel how hot you are for me," he rumbled, his canines sharpening. That little hint of the beast within him never failed to make me gasp. God, did he understand how insanely attractive he was? Probably. Sometimes, when Leo looked at me, it was like he wanted to eat me up. I guess I was a lamb to the slaughter, because I was ready to be devoured.

Leaning forward, I pressed my breasts against the firm planes of his chest as I brushed my lips against the shell of his ear.

“If you’re excited about that, you should feel how wet I am for you.”

I was on a roll, because again, that was very much the right thing to say.

Leo squeezed me once, hard, before he yanked my pajama shorts down. They couldn’t go far, since I was straddling him, and a second later I heard a distinctive tear.

“Leo!” I cried.

Holy fuck, that was hot, but I only had so many comfortable pajama bottoms for the summer, and it wasn’t easy to find more as a plus-sized woman.

“I’ll buy you a new set.”

I almost argued with him that it wasn’t that easy, especially if the website I had bought them from no longer carried the stock, but I quickly came to my senses when his hand went to his zipper. He roughly pulled his straining cock out, already hard and glistening at the tip. Yeah, the whole shorts discussion could wait.

“I want you so bad,” Leo rumbled before kissing me again, harder. As bruising as it was, I loved it. It spoke to the wild part of me that I, as a civilized woman, wasn’t supposed to have. But considering those plants I had somehow summoned, maybe it wasn’t so surprising I had a wild side to me.

“God, Leo,” I groaned when he finally broke the kiss. I was already drowning in sensation. He was still gripping my ass, his cock resting against my belly, leaving a little damp spot on my oversized pajama top.

That definitely needed to get out of the way.

I practically ripped my shirt off, and I was lucky I didn't take any hair with it. Throwing it to the side, I looked at Leo, and I swore my pussy throbbed at the heat in his gaze when he drank me in.

I didn't even have time to say anything snarky, or even tell him what I wanted him to do to me, because his mouth was already on my breast, one of his hands teasing the other nipple. I shifted, allowing his length to tilt more against his abdomen so I could grind against it. It felt so fucking good without clothing between us, and even though it was just the appetizer for the main course, I could have stayed like that for ages. I knew I was in for feeling so much more, but I didn't want to rush. The slow buildup of inexplicable pleasure was so lovely, and I wanted to savor it. Besides, who knew the next time we'd be able to play? It wasn't like Ricky could regularly round everyone up and make sure we got our time to boink.

"Fuck, Leo, fuck. Just like that!"

I loved the way he worked me over, building me up higher and higher to where I was nearly ravenous for his cock. I had to carefully regulate myself for so much of life, but not with Leo. Never with Leo.

I couldn't say how long we moved against each other like that, but I loved every moment of it, and I loved it even more when Leo let out a desperate snarl and lifted me to my knees.

"I need to be inside you right now."

I wasn't going to argue with that. I was practically drunk on lust, all lucid thought draining out of my head as my body demanded more of whatever he wanted to give me. I wanted him deep inside me, hitting all the spots that made me see stars.

"I need it, too," I answered honestly.

That got another snarl out of my love. Goosebumps spread across my body, and I shivered in anticipation. I loved the juxtaposition of my sweet, gentle, and understanding boyfriend, and my wild lover in bed. I loved that he could be both.

That I could be both.

Leo gripped his cock and angled it so I could slide down onto it. Never one to turn down such a lovely invitation from my partner, I slowly slid down his length. I was tempted to slam down, to hear whatever wonderfully animalistic sound it brought out of him, but it had been so long since we were last intimate, and I was already having a bit of trouble taking him. He was so big, and he stretched me just right, but I needed to take my time with it.

Leo, bless him, understood instantly. As he worked my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, teasing the little coral bud until it was stiff, he slid his other hand down my back and pressed me into him, like the warmest and firmest lovers' embrace.

"That's it, baby, I know you can do it," he said, his voice like honey over my soul. "Look at how good you take me. God, you're perfect. You're so fucking perfect. Do you have any idea how good you make me feel, baby?"

His praise was like a drug, intensifying everything, and boy, did I chase it. It was impressive how Leo could talk like that while I worked my way down his shaft, because my orator abilities had gone out the window. All I could do was pant and whine as he stretched me, filling me up so deliciously.

I'd nearly taken all of him, but I couldn't quite get down to his base. I pumped myself up and down on it, squeezing and releasing, relishing every single hiss of pleasure that fell from Leo's lips. Once again, he seemed to have an almost preternatural understanding of my body, because his hand left my nipple and moved down to my clit, a single digit gently circling that sensitive spot in a counter rhythm to my own up

and down movements.

“Don’t worry, baby. You know you can take it. Just breathe for me. Breathe and relax, baby. Let your body do what it wants to do.”

I moaned, and he increased the pressure on my clit. That shock of sensation and resulting surge of pleasure gave me the final oomph to fully take him in.

“ There you go, baby. Fuck. Look at what you did. You’re incredible.”

I felt incredible. My thighs burned, my chest heaved, and a light sheen of sweat covered me, but Leo looked at me like I was the most gorgeous woman on the face of the earth.

God, I was so fucking turned on and so fucking in love.

I was still breathless when Leo tilted his head forward to kiss me again. It was still as heated as before, but there was something different about it. It was slower, more romantic. It was beseeching, and I tried to answer in kind, hoping Leo could tell through my lips how besotted I was with him. It was rapidly becoming clear to me that this wasn’t simply fucking.

It was making love.

While I thoroughly enjoyed the idea of both, there was a certain weight to the latter. Leo and I had survived and worked through things that some people could only ever dream of. And by dream, I mostly meant have nightmares of. And yet, we were closer than ever. I was his pack, and he was my family.

It was all so much , and it brought up a near-overwhelming deluge of emotions. I was okay with it, though. So what if my feelings were intense? It was a gift to even have



them. Just like it was a gift to have Leo.

When we parted for a second time, my chest was still heaving, though for a different reason. No one had ever affected me so thoroughly before, but it was like Leo had a telepathic connection to my body and always knew exactly what I was craving.

“Catch your breath, Ven, because I’m about to ruin you.”

Fuck.

He started to move. Although I was on top, he was setting the pace. He gripped my hips and pistoned me up and down on his leg. The friction was so damn good, and I cried out as he hit that perfect spot inside me.

Maybe it was crazy of me, but I didn’t want to come so soon. I fought it off, tried to drag it out, but the way Leo was looking into my eyes, his gaze almost reverent like I was something worthy of worship, sent me right to the edge. No one had ever looked at me like that. It was something that was Leo’s, and Leo’s alone.

Try as I might, the ecstasy quickly stacked up, building higher and higher. It wasn’t long before I was gripping Leo’s shoulders with all my strength, my nails biting into his skin. He tilted his hips forward slightly, and my mouth fell open. The new direction had his cock sliding directly against that sensitive spot within me, and the next thing I knew, the strongest orgasm I’d ever had crashed over me.

All my muscles tightened to an impossible point only to relax immediately as waves of unadulterated ecstasy rippled through my body. I swore it went all the way from my feet up to my scalp, radiating in a way that shouldn’t be possible.

“Oh, my God,” I breathed, slumping against Leo’s sweat-slicked chest. It felt like my heart was going to beat right out of my own chest and into his, but after a few beats, I

managed to get it under control. “That was incredible.”

“Is incredible,” Leo countered, wearing that damned smirk I loved. “Because we’re not done yet.”

A slight pulse from his hips told me that he was indeed still hard, and my stomach flipped. Shifter stamina really wasn’t anything to sneeze at.

“I told you I needed to be inside you, and I plan to stay inside you. I’m going to make you come until you can’t anymore.”

“Ambitious,” I gasped, stuck somewhere between intimidated and incredibly turned on. My body was slowly rousing from the post-orgasmic bliss. Sure, it would be nice to slump in the bed and cuddle, but why couldn’t we do that after another climax or two?

Or three?

Four?

Well, I suppose there was only one way to find out.

Wrapping his arms around my waist, Leo flipped us over, planting his arms on either side of my head. What a stunning view. I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of looking at his handsome features. That strong jaw and those kind eyes I was so utterly in love with.

And, God, his voice was pure sin when he spoke again, looking at me with such a lustful expression I could barely breathe. “Let’s count, shall we?”

LEO

It shouldn't have been physically possible for Ven to feel so good, yet she did. She was like heaven wrapped around my cock. Soft. Wet. So hot it was borderline painful, and the way she gripped me was just... mmm. There really were no words.

When I was imprisoned in the medical facility, I'd been afraid I'd never get back to her. That I'd never hear her laugh again or taste her delicious cooking, or listen as she went on about a different plant phenomena I'd never known.

So, when I'd gotten back to safety, when I had been lucky enough to end up in her company again, that had been enough. But now, as I stared down at her beautiful, perfect, soft body, spread out below me like a Renaissance painting, I realized how much I had physically craved her. I didn't think I'd ever encountered a woman who captivated me quite like Ven did. Those full, petal pink lips of hers. Her tanned breasts. The muscle that supported her strong frame and all the softness I loved to feel. Her hips. Her ass. Her calves. Even her feet. Everything about her was utterly gorgeous, and I wanted to worship every single inch of her. Maybe one day soon, once things had calmed down, I could take her to a honeymoon suite and give her the full devotion she deserved. Kiss every single inch of her skin, massage every muscle, and pamper her until she was a wet noodle. I looked forward to that, but at the moment, I was thoroughly enraptured in the way she squeezed down on me as I slowly pulled out of her.

I loved hearing her sharp intake of breath as I thrust inside her again, loved seeing her

eyes light up and color creeping into her cheeks. She really was art. A masterpiece I was lucky enough to witness. I watched her face as I increased my rhythm. Most of my trysts had been quick mating sessions for mutual release rather than anything within a relationship—being an alpha meant I didn't have time for dating or romance—but as I thrust as deep as I could into Ven, as I stared into those beautiful eyes of hers, it felt like the most romantic experience of my life. We were connected, not only through our bodies, but through our souls. She understood me better than anyone. Even Ricky.

“You're incredible, baby. See how you take me so well? I told you you could do it. Because you can do anything, can't you?”

Words tumbled from my lips without any direct input from my brain, but I meant them. It also helped that I had long since noticed my darling Ven had a praise kink. If I wanted her to orgasm several times, a little sweet talk was necessary. That was fine with me, because any chance I got to shower my mate with praise was a good one.

Desire and pleasure curled deep in my abdomen, building up in a way that would escalate quickly. However, if I wanted to make Ven come multiple times before I exploded, I needed to pull out more of my tricks.

Sliding a hand over that deliciously thick ass of hers, I lifted her enough to put one of her pillows under her hips. Ven let out an adorable sound, no doubt surprised at how easily I was able to lift her. She was a solid woman, a combination of bountiful curves and legs I wanted to bite for hours, but for a shifter she was quite easy to toss around.

Once I had the pillow where I wanted, I pressed her legs forward, nearly folding her in half as I changed the rhythm of my hips. The resulting shout of pleasure out of her was just as gratifying as I had hoped, and within seconds her hands were scrabbling over me, trying to find purchase as I rocked into her. As tempting as it was to fuck

her into the mattress like I knew she enjoyed, that wasn't the right move for the moment. Maybe for the big finale.

“Leo! Like that! Yes, please, God, just like that! Don't stop! Oh, my God, don't stop!”

Normally, Ven was quite a well-spoken person, quick with banter and a clever comeback, so it stroked my ego that I could reduce her to a nearly monosyllabic mess. That big, beautiful brain of hers was so clearly scrambled, and all because of me. It was the greatest compliment she could ever give me.

“Baby, baby, baby!”

It was when she started chanting that pet name that I knew she was close again. I picked up the pace, my thrusts turning punishing as I pistoned in and out of her.

I wish I had the vocabulary to tell Ven exactly how it felt when she was approaching her orgasm, like a velvet vise clamping down on me, milking me for all I was worth. I had to bite my tongue not to lose it, because I was almost certain I could get a third one out of her, and I didn't want to drop the ball after talking such a big game.

“That's it, baby girl. Come for me. You deserve it.”

Not exactly Shakespeare, but it did the trick, and I watched with rapt attention as she fell apart on my cock for the second time.

Normally, I would let her catch her breath a bit, but we were in a race against the clock. I could feel the momentum building up within myself, and the way she was gripping me was only speeding things up.

Besides, I had learned that if I made the right moves at the right time, I could chain

her climaxes together. It was a challenge, but I was up for it.

Quite literally in this case.

“Breathe for me, Ven. Make sure you breathe, because you’re coming again, baby.”

“I can’t,” she mewled, her chest heaving, those gorgeous breasts of hers hypnotizing me.

I leaned down and kissed her, caressing her cheek as I did. “I promise, you can.”

And then I fucked her into the mattress.

I loved being gentle with Ven, loved treating her with reverence and soaking in the romance, but I also loved taking her. Letting the beast within me come out a little and indulge in my ancient instincts. And I loved that Ven enjoyed it. Her gasps, her pleading, the way she clung to me, the way she would occasionally beg for more. It really felt like we were two puzzle pieces perfectly matched for each other.

Once I had a good rhythm, I slipped a hand between us, going for her clit again. Normally, I would approach it cautiously, gently circling it to warm it up to stimulation, but this was not the time to take it easy.

It was oh-so-satisfying to feel her body responding. Her moans were a symphony I would never tire of hearing. I got lost in it, consumed by our growing pleasure. For a moment, it felt as if the whole world was suspended on the head of a needle, just her and I and our shared joy. But then Ven let out a wail, and she clamped down on me for all she was worth.

“Leo! Oh, fuck, Leo!”

And then she was coming, milking me like no one else ever could. I braced myself, and I still wasn't prepared for the sensation that racked my body. I didn't know what came over me, but in my ecstasy, I sealed my lips over where Ven's mating gland would be if she was a shifter. It was an incredibly sensitive gland that existed in pretty much all of our species, and I longed to sink my teeth into it. But even if Ven didn't actually have that particular piece of anatomy, it wasn't something someone did without explicit consent. So, while I did graze my teeth against it, I didn't bite down.

Just the feeling of my canines against her pulse was the last straw for me, and I finally lost it. The baser, primal part of me roared in satisfaction as I filled her, imagining a den full of pups and a full pack community to take care of them. Certainly not practical considering the situation we were in, but what did an orgasm care about being practical?

When both of us finally came down, I collapsed to the side, pulling Ven with me, so she was cuddled up against me. I knew she needed to go to the bathroom, but surely that could wait for a few moments, because even though we were soaking in our post-orgasmic bliss, I still wanted to be close to her. To have her scent filling my nostrils and her heartbeat echoing mine.

"I love you," I said, trying not to think about those imaginary pups I could see a little too clearly. Maybe one day. Certainly not now.

"I love you, too," Ven said before kissing me softly. I sank into that gentle affection, not a single wall between us. I didn't know what the future held for us or if I would ever find the missing members of my pack, even if we took down the last two warlock brothers, but at least I knew that no matter what happened, Ven would always be by my side.

What more could an alpha ask for?

10

VANESSA

“So, as we approach this estate, I want to remind you that the original family who owned it go all the way back to the very first settlers that came to America.”

I nodded along, idly unzipping and reziping my fanny pack as I listened. Honestly, it was kind of hard to catch what our tour guide was saying over the rumble of the bus engine. I couldn't help but wonder if all the shifters around me were having an easier or worse time than I was. It wasn't like I could ask though, because that risked potentially exposing our little ruse, which would be a damn shame considering how much work we'd put into it.

“As we arrive through the gates to the estate, I want to remind all of you to be respectful. We are guests at a culturally significant site. Remember, hands to yourself, and anything you bring in with you, you bring out with you.”

I had to hand it to Alicia, she really knew how to act. Gone was the taciturn, often scowling woman who always looked like she had something incredibly important to do. Instead, she was replaced by a khaki-wearing, pigtail-boasting tour guide with a megaphone and a serious can-do attitude. I was beginning to wonder if she was less of a mercenary and more of a spy. I could definitely learn a thing or two from her.

“Ah, here we are!” She clapped joyfully as the bus pulled into the outer courtyard. The doors in the back and front opened, and all the passengers streamed out.



We were quite the colorful crew. This time, I wasn't a caterer or a gardener. Instead, I and everyone else on the bus, sans Alicia, were playing tourists—the really, really annoying kind.

I hadn't been part of the planning, but if I had, I knew I would have been delighted at the camp of it all. When everything had been explained to me, my only worry was that someone might recognize me, considering how often I popped up. Especially since I didn't know if anything from Alric's mansion had been recorded. Chiga had assured me it wouldn't be a problem as he had plenty of disguises and supplies to make me fairly nondescript. That was how I'd ended up with platinum blonde hair tied up in a red bandana, and blue contacts.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing here? You gotta get out!”

I did my best to ignore the several security guards rushing toward us. One of their cars raced from the inner part of the estate. Alicia had called in a few favors and employed eagle shifters to scout ahead to get any useful information about the McMansion where the remaining brothers were holed up.

“Ma'am!” the closest security guard continued. He looked like the one in charge. “Ma'am, you can't be here. This is a private residence.”

“Private residence?” Alicia practically shrieked, and man, I had to hand it to her, she was convincing. “Excuse you, I have been running this tour for nearly a decade, and this is a historical site I am showing to my guests as an ambassador of America.”

I did my best not to stare, although the whole situation was quite amusing—dangerous, but amusing. To my left, a couple of security guards were trying to stop Chris and Ricky from taking photos, but the two were replying in what sounded like maybe Dinè and Spanish.

“You need to get back on your bus and get out of here!”

“Ah, no ingles. Sooorrry.”

I never thought breaking out into laughter would be a risk of our plan, but I definitely had to swallow that reaction down. Then it was my turn as a guard approached me and took away the Polaroid camera I had been brandishing.

“Stop that. You need to leave.”

“Uh...” I didn’t know much Spanish, not enough to be convincing, and I’d only just started becoming familiar with Native American tongues since becoming embroiled in the shifter community, so it wasn’t like I could mimic that, either.

Well, it looked I was going with the broken French I had picked up from watching so much Canadian TV when I was younger. At least the pain of all of them ending on terrible cliffhangers had turned out to be for a reason.

“ Je ne parle pas anglaise! Je ne comprend pas ?” My accent was probably atrocious, but I was willing to bank that, like so many Americans, most of the security guards would not have the language skills to call me out on it.

“You. Go. Now.”

Did he really think that would work? All around me, our group of truly annoying passengers was spouting off, making a confusing hail of languages. Some of them were rapidly cursing the staff out in Aleut, and I was pretty sure Miranda was having a fake panic attack in Salishan. From the corner of my eye, I saw two shifters rapidly signing to one of the security guards trying to corral them. From the emphatic movement of their fingers, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were telling the man how close they were to throwing hands.

It truly was a mess, and a glorious one at that. When the car I'd seen earlier screeched to a stop, it was difficult not to feel particularly satisfied. I reckoned we'd managed to draw ten of their security to us, but if possible, I wanted a bit more. Really, at least twenty was the sweet spot I was looking for.

So, in the effort of making a scene, I tried to grab my Polaroid camera from the security guard.

“ Donnez moi! C'est n'est par pour toi! ”

I jumped for it, trying to snatch the device out of the much larger man's hand, and if I just so happened to accidentally get his earpiece instead... Well, wasn't that bad luck for him?

“Hey, whoa! You need to contain yourself, or I will do it for you!”

Considering I had learned the majority of my French from PG-rated television, I didn't really know any swear words, but that didn't stop me from acting like I did. I verbally dressed the man down, my volume rising with every syllable.

Sure enough, two more cars arrived, and more guards piled out of them. We were all doing our best to be the most distracting, loud, obnoxious, and banal interruption the staff had ever had to deal with. After all, if we presented ourselves as a large group of relatively harmless people who were lost, they were much more likely to redirect us rather than kill us. However, if they caught even a hint of subterfuge, everything would be over before we could get to part two of our plan.

A crackle from the megaphone was our cue, and suddenly Alicia was talking again in her tour guide voice.

“All right, everyone! Clearly, we are not wanted here. Let's get back on our bus and

go to our next stop. Hopefully, they will respect the importance of historical literacy.”

Finally, our cacophony died down, and I estimated that we’d wasted at least fifteen minutes of their time. Feeling satisfied with that, and a bit relieved I was going to be out of their direct line of sight, I hurried back to my seat on the bus.

However, I couldn’t relax fully, because I knew it would only be temporary. Very temporary.

Still, I did my best to breathe in and out, centering myself for the next phase. I didn’t have to wait long because as soon as we reached the main gate leading to the outer courtyard, there was a resounding bang, and our bus suddenly lurched to the side before coming to a screeching halt.

Oh, no, it seemed one of our tires had blown. Truly, no one could have expected that.

So, once again, we all poured out, chattering in our different languages in alarm, while Alicia continued to speak into her megaphone unnecessarily. I hadn’t been able to tell before, but the woman definitely had a flair for drama, and I was loving it.

“Don’t worry, everyone. This is a temporary setback. We’ll be back on the road in no time at all.”

Naturally, the security team walked over to us, all of them looking pained.

“What’s going on now?” the man in charge said.

I probably shouldn’t have taken so much joy in how exasperated he sounded, but it was pretty great. I knew the situation was incredibly serious, but it was nice to have a little bit of levity every once in a while.

“Ah, there you are, young man,” Alicia said, still talking through the megaphone at point blank range in the man’s face. “The spare is in the back, so would you be a gentleman and have your little team change it? Then we’ll be back on the road and out of your hair.”

His expression shifted from exasperated to incredulous. “You’re expecting us to change your tire?”

“Well, you certainly wouldn’t expect a lady like me to do it, would you? And how else are we going to get out of here? I mean, I suppose we could wait until AAA can come rescue us, but you know how long those wait times can get. We’d be stuck here for hours, and I don’t know what your bathroom situation is here, but our bus does not have with a lavatory.”

A myriad of expressions crossed the man’s face before he finally closed his eyes and heaved the heaviest sigh I’d ever heard.

Oh, yeah, we were doing our job, all right.

“Gibson, who on your team knows how to change a tire?”

“Are you serious, sir?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

I watched, thoroughly amused as the security detail suddenly found themselves playing mechanic. I did my best to sink to the back to our little fake tourist crowd, just in case one of them somehow got suspicious of my relatively simple disguise.

Hopefully, our other two teams were benefitting from this distraction.

LEO

My lungs were burning, but I forced myself to go a little bit farther, my arms cutting through the water until finally, I saw the shimmering light above my head I'd been waiting for. Angling myself upward, I kicked hard until my head crested the surface. I glanced around. I'd made it to my target. The fish hatchery.

I drew in a deep breath, fighting the urge to cough. I didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention to us. Hopefully, the majority of the staff would be too distracted with Alicia and Ven's group to hear us. I'd been skeptical of the plan when it was first proposed, but the two mercenaries in our group assured us we needed a multi-prong attack. We'd completely lucked out with Chadwicke, which was perhaps a bit ironic, and if it hadn't been for Ven's spontaneous manifestation of plant powers, we wouldn't have survived the auction. Given those facts, I wasn't exactly keen on arguing with the experts.

At least I could take solace in the fact that my mate was safely on the bus, about as far from danger as she could be while still being involved with the plan. Honestly, I would have loved it if she'd stayed home, reading and taking care of her cats, but I'd long since learned that wasn't an option. Ven wouldn't stand by while others put themselves in danger. Considering how powerful she could be if she could access plants again, it would've been selfish of me to ask her to stay behind.

I sensed someone rapidly ascending beside me before I saw them, but a bit later, America burst through the surface of the water. Almost instantly, she started

coughing, and I clapped my hand over her mouth quickly. It had been no small feat to swim that long to get through to the hatchery, but we had to do our best to be as stealthy as possible.

Once I felt her breathing slow beneath my palm, I let go, and she gave me a rueful look.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

We didn’t need to say much else, because by then multiple of our allies were also popping up around us. The small area we’d come up in was becoming crowded, so I swam over to the edge and pulled myself up onto dry land. And just in time too, because suddenly, a dark shadow filled the depths of the pool, and a few seconds later, none other than a giant moose head broke through to the surface.

Right. I’d forgotten moose were somewhat aquatic creatures, and that killer whales were legitimate predators of theirs. It was wild to think about, and it didn’t get any less wild as Chiga shifted out of his animal form so he could clamber onto the bank with us.

Jeez, I wasn’t a small man, but standing next to the giant of a shifter made me feel that way. Thank God he was an herbivore, otherwise the rest of us would have been done for.

As more hauled themselves onto the bank of the hatchery, I couldn’t help but wrinkle my nose at the rather intense smells. We were lucky the brothers weren’t shifters, because there was no way they wouldn’t be able to pick up on the pungent stench wafting from my team.

Still, it could be worse. I wasn't on the team infiltrating from a septic truck. After my experience with the compost truck at Chadwicke's, I figured I'd earned the reprieve. Although fish filth wasn't exactly what I would normally call a reprieve.

"We ready?" Marco, one of America's cousins, asked softly.

I shook my head, listening carefully. Thanks to Alicia's scouting, we'd found out about the septic repair our second-strike team was going to take advantage of. It was the type of opportunity that wouldn't come again so easily, and I didn't want to ruin it by jumping the gun. While both the properties were in different areas, I should be able to pick up the rumble of the pump once that was started, and that would be our cue.

"I don't see any security," America said, peeking out the window she was crouched under. "Looks like our distraction drew plenty of them away."

"Don't let your guard down," I cautioned. "Alicia said this place is enchanted to the gills, and they have some pretty nasty mercenaries along with their normal security detail." I shot Chiga an apologetic glance. "No offense meant."

"None taken. My profession collects bastards and assholes like my fiancé collects trading card games." He cracked his knuckles, his pleasant smile turning far more serious. "I'll take care of them, though. I know how they operate. That's why I'm on this team, after all."

That, he was.

Our plan had three parts, each dependent on the other. There was the distraction team with their broken-down bus full of loud noises and even louder personalities. Then there was my team. We were about to change into employee uniforms that would hopefully be waiting for us before we infiltrated the manor proper.



I wasn't quite sure why it was necessary for the estate to have a fish hatchery, especially since, according to our scouts, the two staff members who worked there only attended it at dawn and dusk. Something about fish not being the biggest fans of broad daylight. It had to be a rich people thing.

Finally, there was the septic team. They were essentially the cavalry. Hopefully the last thing the brothers would expect. If they were anything like their siblings, once the fight started, the brothers would tip their hands almost immediately, likely thinking my group was the big surprise. If everything went according to plan, that would be the mistake that sealed their demise.

Finally, I heard the faint sound of a gate opening and the rumble of a heavy truck entering. That had to be them.

"I think they're here. Let's get dressed."

Thankfully, the fishery and landscaping jobs seemed to be quite messy, because there were five lockers all stocked with multiple staff uniforms of different sizes. They were simple: plain white polo shirts, black pants, and a thick, khaki work apron that felt like it was made out of canvas. It had plenty of pockets, as well as a leather flap that offered extra protection for the midsection and groin.

We cleaned out the entire collection, with most of the fifteen in my group finding things that fit them. Naturally, that wasn't in the cards for Chiga or America, who were on two very opposite extremes of the height chart.

We'd accounted for that from the get-go, and the four of my team who didn't have uniforms knew they needed to hang behind and stick to the shadows as best they could. If possible, we wanted to get all the way to the brothers before they knew something was up.

I wasn't delusional. I knew that would be difficult, especially since the brothers were on high alert. I could only hope that their hubris, as well as the bus full of fake tourists, would be a sufficient enough cover for us.

Sure enough, the rumble of the septic trucks pump starting up was indeed audible from where we were, so I gave the signal to move out. Alicia had supplied us with pretty accurate drawings of the layout of the place, and public records had allowed us to suss out a bit more, so we had a good idea of where we were going. Still, it was nerve-racking. We were quite literally going into the lion's den, as it were.

Or lions', rather, considering there were two of them.

Our group moved in an interesting formation, those of us in uniform spreading about, walking along as if we were headed to our next task. I noticed a few of my allies farther away had managed to pick up some tools, which made them look even more authentic.

As for those in our group who weren't lucky enough to have a disguise, they crept along in our wake, using buildings or large plants as cover. It was much slower going for them, but that was fine with me. It made it that much easier for them to watch our backs.

As I strode along like I belonged here, I couldn't help but think that if the brothers had banded together from the beginning, we never would have stood a chance against them. After all, that's how they had defeated my pack the first time. But they'd become so divided, all chasing their own personal desires, that a simple gardener and an amnesiac shifter had started a domino effect that took them out one by one.

Perhaps there was a lesson to be learned there. Maybe shifters needed to adapt and dash our petty squabbles over minute differences in order to move forward. After all, humans were becoming more and more powerful by the day.

I was the first one to make it to an actual entrance of the manor—a nondescript door on the southern side that led into a storage shed, which connected to their indoor grotto and sauna. Apparently, while the exterior of the mansion went back quite far, whoever had bought it in the eighties had turned it into a wannabe-Playboy-mansion paradise. Definitely not my style.

No, my style wasn't too dissimilar to Ven's cabin. Maybe a bit bigger, with a half-bath for guests and a whole lot more land to run across, but that was about it. My daydreams weren't of grottos and five floors of way too many rooms with marble ceilings. It was cats purring when I first woke up in the morning, vocalizing their need for food. It was looking out of the back windows and seeing Ven working in her massive garden and finally getting those chickens she always wanted. It was my pack, united and finding their way in life once again.

Memorizing the manor had been one of the most difficult parts of our prep. So many rooms, hallways, and closets. I'd thought it wouldn't be too much of a challenge since we'd had to do the same for the auction, but it turned out that the older the estate was, the less its architecture actually made sense.

It didn't help that we were all entering at different points of the truly expansive manor, because no matter how slick we were, a group of fifteen shifters all arriving through the kitchen door was bound to raise eyebrows. But if just one of us was caught? It was much easier to bullshit some story about being lost or that we were a new hire.

It was such a tenuous balance to find as I strode along, picking my way toward the center of the manor. I needed to walk confidently enough to look like I knew what I was doing, but not so assuredly that I looked like a wolf on the prowl.

Which I very much was. I could practically taste the blood of the last two brothers on my tongue. We were close. Closer than I ever thought was possible.

According to our reconnaissance, there were three major areas where the brothers tended to spend their leisure time. The billiards room where, apparently, they had a whole setup for off-track betting. What warlocks found interesting about wagering human money on horse races, I had no idea, but apparently it was a thing. The sitting room, where they had a TV that Jack and Rose could have used as a life raft off the Titanic, and then their greenhouse. Although, from my understanding, that last one was only for one brother. That would be the least convenient space for him to be, as it was a giant glass building attached with a single glass hallway on the western side of the manor. Way too hard to sneak up on, and the idea of fighting a plant-controlling warlock in his own conservatory was most certainly not an appealing one.

Bit by a bit, I made my way, maintaining an easy pace so as not to arouse suspicion, but also not looking lost. I was just an employee, headed to... somewhere. If someone took the time to think, I was sure they would be confused as to why a grounds employee was so deep within the estate. But if there was one thing I had learned since Ven had snuck onto Chadwicke's gardening crew, it was that staff were basically invisible.

It wasn't until I reached a stairway that led to the sitting room—which was basically a stupidly fancy word for a living room—that I finally caught the scent of the brothers. While I didn't know what their personal smells were, there was a certain scent of brimstone and sappy sweetness to their magic, like it was trying to entice me and warn me to go away. Locking on to that scent, I knew I was heading in the right direction. I couldn't smell any of my allies, but that was all part of the plan. We were slathered in all sorts of scent-blocking sprays and lotions, applied far more heavily than usual to make up for our swim. The septic team didn't need nearly as much prep, but that's because what they smelled like wasn't exactly something the warlocks would want to take a deep sniff of. Maybe dogs were on to something when they rolled in their own shit.

Keeping the layout at the forefront of my mind, I drew ever closer. As I rounded a

corner toward one of the last hallways, I picked up my allies' footsteps marching ever closer. They were all coming from different directions but homing in on the same place. I allowed myself a single smile, until a voice startled me. I actually jumped, feeling a bit chagrined at myself, but I calmed down quickly when I realized it was the voice of a guard a ways over. I must have heard him through the room separating the parallel wings.

"I'm sorry, who did you say hired you?"

"Sorry, no... understand?"

That was America. Although we hadn't spent a lot of time together, she had a very distinctive way of talking. Trying to be as quiet as possible, I stepped through the door to my right and quietly made my way through what appeared to be a fancy study, with several marble statues in it. Who had marble statues in their home? It was one thing to have them outside in some hoity-toity garden, but it was another thing entirely to have them as interior decorations.

I really wasn't cut out to be a rich person.

But class differences or not, I had an ally to help. Cautiously, I picked my way to the other door and listened intently, waiting to see if America could de-escalate the situation before I lunged in. Ven had taught me quite a lot, but one of the biggest things was that a little bit of caution in battle could very well be a good thing. I didn't always need to go in guns blazing.

"Nah, don't give me that shit. Everyone here is supposed to be able to understand basic English. "

"I understand some, yes."

“I ain’t buying this. Come with me. We’re going to go get this straightened out with the head of staff.”

That was my cue. As fast as I could, I threw open the door and grabbed the guard on the other side, slapping my hand over his mouth and yanking him backward into the room with me. He struggled, but only for a moment, because then America was on him, leaping onto his front and head-butting him about as hard as I’ve ever seen anyone crack skulls together.

Was that a coyote thing I wasn’t aware of?

Whether it was or not, he slumped in my arms, unconscious. America jumped back on her feet, the bruise on the middle of her forehead already beginning to heal.

“Thanks for that,” she said with a grin. “Was worried I’d have to get up to some very noisy shenanigans.” She was speaking in a low whisper—one I wasn’t sure non-shifters could even perceive considering it partially used the subharmonics our animal sides often communicated in. Maybe I would test it out with Ven one day if we weren’t too busy.

Thinking about having an idle day with my love reminded me that we were a breath away from truly having peace. I still had to find the rest of my pack, sure, but that would be a whole lot easier if I could get information out of the remaining brothers.

I had a feeling I could be very convincing.

“Wouldn’t want that, now, would we?” I asked, ripping off the sleeve of the man’s standard black suit and tying it around his head as a gag. Then his other suit sleeve went to tying his wrists together, then a shirt sleeve to tying his feet together. Would it hold him long? Not likely. Even though I could smell that he wasn’t a shifter, there was a hint of magic about him that told me it was better not to assume he was fully

human.

It only took about two minutes to get him tucked away in the corner of the room, but once we did, America and I both stood there for a moment. I wasn't quite sure what was on her mind, but I was contemplating the reality that the brothers who had been tormenting us for so long were likely a couple of rooms away.

"We're so close," she murmured. "It's hard to believe it."

"Let's see it through, then," I said, giving her a grave nod. I knew there was merit to not counting our chickens before they were hatched, but it was hard not to let my mind drift to all the way our lives would change by ending the bloodline that had hurt so many of us. I wanted all the stupid things that separated us to be forgotten so we could be a loose-knit community no one would take advantage of again. I wanted to wake up every morning to Ven's sleepy face and never have to worry about powerful magic users going after her. I wanted to spend my days catching up with pack members, helping my love in her garden, and learning more about everything. Ven had mentioned there were schools on the internet now. Maybe I could go to college? I'd never really considered it to be a possibility for myself, but if the brothers were truly gone, and if I managed to reunite my pack, then why not? Being with Ven had taught me that no person had to be just one thing. I could still be an incredible alpha while taking night classes. They were not mutually exclusive. Ven, with her gentle words, her fierce determination, and the way she loved on her cats, had opened up worlds and experiences I thought were forever locked away.

"All right, then."

I headed to the door first, holding it open for America. She gave me a silent tip of her head. Although the brothers didn't have enhanced senses like we did, it was best to be cautious.

At least that was what I told myself as my heart pounded in my chest while we walked down the hallway. As we drew closer to the doors of the main sitting room, I couldn't help but think that even a human would be able to hear the thump - thump - thump emanating from my chest. If they had any shifters in their security detail, we were cooked.

Perhaps it was all in my mind, but I had noticed a solid decline in their luck ever since we'd killed Chadwicke. Even when we'd gotten the drop on the first two before everything went to shit, it hadn't been so easy. Not that it was particularly easy now, but things did seem to work in our favor more often than not. It seemed like the universe was correcting itself after a warlock had abused his powers for far too long. Who knew, maybe his patron thought it a fair comeuppance.

Whether balance was restoring itself or not, after a few minutes, America and I reached the door of the sitting room. Sure enough, I could hear two sets of heartbeats and smell that familiar scent of their family's villainous blood. My inner wolf responded instantly, baring its teeth. Bloodlust surged up in me, but I tamped it down. Not because the brothers didn't deserve it or because I planned to go easy on them, but because I couldn't afford to lose my cool right now. There were too many things in motion, and I was sure as soon as we attacked, guards would come running from everywhere. Sure, we had our threefold plan to help us, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be a hard-fought battle.

America and I exchanged one last look, then I opened the door.

I probably shouldn't have been, but I was a bit surprised when I was greeted by a large, well-decorated landing rather than an actual living room. Was their sitting area really two floors tall? Why would that ever be necessary?

Leaning in, I looked one way, then the other. There was indeed stairs on either side. I couldn't see all the way down the stairs, but I could make out the tops of a couple of



heads that had to be more security. Well, I hadn't exactly expected to find the brothers completely on their own, but it would have been a lovely surprise if that had been the case. I hadn't sensed or heard their heartbeats, so they had to be on some sort of magical suppressant. Or perhaps they were creatures that didn't have an audible biological rhythm. Granted, I had never heard of any like that, but I'd also never heard of lovely gardeners spontaneously gaining the ability to control plants, and that had already happened.

Crouching, I crept closer to the banister at the end of the landing, peeking over it. One of the brothers were in the room, but where was the other one? The heartbeat I had picked up close to him was actually one of his security, meaning we'd have to fight different species, and I would have to figure out on the fly what they were. Not exactly surprising as that was how it had been at the gala, but it would have been nice to be able to scent most of them like I could with other shifters. But with only one of them present, did we strike now, or wait for the other brother to arrive?

America and I exchanged yet another look, and I could tell she was wondering the same thing. She had a very expressive face. Or perhaps I'd gotten to know her well enough in the time we'd spent together.

Before either of us could decide, the brother spoke. It took me a few seconds to identify him from my position, but I realized it was Millicent, the one who insisted on being called William.

"Fuck! I'm out of wine. Where is that serving girl?"

"Most of your personal staff has been split up amongst your residences to make sure they couldn't all be freed en masse in case there was an attack," the security guard with the heartbeat murmured next to him. "That's the same reason we've taken most of the enthralled shifters down to holding cells and only have loyal ones currently active on staff."

“Fuck, you’re right,” the whining warlock groaned, dropping his head back onto the couch like he was truly put out. It struck me as such an odd thing to do for a grown man who was anywhere between fifty and a hundred-and-forty years old. I could never remember the order of the brothers or their ages. Especially since they all looked like they were in their late twenties. I was well aware that in addition to their boons they’d gotten from their patrons, they all had an unnaturally long life similar to that of shifters. Granted, it was nothing like their mother, who had been alive multiple centuries, but it was far more enhanced than it should have been for simple warlocks.

“It’s fucking disgusting that my siblings’ incompetence means I have to live like a barbarian in this cesspool!”

Cesspool? That was rich.

Literally, actually, as it turned out.

“Open the door and tell the first staff member you see to get me some fucking wine! If I’m going to live like a peasant, I at least want to be drunk for it!”

The security guard nodded, then I heard footsteps beneath the landing. I was so focused on the conversation I didn’t realize the possible ramifications until the door opened and I heard the now invisible guards speak.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Oh, uh, I was trying to find the bathroom.”

That was when I had to grit my teeth. It seemed our good luck had run out, because I instantly recognized that voice as Chiga’s distinctive, impossibly deep timber.

We were definitely made.

“Oh, great!” Millicent said, throwing his hands in the air like he was a Broadway actor. Maybe he was already drunk. It was a shame warlocks couldn’t succumb to alcohol poisoning. Or maybe they could if I tried really, really hard, like jamming a wine bottle into his throat and drowning him with it. It was always good to have options. “Another idiot! This is what happens when you take away all of my trained staff! We’re left with these incompetents!”

“We’re trying to protect you, sir.”

“I know that, but it doesn’t mean it sucks any less. Go on, you idiot! I’m sure you’ve got enough brain cells in that giant skull of yours to find the wine rack in the old larder beneath the kitchen and fetch me a bottle. I trust you’re at least literate enough to read the label?”

No way. Were we actually going to get away with it? I thought for sure the moment they saw the hulking giant that was Chiga they would instantly know something was up. But it seemed that taking all the shifters and his enthralled subjects from him had really hampered Millicent and his security detail. Maybe if he wasn’t so whiny, he wouldn’t be distracting the head of his team from a very suspicious situation.

Or maybe this security guard wanted something to happen to his boss. It certainly was an interesting theory, although one I couldn’t explore at the moment.

“I can read,” Chiga said almost uncertainly, and bless him for leaning into Millicent’s assumption of his intelligence. I shouldn’t have been surprised, considering he was a professional mercenary and likely had gotten into some awkward situations a few times in his career, but still, I appreciated it.

“Prove it. Wine now. Chop, chop.”

“Yes, sir.”

I heard Chiga take a step away, and maybe one more step, before a different door on the lower floor burst open and what had to be the very last brother strode in.

“I swear to Bacchus the water quality—” He froze almost instantly, not even finishing his sentence. “Who the fuck is that?”

“What do you mean? Oh, one of the useless buffoons we have keeping the grounds?”

I saw the new brother’s face cloud instantly, and in a flash, he lifted his hand, sending a blast of magic out the door. America and I jumped to our feet. “You’re such a fucking idiot, Millicent.”

It looked like the fight was on.

Gripping the banister, I launched myself over it, shifting into my wolf form in mid-air. It hurt to do it so rapidly, flesh tearing and joints breaking, then reforming, but I figured we could use the steam to help obscure our onslaught.

Because there was most certainly an onslaught. I heard Chiga shift behind me, the unmistakable, haunting bellow of a moose filling up the room like the howl of something entirely alien. I always tended to forget how creepy the giant animals sounded.

But Chiga wasn’t the only one barreling in. Pretty much every door except the one the brother had come through burst off its hinges to let different members of my team in. Within seconds, we were all in the room, attacking the last two members of the warlock bloodline.

I went for the one who had sussed us out. I had hoped to get the drop on him quite literally, however, I never quite touched ground. A moment or two before I was about to land, the potted plant next to Millicent rapidly grew in size. The next thing I knew,

two giant leaves wrapped around me and flung me across the room.

Ah, that had to be Frederick, the plant user. If the tricks Ven had pulled at the manor were anything like the plant user in front of me, no wonder she'd thrown Alric for such a loop. There was something particularly uncanny about foliage coming to life and acting like a sentient creature. Like it was breaking all the rules of our world and how it was supposed to work.

I recovered quickly and found my footing, only to have two security guards run in with guns. If I had to guess, those weren't as benign as the ones I had tangled with at Chadwicke's manor. Meaning, they most definitely had silver bullets.

That certainly wouldn't do. While not everyone in my group were wolf shifters, and therefore didn't have the silver allergy we did, a majority were. I pivoted my attention from Frederick and focused on disarming the new pair, hoping that if anyone else had run in from other directions, my allies would choose to do the same.

I leaped at the first one, closing my jaws around his wrist. I bit as hard as I could, appreciating the crunch of bone as I jerked his arm back and forth. If he survived, he would never have use of that hand again.

Good.

He screamed. I let go of his bleeding limb and head-butted him in his chest for all I was worth. He toppled backward and didn't get up. Old Leo might have taken the time to stop and chomp on his throat right then and there, but I'd learned that I didn't always have the time to make sure every single enemy I faced had a completely satisfying end. What was important was that he was out of the fight, and I could focus on the brothers.

Oh, and also all of the plants in the room.

Never in my life did I think I would have to have a showdown with some foliage, but that was exactly what was going on. Vines burst from the floor and broke through the windows, trying to grab whoever they could, while the tree and other plants were tripling or even quadrupling in size, their leaves turning into limbs.

A quick glance told me Chiga was most definitely being our MVP. His truly mammoth animal form was too big for most of the vines to pick up and fling around, and his mouth was especially suited for destroying plant matter within seconds. After all, moose had the ability to dive down in the water and rip out mouthfuls of hearty aquatic greens all in one breath. I never thought a battle could be influenced by someone being really good at eating salad, but, God, was I grateful we had Chiga on our team. His teeth weren't just meant for ripping and tearing flesh.

However, I couldn't leave it all up to the moose. I charged at the plant that had tossed me aside, ducking this way and that beneath each swipe. It was strange how they moved, almost like they were a second delayed. It made it harder to predict their movements. It was probably because they didn't have a nervous system that could send signals to their muscles, so the way they were moving was so completely foreign to what I was used to. However, I still managed to get close enough to the ornate pot. I immediately started digging in the dirt.

I nearly laughed. Here I was, in a battle for pretty much all shifters in a multi-state area, and it was suddenly very important how fast I could dig a hole.

I was so focused on the dirt that I lost track of the fight. Suddenly, I felt a white-hot slice on my thigh. Jerking around, I saw a security guard wielding a giant thorn, magic crackling in his other hand.

He didn't smell like a warlock, which meant he was likely a witch. I'd dealt with witches before, and while they were certainly powerful foes, they were nothing like the brothers. I could work with that.

But before I could whirl to face him, two smaller, tawny figures jumped on him, one going for his extended arm, the other for his throat. He screamed, but not before both coyotes tore into him. The two shifters jumped off the man as he crumpled, and I realized it was America and one of her cousins. I gave them the shortest, most appreciative nod before getting back to digging.

It took maybe two more seconds before I found the root ball. I hadn't even known what a root ball was until I met Ven, and I sent up a prayer for her love of info-dumping about plants. Eager to get a heavy hitter out of the way, I dug my teeth into the root ball and ripped with everything I had.

I swore the plant squealed, which was something truly uncanny, but I didn't let go. Even when one of its leaves suddenly slammed into me and lifted me off my feet again—a mistake on the plant's part, because I didn't let go of its root ball as I flew through the air.

I knew Frederick would simply heal the plant, but from how Ven had described things, it was less him controlling the plants and more giving them a sort of magical half-life. Hopefully, he wouldn't even notice the plant was gone until he saw it, and then he would have to waste time and energy bringing it back to life.

So, I bit and I tore, even using my paws and claws to tear away chunks of densely packed roots. Sure enough, once I got down to the heart of the root ball, the leaves finally stopped moving and fell to the floor.

Massive footsteps sounded behind me, and I whirled around, ready for another fight. Instead, I saw a giant moose smiling at me. I had no idea what he could be so happy about, but then he nodded at the mess I'd made of the plant.

Oh! Well, bon appetit .

While he hoovered it up to make sure it truly couldn't be used again, I spun to go for Frederick again. But once more, I was thwarted as a geyser of water burst from the floor and spun up to the ceiling. For a split second, I was completely baffled, until I smelled the distinct rust of an old pipe. Millicent had used his powers to summon the water from below the marble floor. That was clever and far more resourceful than I thought he would be. It looked like the battle had gotten that much more complicated.

We needed to end it, and fast, before Millie and Freddie got any more creative. Otherwise, we might not survive.



VANESSA

“ I need you to count down from ten for me,” I said calmly, pulling one of my vials and a bit of gauze from my fanny pack as I knelt next to a wolf sprawled on ground, blood pooling below it. “You can do it in your head.”

How else were they going to do it? It wasn't like I could communicate with shifters when they were in their animal form. I didn't even know if they were able to speak to each other, but I imagined they had some sort of wordless telepathy.

The counting was the only way I could think to distract him as I pulled a silver bullet out of the wound in his side. We'd been so lucky so far that no one had ever used that type of ammo against us—at least that I knew of—and I figured the only reason for that was because the brothers employed so many shifters who wouldn't be able to use anything the bullets touched and would be weakened in its presence. Now, I wasn't surprised they were using it. The brothers were on high alert, and most of the shifters they'd enthralled had been removed.

Which was why I had brought so many things to counteract silver poisoning. At least I'd brought things I'd guessed would counteract it. It wasn't like there was a manual, and when I asked the shifters what would help, they'd said their best method for fighting off such poisoning was to remove the source of the poison.

Different shifters had different weaknesses. Wolves were the only ones susceptible to silver, but along with coyotes, bears, and moose, they were also weakened if iron got

into their bloodstream. I had no idea how they dealt with anemia, or how they could eat so much red meat, but I chalked it up to magical shenanigans. Eagles were susceptible to electricity and deathly allergic to waterhyme while moose had a wolfsbane-like reaction to English yew.

In fact, it seemed the only shifters with no known weaknesses were alligators. I'd heard a lot of different theories as to why from our little merry group of rebels, but my theory was that alligators had evolved out of their weaknesses. They were, after all, ancient creatures. It was a shame we didn't have any in our group because from what I heard, they were twice the size of a regular alligator and incredibly difficult to damage. Most of them liked to live in places much warmer than where we were, though, which made sense since they were reptiles.

"Focus on breathing and counting for me, okay?" I urged softly, despite the cacophony around us. One moment we'd all been standing around the bus, watching security try to fix our blown tire, the next an explosion had rocked the courtyard, and chaos erupted. Despite my sudden magical prowess with plants, I didn't jump into the battle. Chris and I had retreated, both of us armed with full med-kits to run triage as best we could.

Chris had been a champ when he'd come to me and asked to learn whatever he could, and I had tried to teach him everything I could about what herbs and concoctions to use in which situation, and how to stop the flow of blood until a shifter could heal. I'd also showed him all the little tricks I'd learned about how to clean wounds so the injury could heal faster. He was a great student, and I wouldn't mind if he chose to continue learning once everything was settled. It would be nice if there was more than one herbalist in our group.

In our pack.

Once people started going down, we'd split up to cover more ground. I didn't regret

it, but I did hope Chris was all right. He didn't have an animal form to protect him, or even mysterious plant powers that worked of their own accord.

I couldn't risk the distraction of worrying about him, though, so I took that out of my mind and focused on removing the bullet from the side of a giant wolf. Pulling out a long pair of tweezers, I carefully inserted them into the wound and felt around for something solid. The shifter whined, but to their credit, they didn't move a muscle. That was truly impressive. Or maybe the silver had paralyzed him. Either way, I knew the longer the bullet was in, the worse it would be, so I went a bit faster than I was comfortable with.

Thankfully, after a minute or two, I got it out. I threw the offending piece of silver as far away as I could before returning my attention to the wound. I pulled a vial of black liquid out of my pack. It looked exceptionally magical, perhaps even villainous, but it was only powdered charcoal mixed with witch hazel, distilled water, crushed ibuprofen and powdered willow bark. It was a double whammy of absorption and reducing inflammation.

Unfortunately, I would have to find out if it worked in real time.

The wolf jerked as I poured some of the liquid into the wound, and I didn't blame him one bit, not even when one of his claws nicked my arm. Instead of freaking out, I gently laid my hands on his side and tried to envision calm and healing seeping into him.

"You're gonna be okay, friend. I need you to picture all that icky poison draining right out of you. Pouring out like when a cup tips over. Can you visualize that in your mind for me?"

Although I was flying blind, I tried to sound as confident as I could. Maybe it was a magic thing, maybe it was just invoking the placebo effect, but I figured if I sounded

like I knew what I was doing, it would help more than hinder.

“When you’re ready, I’d like you to try to sit up on your belly so all this badness can drain from your side. Do you think you can do that? I’ll be here to help.”

Another whine, but it seemed to be an affirmative. It took at least a full minute or two, but eventually the wolf groaned, then struggled onto his side. The mixture I poured into the wound began to dribble out, but I swore it had a new metallic shine to it. Maybe that was my own brain seeing what it wanted to see, but after another moment, I could feel the wound closing up even through the dense layer of his coat.

“See? You should be feeling better already. Give yourself some time, then get out of here,” I advised as I reached into my pouch and took out some deadnettle balm. I dabbed it around the wound, then smeared the rest on a bit of gauze and placed it over the jagged hole once I was sure it was done with the majority of the leaking. The deadnettle would soothe and help heal, as I had learned with Leo all that time ago, and the gauze would help to soak up anything the wound wanted to discharge as it healed from the inside out. I didn’t secure it, because I wanted it to fall off once the wolf was up and moving, as his body would take it from there. “I need to go help others, but be safe.”

I gave him one last pat on the side, still trying to exude healing, calm, and comfort, before I was on my feet and running again.

I kept my eyes peeled for anyone in need of medical attention, but it seemed we were doing a great job of staying scattered and having most of the security chase us rather than engaging in direct combat. We’d fight if it came down to it, but for the most part our job was to keep as many of the guards running around far away from the manor. And we were doing a great job if I did say so myself.

A sharp yelp somewhere to the left of me had me turning my head, and I saw a wolf

shifter caught between three furious members of the security team. I still didn't really have a handle on my powers or even know how to activate them, so I couldn't just charge in. Instead, I reached into the bag Chris had thrown me when everything went to shit and pulled out a smoke bomb.

My softball training came in handy as the smoke bomb hit one of the guards right in his back. Smoke filled the space between the trio, and the wolf darted away in the confusion. It seemed even without my plants I still had a trick or two up my sleeve.

I continued to move, helping where I could, but trying my best to stay out of direct danger. If Leo could see me, I was sure he'd be proud of how well I was doing in a support position. Truthfully, I didn't really want to be a brawler. I had only done what I had at the auction because I truly had been afraid I was about to lose the love of my life.

I fell into the rhythm of battle, scanning for the injured or someone who was in a pinch, aiding however I could, then moving on. It was a balance of quick efficiency and making sure everyone got the care they needed. However, after I threw a smoke grenade at a tight cluster of enthralled shifters about to surround a couple of our own, another explosion rocked the grounds, nearly knocking me off my feet.

That could not be good.

I whipped around to face the massive estate, sure that was where the blast had come from. Sure enough, a wolf sailed through the window and went flying through the air, his body limp. I raced toward him like I was going to catch him or something—what a ridiculous thought—but two eagle shifters beat me to it, swooping in and grabbing one of his front legs to slow his momentum so he didn't hit the ground with an overwhelming force.

I got to his side as fast as I could, gasping in horror at the blood covering him. The

deep but thin lacerations all over his body made it look like he'd been whipped with a cat-of-nine-tails.

"I've got you. I've got you," I said, aiming for that soothing timber again, but not quite getting it. Almost instantly, the wolf began to shrink until a battered and bleeding Jason lay in front of me.

"Give me whatever potions you have," he insisted, pain evident in every syllable he uttered. "They need you in there way more than I do."

They needed me in the mansion? I wasn't supposed to go in there. I didn't reply however, and instead focused on treating his wounds. We were incredibly vulnerable sitting out in the open, two fleshy bodies and no animal form. Thankfully, the eagle shifters wheeled back down, flying in tight circles around our heads. Okay, it looked like we had guards.

I did my best to patch him up, giving him a vial of invigorating tea while quickly disinfecting his wounds. I didn't have the heart to tell him that nothing I made was technically a potion, they were all simple herbal remedies I had learned through reading and my time volunteering at the animal clinic. The clarification wasn't really necessary at the moment.

As I dabbed some of the deadnettle balm onto his wounds, I caught a guard approaching us, a bright yellow light forming in his hand. Oh, they had magic? I supposed that made sense, but I'd kind of forgotten there were lesser-magic users in the warlocks' ranks.

While Jason and I were too weak to be a threat, it didn't mean I was going to let the guard mow us down. I pulled two smoke bombs out of my bag, throwing one directly at our attacker's middle, then the other one a few paces in front of him. It had the effect I hoped for. Smoke burst all around him, and the eagle shifters shrieked as they

dived into the cloud.

Huh, even without strange plant magic, I was still a capable member of the team. It made me feel better about myself and less like I was a monster who could burst out of my skin at any moment.

When I turned my attention back to Jason's wounds, he grabbed my hand and gave me a serious look.

"Go. They need you in there. I'll get to safety out here, I promise, and I'll help anyone else who needs to get out."

"But I?—"

"Look, I know we still have the second cavalry, and I know Leo wanted you out here, but I saw what you did the other night. We would all be dead without you. It doesn't make sense to have our heaviest hitter hide on the outskirts when you could be saving lives in there."

He had a point, and my mind was desperately screaming that if my friends needed help, then I had a responsibility to join them. It was wrong to stay safe when they were all risking their lives. Still, I hesitated. Not only because I was scared of what I might do, but I was worried about breaking my promise to Leo. I liked to think my promises meant something, and I didn't always break them all willy-nilly.

It was like Jason was in my mind, though, like he knew the exact reason for my trepidation.

"I don't know what you are, but it doesn't matter. What I do know is that your mate is in there, and he needs you."

Well, I had no desire to argue with that logic.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded at Jason, and then I was off, racing into the very place I wasn't supposed to go into. And I wasn't alone, either. From the corner of my eye I saw almost two dozen dark shapes erupting from the septic truck we'd procured through America's family. It turned out having allies who had three mechanic shops in their family circle was a far greater resource than we could ever imagine.

They were the second cavalry Jason had been talking about, and I decided to follow them to make sure I got to the battle as fast as possible. I could have gone through the broken window Jason had come out of, but that didn't exactly seem like a safe course of action. And considering I still didn't know if I would be able to use my plant abilities or not, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Granted, if I really wanted to be safe, I shouldn't be going into the thick of it, but if I was honest with myself, it had always been rather inevitable. Hopefully, Leo would understand.

My lungs burned as I ran, quickly falling behind the second wave as they sped across the grounds on four feet. I kept a sharp eye out and threw smoke bombs in case they needed cover. I didn't want to fall too far behind because that would definitely make me easier to pick off. I wanted to be toward the middle of the rush if I could.

Keyword, if .

When I made it into the manor behind a pair of coyote shifters, I expected to find all hell breaking loose. Instead, the foyer looked as neat as one could expect, as if it was ready for a magazine photoshoot or Harper's Bazaar. For a moment, I was so perplexed I wondered if I had been transported to some other giant mansion, but then I heard a howl from far away and what sounded like a wall splintering apart.



I was definitely in the right area.

Off I went, following the scratch marks on the floor and the doors knocked off their hinges. A very small part of me felt a bit sad for all the damage we were doing to such a historical landmark, but most of me couldn't be fucked to care. Really, the house was a testament to the insanity of wealth. It had been passed from generation to generation, and while multiple owners had added multimillion-dollar additions to the building, it was still as gauche as ever.

Although, I certainly wouldn't mind having all that land for chickens, miniature goats, and gardens, as well as the giant glass conservatory I'd spotted on the maps. However, no amount of growing space was worth it if it meant a single shifter had to become a mindless slave.

The sounds of battle grew louder and louder, and a strange energy shimmered under my skin. For a moment, I thought I was about to experience the same wave of power I had at the auction, but as I sprinted, I realized it wasn't my power I was feeling, but someone else's entirely. I didn't have to guess who that was. That had to be the brother who had sworn fealty to Bacchus.

When I'd first heard that, I was confused, as I had assumed Bacchus was the god of wine and partying. Apparently, though, he also had domains over agriculture and fertility. Also, it was the very fact that he was an actual spirit that magic users could get in touch with. It definitely made me wonder how many myths could be real—yet another thing I could tackle once the brothers were gone and Leo's pack was safe.

Safe was about the last thing we were at the moment.

I rushed through the door where I heard all the fighting. Holy crap, it was massive. I had expected it to be large, but not two floors large, with stairs on both sides going to a sizeable landing. Man, some people really had too much money.

I couldn't really focus on the abject capitalism because it truly was a cacophony around me, like the gala but five times over, with plants covering almost every surface as well as a miniature tornado whipping around the center. Lightning struck down from the crystal chandelier above.

Had we somehow left the most powerful brothers for last? It made sense they would have survived the longest, but man, we were a lot less lucky than I thought.

I took one last moment to observe before I searched for Leo. It was nearly impossible to find him in the throng, and I feared the worst. A truly inhuman bellow drew my attention to a giant, horse-like creature standing on his hind legs. A second later, his full weight cracked down on the chest of a man on the floor.

Wait, it wasn't a horse. It was a moose . Chiga. I had known he was a massive creature, but it was entirely different seeing it in person.

I knew from my various animal shenanigans throughout my life that moose were giant creatures, often standing anywhere from five to seven feet at their shoulders, but Chiga was at least nine feet tall without taking into account the huge antlers atop his head. Leo wasn't kidding about him being a force to reckon with.

Finally, I saw a flash of that familiar coat behind the gargantuan moose. Leo was lunging for one of the brothers, but the warlock had summoned a hazy shield around himself. If there was one trick I really hated from those guys, it was that.

Thankfully, my love was holding his own, so I switched my focus and looked for anyone needing my help. Unfortunately, quite a few people were in grievous states.

Time to see if my support skills could hold up in much closer quarters.

I ran to the closest shifter—a coyote I was pretty sure would come up to my waist. I'd

gotten used to the fact that all shifters were larger versions of their wild animal counterparts, but it still threw me for a loop. However, even at their greater size, I was still able to grab his legs and haul him over to the door, swinging it partially closed to use as cover.

My mind crept into that almost meditative state as I did what I could to stabilize the coyote so his body could begin the healing process. I hoped most of them would have the good sense to retreat rather than push their injured bodies and end up dying, but I also recognized that if one of them wanted to fight, it would be a waste of time trying to stop them. We all had our choices to make, and in the end, I needed to respect theirs.

A gust of wind blew the both of us forward. I grabbed the edge of the door to stay in place, but the coyote slid several yards down the hall. Before either of us could react to the sudden movement, the air reversed directions and I was being sucked into the battle.

It was a strange sensation whirling through the air like that. My back hit the solid couch, my breath rushing out of my lungs from the impact. I sat there, more than a little stunned at the sudden game of tug-of-war over my body, but then a perfect replica of a miniature tornado skipped up on an ottoman that looked like it cost more than my entire cabin. I blinked in surprise as it launched itself right out the already broken window.

Fighting warlocks was absolutely wild.

Not wanting to encounter more shrunken versions of terrible weather phenomena, I scrambled to my feet, hoping to spot the closest fighter who needed my help. The coyote was too far away now, so all I could do was hope they would be okay while I helped someone else. Now that I was pretty much in the heart of the battle, I could see nearly a dozen or so of our people strewn across the floor or pinned in very

uncomfortable positions. What would they have done if the second cavalry hadn't arrived when they had?

I didn't like that thought, so instead of entertaining it, I rushed to the injured wolf nearest me. I figured since he was still in his animal form, he couldn't be too hurt. When shifters were low on energy or too injured, they reverted back to their human forms.

I fell into a rhythm: triage, treat, and get them mobile enough so they could get themselves out of direct danger. The outer courtyard wasn't exactly the safest place for the injured, but it was way better than the middle of a battleground with two extremely pissed-off warlocks.

Things grew a little blurry after that. I was so intensely focused on whoever I was helping, I didn't realize how completely drained I was until I stood up from helping an eagle shifter and nearly fell on my face. Why was I sweating so much? Why did it feel like I had just run a marathon?

It wasn't all that different from the way I'd felt after I killed Alric. Except I wasn't using my plant powers, and that might have been a one-time thing, anyway. So, what the hell was going on? It was almost like healing people had been steadily sapping my energy.

But that was impossible, because I wasn't actually healing them. As far as I knew that was the stuff of fantasy books. I was just using what homeopathic medicine and herbalist strategies I happened to know.

I tottered again, and my feet got tangled together, and it really seemed like I was about to face plant this time. But then an absolutely wretched-smelling wolf bounded up, turning at the last moment so I could catch his fur and slump over his back.

God, he smelled disgusting.

The stench overwhelmed me, but then my vision cleared enough to see it was Ricky below me. God, I was so happy to see him, I didn't even care how he smelled.

"Hey." I grinned slightly. That was all I got out before the marble below our feet fractured and dozens of vines shot up like a water spigot.

It felt like going quite literally from zero to one hundred as I was blasted upward, my body feeling like it had been hit with a dozen paintballs at once. The air was driven from my lungs when my back slammed into the ceiling, and once more my vision went a little fuzzy. God, I'd have to see a doctor when this was over. Did my insurance cover life-and-death battles with malevolent magical colonizers?

"Ugh!" I groaned, and Ricky echoed the sound. But that discomfort began to shift into outright pain as I realized the vines were still pushing, trying to drill through our skin.

There was a special kind of horror that came with something trying to burrow its way into one's body, and the fact that it was something I loved so much didn't help. I gritted my teeth, and that churning energy within me made itself known. I was no longer drained. Instead, a simmering something filled me. It spilled out into the world all around me, painting every surface in colors only my mind could see.

Once that energy touched those vines, it was like baking soda touching vinegar. Everything was fizzing, reacting, and that burning anger inside me ordered those vines to put. Us. Down!

They did.

It wasn't exactly the smoothest landing, but that didn't matter. What mattered was

that Ricky and I were on the ground. The plants writhed around us as if they weren't sure what they should do. Well, if they needed orders, I was more than happy to give them. Did I understand that by doing so I would likely be drawn into battle? Yes. But it was time. I had helped the injured for as long as I could, but the way the plants were running wild told me they needed to be reined in before the brothers got the upper hand. I knew personally just how pervasive and powerful foliage could be.

"Go," I said, feeling along the spiderweb of sensation for the heart of where they were coming from. I'd lost sight of the brother, but I was certain I would sense him.

Sure enough, after a beat or two, my magic pulsed somewhere across the oversized room, almost like a powerful heartbeat pushing shock waves through the air. That was my target.

There was an inherent foolhardiness to taking on someone who had been communing with and manipulating plants for most of their life when I'd only done it once, but all I could do was hope the stress of fighting off nearly three dozen shifters had been enough to weaken him a bit.

Once I had him anchored in my mind's eye, I let every plant my energy had bled through surge toward him.

I didn't tell the plants to shred this time. Going for the kill would be an error. There was no way he wouldn't find a way to stop them before they could eviscerate him. Instead, I channeled all my thoughts into binding him, wrapping him up until he couldn't move. Would he be able to get out? Certainly. But not before he was surrounded by shifters and unable to get his momentum back.

Hopefully, the other brother and his mini tornadoes didn't interfere.

"What's going on here?" Ricky said—at least, that was how I interpreted the howl

from Ricky. That was certainly how it sounded as all the plants around us surged away from us and started growing again. I didn't answer him, of course, as I didn't actually know how accurate my translation was, but I did take off in the direction of the vines.

They moved like a snake and like a wave, leaves fluttering this way and that. The plants were faster than me, pushing aside or moving past combatants in much more agile ways than I could. Hopefully, Frederick couldn't sense my interference and would be just as surprised as Ricky was by the sudden change in energy.

I felt them reach my target before I saw them, having thrown myself to the side to avoid a lightning strike that lanced down from the ceiling. It hadn't been aiming for me, but that didn't make it any less terrifying.

Once I righted myself, I decided it would be best to stick to the perimeter of the room. Hunching over, I moved as fast as I could until Frederick was in my sights.

He wasn't floating for once, but he was red in the face as hundreds of plants wrapped around him tightly. My mind flashed to the gala. It had been horrific. Terrifying.

But this? This situation was entirely different.

"What are you doing? I said attack!"

Unfortunately, the plants I hadn't sent were still entirely under his thrall. They surged up over the vines, wrapping down into them with the intent to tear.

That wouldn't do at all.

Brow furrowing, I focused on that fizzing, sizzling magic within me and the plants I affected. I let it grow, bloom, even feed back on itself until it was spilling out of me

again and across any plant it touched. Across other plants that my plants touched.

Wonder cascaded over me as I gained control over the new plants. It was a mass of organic wonder, and I told it all to squeeze.

For one brief, blissful moment, I could feel Frederick's bones creak under my control. Could it really be so easy? Was I really about to bring him down? It seemed like it would be even easier than Alric.

I probably should have known better.

Right when I really felt like I had the most solid grip on the brother, his head jerked to me, and his eyes went wide.

"It's you! You're doing this!"

Uh oh.

I didn't reply. I needed to react as quickly as possible. I squeezed my fingers together, my nails biting into my palm as I imagined those plants crushing him with all their strength.

Maybe if Frederick had only been a plant manipulator like me, I would have bested him. Unfortunately, he was a warlock , and that meant he had a whole school of magic spells I would never even know about.

He sent out a burst of that magic, and a blinding, white-hot pain surged through the network of foliage. The next thing I knew, fire blasted out of him, reducing all the plants binding him to ash. It was hot enough that I threw out my arms to shield myself even from this distance. However, that distance shrank rapidly as he practically teleported over to me. He moved so fast through the battle that one



moment I blinked and then he was a few feet away from me.

Shit.

I called upon all the plants around me, creating a defensive barrier between the two of us, but he raised his hands and flicked his fingers downward like he was swatting cobwebs out of the air, then all the plants settled to the ground.

“It is you!” The strangest thing was that he looked happy rather than upset. Actually, he looked downright ecstatic. Something definitely wasn’t right.

Was it a trick to disarm me? I didn’t want to take the chance. So, I ignored the broad smile that crossed his features and tried to wrestle back control of the plants. They stirred, shimmering with the same feeling inside me, but before I could issue any order, Frederick shook his head and snapped his fingers, and the plants ignored me again. Clearly, I was outclassed. Not exactly a surprise, but I had hoped that some of the shifters?—

As if they could hear my thoughts, a wolf leaped onto Frederick’s back while a coyote shifter went for his ankle. The warlock whirled, sending the wolf flying away, but that left enough of an opening for the coyote’s teeth to sink into his designer pants. Frederick let out an angry curse before waving his hand. A crackle of green light rippled through the air before the floor beneath the coyote suddenly turned to liquid and it began to sink in.

It didn’t take a genius or a battle strategist to figure out that he was going to make the floor solid again to crush the coyote, so I quickly reached for the plants that had slackened under his control and had them rip the coyote out of the mire, depositing him a few feet away. I tried to press, using the sudden slack in the warlock’s concentration, but I took too long to redirect them after helping the coyote. Frederick moved at an unnatural speed again, and then suddenly, he was in my face. His hot

breath fanned across my skin, and every muscle in my body locked up.

Despite my repeat run-ins with the brothers, I'd never actually been so close to one of them. I could see the individual pores on his nose, could smell the sandalwood in his cologne. My heartbeat rushed in my ears as I wondered if I had inadvertently caused my own death.

He looked so thrilled to see me, his eyes traveling up and down my body—not in a lecherous way as that action would usually suggest, but as if he had been reunited with an old friend.

What the fuck was going on?

“You look so familiar,” he said, and to my horror, one of his hands came up to caress my ponytail. “But you can’t be her. That’s impossible.”

Her? What was the man on? I had gotten the distinct impression that most magical folk had some pretty severe resistances to most inebriation, so whatever had him thinking he knew me had to be some really powerful shit.

But he didn't seem high as he slowly caressed my face. If someone had told me such a thing might happen, I would have told them I'd slap him silly or try to slit his throat with a thorn. But now? I felt a bit paralyzed. The entire situation was so unexpected that my brain couldn't quite figure out what to do about it.

“I watched you burn. I know I did, my little plant pet. So stubborn. All you had to do was?—”

He didn't get the chance to finish his sentence, because a howl came from incredibly close by, and a shadow moved in the corner of my eye. That was the only warning I had before Leo leaped onto Frederick, snapping his jaws closed around the warlock's

arm that had been touching me.

As soon as he landed, he began to shake his head in that way predators did to rip off full limbs. Although I was still more confused than anything else, I banished the strange shock that had come over me and latched on to every single plant that would listen around me. They all surged as one, the vines sporting massive thorns that could impale a man.

I had to admit, I agreed with their idea.

I sent them racing forward, and they reached Frederick right as he grabbed one of Leo's ears, his hand crackling with a deadly, green energy. I couldn't let whatever he was brewing go right into my mate's head, so without so much as a beat of hesitance, I ran him through.

Although I was several feet away, I could still feel the force of the plants as they pushed through Frederick's chest and lifted him up, up, up off the ground. He let out a gurgling scream. It was truly horrific in a way I would have thought I'd gotten over since the auction, but I clearly hadn't.

I didn't ease the pressure. I wasn't stupid enough to think that impaling him once would take down a warlock who had spent his life taking advantage of every other type of magic user and shifter in existence for his own gain.

Thankfully, I wasn't alone. Leo jumped up, scaling the pillar of thorny vines until he was at the warlock's feet. Sparing what little power and control I had left, I made a platform of leaves and vines so Leo could be face to face with one of the men who had tried to destroy his pack. And although I didn't want to watch, I kept my gaze steady as my mate let out a truly pained and feral howl before opening his jaw wide enough to encompass Frederick's head from the top of his skull to the bottom of his chin.

And then he bit down.

It was horrible. It was bloody. My stomach flipped at least a dozen times, and bile rose in my throat, but I pushed it down. Frederick was dead, and I could feel all the plants I wasn't controlling in the room go still, as if they were confused and waiting for direction.

"No! You can't! You can't do this!"

Right. The battle wasn't over yet. Tearing my gaze away from Frederick, I let his body drop to the floor as I looked for his brother. Sure enough, the last surviving son was beginning to rise up through the floor, his face pale and full of horror.

If he was anyone else, I might have felt bad for him, but all I could think of was whether his victims wore that same expression before he ripped their lives, their ability to consent, and their very minds away.

Raising my hands over my head, I sent all the plants toward him, the green wave quickly snatching him up. But like Frederick, he didn't make it easy. He sent out blasts of magic, trying to knock them away. I gritted my teeth, my feet beginning to slide off the floor as I was dragged along with it. I still didn't understand the symbiotic relationship I had with plants, but I knew I was losing this particular tug-of-war.

"Leo!" I cried, but he was already on it. Him and pretty much every shifter still capable of battle. The tide had most definitely shifted as they all raced up to the warlock. The eagle shifters flew directly to him, slashing and biting at his face before wheeling off and turning around to do it again. The coyotes raced up the leaves that were unfurling for them, while many of the wolves used the furniture to leap up and bite at the man's dangling feet. For once, we were dealing with a brother who couldn't summon shield bubbles to surround himself.

However, he was still very capable of summoning lightning.

It began to crack down in earnest, setting fires in half the places it struck. The shifters had to go from attack to defense, and I worried that Millicent would get the good sense to go for me. I didn't have the reaction time the others did, and with all my concentration on keeping him held, I didn't think I could magically protect myself either. If only I was powerful enough to yank him down to the ground, or if any of us could physically reach up to him to do so. He wasn't planning to stay and fight. His intent was to escape. And if he did, there was a chance he could start the cycle all over again somewhere else.

If only...

Chiga slowly clopped into my line of sight, his dark eyes determinedly raised towards the warlock. He definitely looked worse for wear, with several bald patches along his hide and a wound down the side of his neck that was bleeding sluggishly, but that didn't stop him from gracefully lifting his head and slowly enclosing his long, arboreal teeth around the warlock's ankle and yanking him downward.

I felt the give in the plants as Chiga's immense strength immediately brought the enemy closer with one yank. Millicent screamed bloody murder and extended his hand downward as if he were going to blast the moose shifter.

But that bastard of a warlock didn't realize how completely outnumbered he was, because as soon as he focused on Chiga, I was able to squeeze the plants tighter, and all the shifters surged at him again. I was pretty sure he realized it a hair after I did, because as his hand crackled with malevolent, crimson energy, the two eagle shifters still left in the room went for his eyes.

He changed his aim to the birds, who pinwheeled up out of the very hole in the roof he was trying to escape through. But that distraction was his final mistake, as both

Leo and Ricky managed to get to his arms while America finally scrambled up high enough to be even with his face. Three sets of teeth all tore into Millicent at once, and in a rain of blood, it was over.

I finally let go of the strange magic I still didn't understand, but my heart continued to thunder in my chest.

I couldn't believe it.

It was finally over.

There would be no more shifters enthralled. No more kidnappings. No more senseless murder. For the first time in God knew how long, the people I'd grown to love would have peace.

"Leo," I breathed, swaying slightly, and my lover bounded over to me, shifting into his human form a few paces away. I embraced the rush of steam and let it swallow me, opening up my arms. Sure enough, Leo's strong limbs wrapped around me, practically crushing me to his chest with a hug.

"We did it," he whispered, and I could hear the wonder in his ragged voice.

"We did," I confirmed. "Let's go home."

"Yeah, let's."

13

LEO

For the first time since I was a young child, things were calm. Truly calm. There had been a lot of cleanup after we defeated the last two brothers, as we still had to take care of the remainder of their security outside, free the enthralled they'd left behind, and reunite them with their families.

Then there was the matter of my missing pack members. I had hoped we would find them with the last two brothers, but we only found four: Elizabeth, Frank, Archie, and Phillip. Like most of us, they were confused when they first came back to themselves, but bit by bit their memories returned. Unfortunately, even with the increase in their recollection, none of them had any idea where the rest of our pack could be.

We hadn't been a large pack, cresting over thirty at our biggest before the massacre, but we were still missing about seventeen pack members. I knew it was unlikely that all of them were left alive, but still, I had hope that there were more of us left than the six of us.

If it weren't for that weight hanging over my shoulders, it would have felt like months of serenity had passed, but in reality it was only about a full week when something incredible happened.

I'd been out in the garden, trying to find a semblance of normalcy with Ven, when a ragged, bony figure appeared at the tree line. Even after so much time, I knew that scent like the back of my hand.

“ Andromeda! ” I’d cried, heart in my throat as I sprinted for her. Although she was much thinner and worn than I had ever seen her, I knew it was her. Same hair, same button nose, same foxlike eyes.

She had practically collapsed in my arms at the time, but I was there to catch her. Her face was gaunt and drawn, but I knew without a doubt it was her. Hope bloomed in me. Bit by bit, our lost numbers might find their way home.

We were on the third day since she’d arrived, and although she was already improving under Ven’s care, her memories were still scattered. While she didn’t seem to recall us by name, our scent brought her comfort, so Ricky and I donated shirts to her makeshift bed on the couch. One downside of so much of our pack being reunited was that space was getting more and more scarce by the second. Most of the free space in Ven’s yard was packed with tents, and while most of our support had returned to their homes, a lot of them were hanging around to help transport recovered victims back home as soon as they remembered where their home was. I also got the distinct feeling that America wasn’t ready to leave. I didn’t blame her. Sometimes the peace seemed far too good to be true.

“Okay, I gotta go in and get changed,” Ven said, standing up and wiping her hands on the gardening apron that had been given to her by... actually, I couldn’t remember who had gifted that particular item, but I did know that my love had been wearing it whenever she was out in the garden.

“Changed? Why?”

As cute as ever, she smiled and stood up on her tip toes to kiss my cheek. “I have work, silly. Javier offered to drive me there and back, so I won’t have to bike. I’ll only be gone maybe five hours maximum.”

“Ah, right.” Somehow, I had forgotten Ven still had a job outside of our bubble.



She'd reduced her hours a lot and had called off for our adventure with the final two brothers, so it had slipped my mind. Really, with all the support from the wide-flung shifter community, she didn't need to work at all. I couldn't help but wonder if Ven was clinging to it as one last form of normalcy she had control over. She still didn't talk much about her spontaneous magical abilities, and I figured it wasn't the right time to push her. Maybe once things calmed down a little or stopped interfering with her day-to-day life...

"Do you want me to cook dinner?" I offered rather futilely. I wasn't one of those douchey alphas who didn't even know how to make themselves a sandwich. I'd cooked for myself and Ricky when we were younger, but my culinary skills weren't up to snuff when compared with Ven's or America's aunties.

"No, I think someone said something about barbacoa, so we'll be set. But thank you for asking. I wouldn't mind if you played with the cats and checked in on Andromeda, though. I don't think she's quite up for solid food, but I do have bone broth with some silken tofu chunks in the fridge that needs to be reheated."

Well, it wasn't quite saving the world, but I was more than happy to do that for her.

"Sure, sounds like a plan."

"Thanks!" She kissed my cheek again, then hurried off.

Although I felt a little melancholy at seeing her go, I was overjoyed that we finally had enough peace and steadiness that the only reason she had to leave was her work. I didn't have to worry about any warlocks in the background or enthralled bear shifters who could take her out on her bike ride.

All in all, things were most certainly looking up.

I went about finishing the pruning in the garden, then walked around and exchanged words with everyone who was still on Ven's little chunk of land. Part of me wondered if we could go to the landlord and ask about renting a larger area so we'd have more room, but I didn't want Ven to get in trouble if he found out how many people were staying with her at the moment. In all honesty, I'd have loved to go back home and restore the small piece of land our pack had inhabited before we'd been scattered, but the memories of it were bathed in misfortune. That piece of land was only double the size of Ven's plot, and the houses were all dilapidated, but we'd put so much work into making them cozy houses for the lot of us. We'd had chickens—something I knew Ven desperately wanted—and the woods surrounding it had been perfect for hunting and our monthly runs.

Granted, it wasn't like our pack lands had been too far considering the fact that the cave was so close to Ven's home. Perhaps there was a way we could connect the two territories? It seemed a bit impossible since I had no idea who owned Ven's little plot of land, but perhaps it was something to look into. Especially if we ended up finding more of our pack members.

Thankfully, there was no great drama, so my walk lasted maybe an hour or so, and only because I got involved in a conversation with Ricky. My beta was doing great since our victory with the last two brothers. I was pretty sure it was only his enhanced healing that stopped his cheek muscles from burning with how he was constantly grinning from ear to ear. I didn't begrudge him the happiness. Of all of my pack members, it seemed that I, for some reason, had suffered the least—only because Ven had freed me from my curse first. Everyone else but Ricky and me had to wait for the brothers to die before their curse was broken. While I still didn't understand how or why Ven had been able to break the enchantment that had kept me locked in my wolf form, I had a feeling it had something to do with her ability to control plants. Some sort of healer magic. I only wish we knew what she was so I could give her the peace she so longed for. Although the battle had been a haze of stimulation and a cacophony of noise, I remembered Frederick saying something strange to Ven.

Nothing that quite made sense but did seem like he knew—or at least thought he knew—something about Ven.

It was too bad we couldn't have kept him alive to interrogate him. But that was the problem with warlocks. Once the upper hand was gained, it was easily lost if not taken advantage of immediately. Although I hated them down to my very core, I had to admit they'd known how to fight.

Once I'd done my rounds, I went inside and reheated the bone broth for Andromeda. While she had never been one for lengthy conversation, I did want to ask her if she was all right. I knew firsthand how confusing it was to go from being purely an animal to regaining humanity again, and I'd had Ven to walk me through it. Andromeda had woken up alone and cold in some place she wasn't ready to tell us, then wandered in a random direction until she found us. Her connection to me, her alpha, had guided her in the right direction, but she didn't know that. It must have been so confusing and so utterly lonely.

So, yeah, even if she didn't remember me, I wanted her to know she'd never be so alone again.

"Hey there," I said, peering around the doorway. It was funny how all of us had adapted that way of checking to make sure whoever was on the couch didn't want privacy, as there were no doors on the lower floor besides the half bath. "You hungry?"

Andromeda tore her eyes away from Goober, who had been purring up a storm on her chest. Now I was certain my mate had special healing powers, I also had to wonder how much of her miraculous results were from the healing power of her cats and their purring.

"Yes, I am, but I'm a bit trapped right now."

“I can see that,” I said with a chuckle. Crossing over to the coffee table, I put down the tray, then gently picked Goober up. As soon as I put him on the floor, he hopped back up on the sofa and settled at her feet, earning a squeaky complaint from within the knitted blanket.

“Who’s that now?” I asked, moving some of the cloth to see none other than Fork’s furry orange head peek out. He really was a character. I was used to him causing far more chaos in the house, but with so many people to pet and play with, he was pretty tired on the regular. No energy for shenanigans with all the love and play time. What a problem to have.

“Come on, the both of you. You’ll get plenty of cuddle time later.”

They stared at me like I’d grown another head. Sighing, I went and got the treats. What could I say, I had no backbone when it came to Ven’s kitty children. At least they wouldn’t tattle on me.

I gave the treat container a few solid shakes. Naturally, the two boys launched themselves from wherever they were and skittered across the floor like their lives depended on it. I gave them each a handful, which was probably about five treats too many, then waited for Mudpie to saunter in. She loved treats and would throw a hissy fit if one dared to short her, but she at least tried to pretend she wasn’t absolutely mad for them.

Once those clawed terrors were handled, I returned to Andromeda and helped her sit up. She looked a lot better. The color had returned to her cheeks and her hair wasn’t stuck to her scalp anymore. America and Ven had helped her in the shower, and I was immensely grateful for that. I knew the experience was likely very different from how my first time with Ven had been, but I was glad she’d had someone there to help her.

“Here you go,” I said, carefully setting the tray on Andromeda’s lap.

A warm smile spread across her features as she leaned in and inhaled the scent of the soup. I was all too familiar with how the delicious warmth after far too long in the cold could leave one speechless, so I didn't say anything for a while. I settled into the only other chair in the room and picked up the book I'd started reading a few weeks ago.

It was only a matter of time before Ven's three felines joined us, Mudpie settling at the top of the couch behind Andromeda's head, and Goober and Fork settling along her legs and feet. Although Ven did indulge her babies, she'd trained them to keep their distance when someone was eating.

"I... had a cat."

I set my book aside and leaned forward. I tried to sound casual, as I didn't want to make a big deal out of it and freak Andromeda out.

"You did. Do you remember that?"

"I do. She was old and very fat, even though we kept trying to put her on diets. I think we took her to a vet once?"

"We did indeed. Do you remember the diagnosis?"

Andromeda seemed to puzzle over it for a long moment before she shook her head.

"No, I don't."

"That's okay. I only remember because your aunt thought it was the most hilarious thing and told the story pretty much any chance she could get. The vet said she was diagnosed with being too good of a hunter, and she would need to become an indoor cat instead of being allowed to play in the dilapidated barn in the afternoons."

Andromeda's eyes went wide. "Wait, wait, I do remember that! We all joked that she was meant for a pack, or that she learned from us."

"That we did," I said, grinning from ear to ear. It was a small thing, sure, but it made me so incredibly happy. Bit by bit, Andromeda would find herself again. It would be hard working through the wounds the brothers left on our bodies and in our minds, but she was taking the first steps to do so. Man, once things calmed down, I would have to find a shifter therapist for all of us. God knew we needed it. I supposed we could try a human one, but having to keep so many secrets and also not having them understand our duality seemed like a recipe for disaster.

"You said something about my aunt..."

"I did," I hedged, perhaps a bit more cautiously than I needed to. Like most of us, Andromeda's backstory wasn't exactly full of roses and sunshine. We all made do and got through it together, but it wasn't easy.

"I... I didn't live with my mom, did I? Or my dad?"

"No, you didn't. They died fighting the usurper. Like my dad did."

Such news could be pretty shocking. After all, it was one thing to be an orphan, but it was another to forget you were an orphan, then suddenly learn it when you'd only just remembered you'd had a cat. Thankfully, Andromeda did not seem that rattled. Instead, she gave a slow, measured nod. I'd never realized how much we wolves tended to communicate that way until Ven started mimicking us.

"Your scent just changed," Andromeda said, her brow furrowing. "Penny for your thoughts?"

She was remembering idioms already? Another great sign. "Just something funny

about Ven.”

“Ven? That’s your mate, right? The human?”

I made a so-so gesture with my hand. “Maybe not entirely human, but, yeah.”

“What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “Her genetics are a bit of a mystery, but it’s nothing urgent. Ven is Ven no matter what species she is.”

It was impossible for my thoughts not to go to my love. Sometimes when I looked at her, it was hard not to be in awe. Never in a million years had I thought I would deserve someone like her. Honestly, I still wasn’t sure I did, but I certainly wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth, so I was happy to accept that I had definitely pulled above my league. She would probably disagree with me because she always undervalued herself.

“Did I have a mate?”

“No, you didn’t. For a while I thought there might be something brewing between you and Tabitha, but then...”

“Then the warlocks happened.”

“Yeah. That’s pretty much the long and the short of it.”

“So, I like women?”

I raised my eyebrows, a bit taken aback by the question. While I had been plenty confused when I’d woken up from my curse, I’d remembered my sexuality. Sure, it

had taken me a couple of days to remember the actual word for it, but I'd been aware I was acutely attracted to women.

"As far as I know, you like hunters. The more skilled they were, the hotter they were to you. What's between their legs never seemed to matter much."

"It's hard to imagine that. Sometimes I feel like I'm still just a wolf in the most insane dream."

"I understand, believe me."

"But I do know I loved my aunt. She did her best."

"That, she did."

"I wish... I wish..." She trailed off again, and dutifully ladled soup into her mouth. I didn't take it personally. Really, I was proud of her for saying as much as she had. It did seem like she was coming back into herself, even if she couldn't remember who she did or didn't fancy. "I wish she was here right now. I wonder how long it's been since we even talked."

"As far as I can estimate, we probably spent about two years under the brothers' spell."

"Two years? That's insane."

I couldn't agree more, and while I wasn't certain, with everything that Ricky and I had figured out, we were about as sure as we could be. If it weren't for America and Jason also pitching in with rumors they'd heard, we'd likely still be in the dark.

"It doesn't feel like it's been that long."



“I know, time is weird in our animal forms.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I—” She straightened so suddenly she nearly knocked her bowl of broth from her tray. “I was with her!”

“With her? What do you mean?”

“I know where she is.” Andromeda turned to me, a manic grin on her face and tears in her eyes. “I know where so many of us are! I remembered. I remembered! ”

“Look, I don’t want you to get your hopes up. None of our scouts have picked up any shifter scents so far, and we would have if they were around here.”

“No, I know they’re here,” Andromeda said, her voice almost beseeching.

I hadn’t really been keen on her coming to the cave she’d described from her memory, but her directions weren’t the best, and considering that wolves navigated by scent, we needed her to lead the way.

“I know it, Leo. I do!”

Ricky looked skeptical and opened his mouth to say something, but I shook my head. While I hoped Andromeda was correct, if she wasn’t, there was no need to argue with her about it. We would find out soon enough.

But I did truly, borderline desperately, hope she was right. The last thing I’d expected was a bowl of good soup and a conversation about cats to bring around the possible location of nearly a dozen of our missing pack members.

“This way,” Andromeda said, still gripping my hand tightly. “I think the cave is this way.”

“How did y’all end up in there again?”

“I don’t remember. I woke up there with no clue what was going on, and I was so hungry it felt like my stomach was going to turn itself inside out. I wandered into the night, but then I got turned around, and I followed this feeling in my gut that told me I was going the right way. It didn’t lead me back to the cave, though, it?—”

“Led you to us,” I finished.

“Exactly.”

I shot Ricky one last meaningful look, and he clamped his mouth shut. Despite all odds, we eventually stumbled upon a craggy opening at the foot of a steep hill, the kind that told of mountains not too far in the distance.

“There,” Andromeda said with a shaking finger. “They’re in there. I know it.”

Ricky and the two scouts with us began to step forward, but I held out my hand. I had no doubt whoever was in that cave was either terrified out of their mind or confused enough to be violent. They needed their alpha, and it was time for me to step up to my responsibilities.

“I’ve got this,” I said, striding forward. No one argued with me, which I appreciated, and I gave my eyes a moment to adjust before I walked farther into the darkness.

Even with my enhanced vision, there was nothing quite like the pitch black within a cavern, so after a moment I pulled out the phone Ven had given me and turned the flashlight on. I made sure not to shine it far into the cave since I didn’t want to blind anyone hiding there.

I pulled up a rumble in my chest as I walked, a deep, comforting alpha sub-harmonic

that any of my pack would hear and feel. I didn't want to surprise anyone, and hopefully they would be drawn to me the same way Andromeda had.

The going wasn't exactly smooth, and there were two points where I had to drop down. Just as I was beginning to think no one was there, I heard it. A heartbeat. It was weak, more like a hummingbird than a wolf. Perhaps a starving wolf?

"I'm here to help," I said softly, but any shifter would hear me. "I'm your alpha. You have nothing to fear. I'm here to protect you."

It started off as soft noises, nothing more than the scrape against rock, but then I heard more heartbeats. I raised the phone slightly to illuminate more of the space, and I nearly burst into tears at the sight in front of me.

Andromeda was right. There were nearly a dozen humans in ragged clothing who looked more like cave people than modern citizens. They stared at me with confusion and fear, but also the tiniest flicker of familiarity.

"Come," I said, offering my hand to the closest one. "Let's take you home and get you something to eat."

"Alll....pha?"

My heart squeezed at the filthy face looking at me curiously. I thought I would have been able to recognize the female, if not by sight then by scent, but she was so caked in mud and other gross things, it was hard to make out much about her at all.

"Yes. I am your alpha. You're all safe now."

It wasn't quite like herding cats as I got them out of the cave, but it was slow going. While I couldn't discern their individual scents, I could pick up the acrid notes of

starvation. Even if they had somehow adapted to see within the caves, there wasn't enough large prey to sustain them. When was the last time they'd eaten? How did they get to the cave? Were they let loose as wolves or had they escaped to the wilds to form their own mini pack? Andromeda still didn't remember that part.

So many questions, and we might never get any answers, but I didn't care. My pack was slowly coming together. We had only a handful missing, and I was sure we'd be able to find them, too.

“Auntie!”

Andromeda stumbled forward the moment we came out into the light. Although she was still unsteady on her feet, she rushed past me to an especially emaciated figure in the middle of the group.

“Auntie!”

The woman stared blankly at her niece before the mud on her face crinkled, and she let out a nearly feral cry. “Andy! My little Andy!”

It was like a dam broke open. Ricky and the two scouts quickly strode forward, embracing our lost brethren one by one. Tears flowed down every face, and it was a miracle I managed to keep my composure. I was so completely filled with pride and joy, it was like it was welling out of me, filling every single cell before it flowed out to touch all the members of my pack standing around me.

Against all the odds, we were winning. We were reuniting.

And this time, I would make sure I never failed them.

14

VANESSA

“I would like to go on a date.”

“Excuse me?” I looked up from the email I’d gotten about my check deposit—the first one I’d gotten in ages, it felt like.

I hadn’t expected Leo to be all dolled-up in a pair of nice slacks, a blue flannel button-up, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and his long hair neatly brushed back. My heart ricocheted in my chest, and I had to swallow hard not to drool on the floor like a cartoon character.

“I said, I would like to go on a date. A real one. I realize I’ve never taken you out, and I want to change that.”

The smile that spread across my face had to be downright sappy, maybe even swoony, as my stomach flipped several times. “I’d like that. What were you thinking?”

“A picnic under the stars. I have the basket all set up, and a couple of very nice blankets Chiga’s family gave us.”

I flushed at the thought. It was simple, but at the same time it was so very us. Almost like a fairy tale.

“Do I have time to get ready?”

“Of course. Take as much time as you need. I’ll be right here when you’re ready. If you want, we can head out at dusk, watch the sunset and the stars rise, or we could get a couple of lanterns and head out in the dead of night. Like something out of a fantasy novel, yeah?”

God, he understood me so well. In all my years on Earth, I truly never thought it was possible for someone to be so completely on my wavelength.

“I’ll be, like, forty minutes,” I said, already rushing up the stairs. “Feed the cats for me, will you, dear?”

“As you wish.”

Oh, now that wasn’t fair. Quoting Wesley from *The Princess Bride* was usually a top-level move against book girlies, and I was no exception. I nearly giggled out loud as I rushed up the stairs and jumped into the shower. Thankfully, I managed that without cracking my head open.

I’d never gotten ready so quickly, but I did slow down when I started on my makeup. I wasn’t a high-glam girly—makeup was expensive—and I never really had special occasions to doll myself up for, but I still loved the art of it. So, I enjoyed putting white in the corner of my eyes and purple on my eyelid, with a smoky nude in my crease. Was it high art that someone would make an entire YouTube tutorial about? No. But it did make me feel pretty when I looked in the mirror, and that was what I needed.

My hair was a bit harder to figure out. I either wore it down or threw it up in a ponytail, but neither seemed right for tonight. After quite a bit of fiddling and one broken hair claw, I finally tamed it into two curly, cascading space buns. Yeah, that

was definitely worthy of a romantic picnic.

Lastly was my outfit. Leo had seen me in quite a lot and also nothing at all, and yet the choice seemed so important. He'd seen me in work clothes. He'd seen me in garden clothes. He'd seen me in my lounge-around clothes. Oh, and not to mention the multiple disguises I'd donned during our hijinks. But he'd never seen me dressed up. Granted, I didn't want to be too dressed up so I would be uncomfortable lying on the blanket. Talk about ruining the whole point of a starlight picnic.

In the end, I picked a milkmaid dress with a cute strawberry print and paired it with thin but sturdy, knee-high, white socks. I figured it would be a fashion faux pas to wear Crocs with it, but I didn't wanna twist an ankle while we were walking. Besides, I could take the ugly shoes off once we reached the picnic spot.

Yeah, that sounded like a great plan.

Giving my reflection one last nod, I headed downstairs. It was a bit silly, but suddenly my heart was pounding like I was going to prom for the first time. Not that I actually ever went to prom, but the parallels seemed pretty strong when I came upon Leo standing in the kitchen, a heavy basket in the crook of one of his elbows, and a bouquet of flowers in his free hand.

"Are these for me?" I said a bit coquettishly. It sounded strange coming from my mouth, but Leo still grinned at me, nonetheless. Goodness, sometimes the way he looked at me made me feel... utterly incredible. This felt like a movie moment—one I never thought a girl like me would have.

"Do you see any other gorgeous women around?"

"Hmm, I don't know. America is pretty gorgeous," I teased.

Leo gave a little huff and rolled his eyes before handing me the bouquet. I buried my face in it, appreciating that it didn't contain anything toxic to cats. Some people really underestimated how harmful a single lily could be, and yet somehow, Leo was on top of that.

"They're beautiful," I said, taking a deep breath. We were starting to enter the wild phase of the growing season, and I'd always loved how that time was punctuated with wild blooms and thick, green foliage in the garden. "Let me put them in a vase."

I rinsed the stems under cool water first, then propped them in the vase and set it on the kitchen table for all to enjoy. I could have taken them up to my room, but I wanted everyone to see and appreciate their beauty. Not only was it pleasing to the eye, but the flowers were a testament to the fact that I was loved. It was still such a new sensation for me.

"Ready?" Leo asked, but he didn't offer his arm. I wasn't mystified as to why, however, as he pulled a chair back from the table and revealed those comfy blankets he'd been talking about. They did look nice to lie on, that was for sure.

"Ready," I confirmed.

Together, the two of us strode out the back door. Since I had been so quick to get ready, the sun was beginning to set, golden rays just beginning to sink down into the lilac of dusk. Sometimes, I got frustrated with the approaching darkness because it meant my time working in the garden was done before I'd finished my to-do list. But I still loved this time of day when the sky shifted to a beautiful range of soft golds to deep lavenders until finally being swallowed up by the cobalt of true night. It was undeniably beautiful, and I couldn't wait to watch it happen with Leo.

We walked the now-familiar path toward the embankment and our cave. Although, I supposed it wasn't actually a cave compared to the one where Leo had found a huge



chunk of his people. I still couldn't believe that had happened while I was at work, and it was a special surprise coming home to almost a dozen more people in my space. I wasn't mad about it, though. In fact, I was overjoyed.

With the warlock brothers all gone, I'd figured we'd focus on finding the rest of Leo's pack members, and I'd thought it would be a long, drawn-out process with a lot of disappointment in between. But thanks to Andromeda, most of the pack had returned. The change it brought about in Leo was palpable. He was still my same sweet, considerate guy, my garden helper, but he also was the alpha. I mean, he'd always been the alpha, but it seemed so different now. So much more real. He stood with his shoulders squarer, and there was a lightness to his step that hadn't been there before.

I was happy for him. Sometimes it felt like I didn't have the language to properly express it, but seeing him sit in a circle with his recovering pack members, his voice a gentle rumble as he told them things about themselves, made my heart soar. And, yeah, maybe I did prepare a near industrial amount of bone broth, buy a hundred dollars' worth of Ensure shakes, and made sure I had the largest bag of rice my grocery store carried, but it was so worth it. No, it was beyond worth it. It legitimately brought me so much peace to help him heal his shattered family, because although I didn't really know them yet, they were my family, too.

Who would have thought the orphan girl would end up with such a large brood? I certainly hadn't.

"What's going on in your head?" Leo asked softly. "You've been a bit quiet."

"I suppose I have, haven't I? Just thinking about all the changes that have happened recently."

"There have been a lot, haven't there?" Leo chuckled, but I picked up a sliver of

uncertainty in his tone. “Are you okay with that?”

Ah, I understood that uncertainty now. He was probably worried it was too much, too soon. That I would be overwhelmed by his pack and everything that came with it. Thankfully, I was built of hardier stuff.

“You know, I was actually thinking we should bring some of the brothers back, go back to being hunted and having them enslaving people right and left. That definitely would be an improvement.”

Leo laughed and reached over as if he was going to ruffle my hair but seemed to think better of it. “Smart Alec.”

“But you love me anyway.”

Leo paused and turned his full gaze to me. Although the smile on his lips was kind and sweet, there was such an intensity to his gaze, I could barely breathe. “Yeah, I do.”

What a fucking thing to say. I could feel those stupid tears begin to prick at my eyes as pure happiness bubbled up within me. I had spent so many years begging to be loved, fighting for scraps wherever I could get it. But with Leo? With Leo there was never any emotional starvation. He never withheld his love and affection, not even when he was at his darkest.

How did I ever get so lucky?

“I love you, too,” was all I could utter, and then I was in his arms.

It wasn’t like any of those bodice rippers my aunt used to read—we didn’t suddenly fall to the blankets below us and begin tearing at each other’s clothes. Mostly because

I got the impression it would hurt. We held each other, our heartbeats ricocheting off each other's chests until they slowly, slowly began to synchronize.

God, I loved this man, this wolf, and every day we got to be together was a gift I would not let go to waste.

Eventually, we parted, but only to arrange ourselves across the blanket. I got the feeling Leo was quite proud of whatever he'd put in the basket and wanted to show off a bit. Sure, I wanted to jump his bones, but there was no reason it couldn't wait until after I saw all the effort he had gone through to make the date special.

"You sure you're ready for this?" Leo asked, waggling his eyebrows.

"Oh, I'm on the edge of my seat."

"Actually, you're on the ground."

I let out a soft huff of laughter. "Now who's the smart Alec?"

"Well, I did learn from the best."

"Damn right, you did."

We were both grinning like loons, and I loved it. Talking had always been easy between us, but now the threat of the brothers was gone, it flowed that much easier. It was amazing how not having the threat of imminent death hovering over our heads really lightened things.

Granted, I wasn't stupid enough to think everything would be peaches and roses for the rest of our life. There had to be some fallout from taking down such a powerful family, and I was sure there would be other people who would rise to take advantage

of the power vacuum, but I wasn't going to sit here and dread what was to come. I was going to enjoy my time with my mate and all the new people I had the honor to get to know. I was going to enjoy myself, starting with the soft cheese Leo pulled out of the basket.

"Is that brie?" I asked, my salivary glands waking up. Like most people with taste buds, I loved cheese, but I rarely got to indulge in anything fancy. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been able to buy a little wheel of something so fancy. Maybe my birthday a couple of years earlier?

"It is." Leo beamed at me. "And this is camembert." However, the container he pulled out wasn't one from the store, but rather one I recognized as my Tupperware. "I roasted this in the oven with honey and some walnuts over it. It's not as warm as it could be, but it is still a little toasty."

Was I getting emotional over cheese? Yes. Did that say something about me? Probably. Was I ashamed about it? Not in the slightest.

Leo continued to pull treats from the basket that showed how much he cared and how much he knew about me. I didn't even remember telling him that I only liked dark chocolate when it was paired with peanut butter, and yet he knew. I also didn't remember telling him that I preferred plain crackers so the flavor of whatever was on them wouldn't be interfered with, yet he knew.

Could he get any more perfect?

Well, I supposed it would be cool to have a boyfriend who could fly, but that also seemed a bit complicated. Time-travel powers? No, that would get problematic way too fast, and I didn't want to end up in some sort of time shenanigans where I met my own grandmother and therefore stopped existing.

Wolf shifter boyfriend it was, then.

“I love you,” I said when he finished his grand parade of lovely things.

Leo looked a touch surprised, but then the corners of his eyes crinkled and he gave me the sweetest, sappiest smile.

“I love you, too.”

It was the perfect note to dig in on, and we did. We served each other and ourselves, chewing between long bouts of conversation. Entirely too soon, the sun began to set, which I didn’t even realize until I had trouble seeing Leo’s features beyond his piercing eyes and bright white teeth. After a couple of minutes of squinting, my mate chuckled before pulling a small camping lantern from the basket.

“I thought you might like this,” he said as he set it beside our blanket and flicked it on. It was dim enough that it wasn’t blinding or disruptive to the nature around us. We could still look up and watch the gradual arrival of the stars as the sky slowly dipped itself into ink, but I could also see Leo’s face whenever I wanted to... which was pretty much all the time.

Our conversation went anywhere and everywhere, meandering through past anecdotes, through his concerns for the newly recovered members of his pack, to my stories about working at the grocery store. It was surprisingly cathartic to be able to grouse about something so mundane. So banal. It seemed like Leo enjoyed the stories, which made sense since he’d never had a minimum-wage job. From what he’d told me his pack had gotten by on freelance labor gigs and pooled all their money to support each other. I couldn’t imagine it, but it sounded nice.

“Do you think you’ll ever go back?”

“Go back?” Leo echoed.

The two of us were lying on our backs, watching the stars overhead.

“To your pack’s old grounds. Your homes are all there, right?”

Although I’d never gotten a clear description, I got the impression Leo’s old stomping ground was somewhat like a trailer park, but with cabins, shacks, or ranch houses built by members of the pack over the past few generations. I knew they had running water and electricity, but they were largely cut off from contact with human civilization unless they traveled through the woods that surrounded them. It was hard to believe there were still places like that in America, but it did sound peaceful. And although I loved my cabin, there simply wasn’t enough room for a long-term situation. The tents, the trailers, the RVs... all of that was temporary. And if we were ever unlucky enough for my landlord to come around, he might kick me out.

“I’ve thought about it,” Leo said, and I could hear the deep introspection within his voice. “But I don’t know how much is left there for us. Sometimes I think it would be better to start over completely rather than chasing ghosts from our past.”

“What do you mean?”

“When the brothers cursed our pack, I’m pretty sure they torched our homes. It’s fuzzy... that whole night is, but I think if we returned home all we would find is ashes.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” In my mind, Leo’s original home was waiting for him to return. I had been bracing myself for the day he would leave me, but after everything that had happened, it was pretty clear he wasn’t going anywhere unless I was with him, so I’d begun to wonder if I would move right along with him. Seemed like all that worrying was for nothing.

“It’s all right. To be honest, I didn’t even think about it for a long time. I had an extremely hard time recalling anything solid about that night, and I don’t think it’s from the brothers’ magic. I think it’s from trauma. Now that things have calmed down, maybe I’ll get a chance to sort it out. I’ve talked to Ricky, and he remembers even less than I do. So, who knows?”

The pain in his voice had me rolling onto my side and staring at his profile. Sometimes I felt a bit overwhelmed by the intense magical world I had stumbled into, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but admire everything Leo had survived. Had worked through.

“You know wherever you go, I’d follow, right?”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, and I wondered if I had gone too deep too quickly. I watched his throat bob as he swallowed, and then he rolled over to face me.

“I know you mean exactly what you say, but sometimes it’s so hard to believe that I could possibly be so lucky.”

He reached up and cupped my cheek, and I pressed my face into his palm. I loved the rough callouses of his finger pads as they dragged against my skin, and I wished I could bottle up that feeling to use whenever I was down in the dumps. Knowing Leo was so incredibly powerful that he could rip me limb from limb without breaking a sweat, but he still chose to be so delicate, made my heart pound in a way I didn’t know was possible.

“I think I’m the lucky one,” I murmured, placing my hand on his chest. While his flannel covered the muscles I was so familiar with, I could still feel his heartbeat. The steady thump - thump against my palm assured me that both he and I were alive. That we were together in the moment.

“I guess we’re just lucky together, then.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

We closed the distance between us, our lips fusing together. We’d had all sorts of lip locks in our relationship, from feral and wanton, to sweet and soft. But this was different. It was deeper. Urgent but unrushed. Like it was a confirmation of everything we’d already said. There was no thought, no second-guessing, just the two of us and the love we shared.

Our hands slid over fabric and flesh. Even after all the time we’d spent together, after everything we’d been through, his touch never failed to make goosebumps rise along my skin. I never thought someone could look at me the way he did, and every time it was the most welcome surprise. A thousand years could pass, and I would never find anyone else like my love. Not that I would want to, anyway. I knew who I was meant to be with, and he was right in front of me.

When his hand cupped my breast, I gasped into his mouth, alight with the sensation of it all. That simple sound unlocked a furor in him, because his hands slid up over my thighs and under my dress. I rolled onto my back to give him better access, and Leo followed me, positioning himself on his elbows above me. God, I didn’t think I would ever get tired of that sight. Of his face hovering above mine, pupils so large and dark his eyes were almost black, his canines slightly elongated. I loved that his desire for me wasn’t always civil. That it was as wild and untamed as the wolf inside him. I doubted there was much else that could make me feel as beautiful. As desired.

“I want you,” he growled as if he could read my mind.

“You have me,” I said before kissing him for all that I was worth. “You’ll always have me.”



The rumble that issued from his chest was downright intoxicating, and I didn't fight its pull. I raised my hips to help Leo strip my dress from my body. I wasn't exactly an exhibitionist, so never in a million years had I imagined something like this happening in the middle of the woods, yet it felt so right, almost inevitable in a way, as if our love was so potent, so raw, it couldn't be contained in my cabin.

Or maybe I was already fuck-drunk. It wouldn't exactly be surprising considering the way Leo consumed every single one of my senses. My brain was alight with him, and only him.

And, God, did I love it.

I knew from experience that Leo was quite the fan of foreplay. Throughout high school and college, I remembered multiple girlfriends complaining their partner was only concerned with getting it in and out, but if Leo had his way, he'd eat his way to my heart.

But now, as he spread my legs and knelt between them, I got the feeling we wouldn't have as much prelude as we normally did. Which was perfectly fine. I wanted him inside me. I yearned for him. As much as I really appreciated all the orgasms from Leo's tongue, I so very desperately wanted him to fill me. It felt like a lifetime had happened since the last time we'd been together, and I was eager to experience that ecstasy again. There was something so primal about being joined together in that way, something that made me feel safe, protected, and wilder than I'd ever been in my life.

"Yes, please, oh, God, please," I panted as Leo fumbled with his zipper. That was one thing I never quite enjoyed. Girl clothing, while complicated, was often pretty easy to get off. Men's clothes? Not so much. Luckily, Leo didn't need to shuck his pants off completely. He was already hard for me, and my stomach flipped at the thought of him buried deep inside me. While it was often hard to believe that

someone could want me how Leo wanted me, it was very convenient how physically evident that attraction was. Something like that couldn't be faked, no matter how insistent that little mean voice in my head tried to be.

“Don't worry, love, I won't make you wait. Not when you've been so good. No teasing tonight.”

I was definitely on board for that. Especially when those calloused finger pads I loved so much slid against me, testing my center to see how ready I was. And when he found I was already wet for him, the sound that issued out of him was pure sin. If I was remotely religious, I'd definitely have to go to confessional, but I was pretty sure that being on my knees would conjure all sorts of memories and sensations no priest could absolve me of.

“Leo. Please, I need you.”

Those words always got to him. And maybe it was a bit underhanded, but I was playing to my strengths. I wanted him inside me. I wanted to be completely enveloped by him. I wanted, for the fleeting time that our bodies were joined, there to be no one in the world but us.

“God, you're so fucking wet for me.”

“For you and only you.”

That was the truth. Never with any of my partners had I had such intense sexual compatibility. And the fact that we had intense love and connection to go with it made it that much more .

Leo let out another groan of appreciation before gripping his straining length and rubbing it along my entrance. I opened my legs more, wanting to wrap them around

his waist, but I knew I needed to wait until he was fully seated inside me. Patience was not my strong suit, but as he began to slowly enter me, I found the grace to lay back and let myself experience the slow, deliberate, and delicious slide of him.

It still seemed impossible that he would fit. The stretch of him, that burning slide, bordered on too much. But every time, I got over that hump without too much issue, and all of the good feelings came pouring in. It felt like every nerve in my body was alight, synapses singing with an overload of pleasure and excitement, and he hadn't even started to move.

In true Leo fashion, he let me adjust before he pulled out, making sure I was comfortable and ready for him to plunge in again. I lost my patience, wrapping my legs around his waist so he could go that much deeper into me.

“Oh, fuck, Ven, the things you do to me.”

If I was in a bit more verbose mood, perhaps I would have told him what he did to me, but I could feel that haze that always came over my mind whenever Leo was giving it to me good, and I didn't want to disrupt it by trying to be witty. I let myself feel everything, I didn't chase the sensations, but I held on to every one of them, relishing the incredible things he could draw out of my body.

We moved as one, hips meeting fervently, the sound of our joining filling the quiet forest around us. I wasn't embarrassed by the noise. No, it urged me on.

Even our breathing, which had started out as ragged counterpoints, were slowly drawing closer and closer to each other. It wouldn't be that much longer before we were on the same frantic inhale and exhale, and for some reason that struck me as so incredibly lovely.

I'd been alone for so much of my life. My cowardice had caused the death of my

mother, and then my guardian had rejected me for that. Even after that, I was so busy on the grind that there wasn't much time or energy for much else.

But now I would never be alone again. Sure, I would have my moments of solitude when I needed them, but it would never be forced. It would never be my only choice. I had Leo, and he had me.

“Fuck, Leo, I'm close. I'm so close!”

Normally, it would take at least half an hour with my vibrator, but with Leo, it never seemed to take that long. None of my previous partners had had his skill, or maybe it was because I was never in love with any of them.

I didn't know the reason, but I didn't need to. All I needed to know was that Leo could get me to reach new heights I'd never thought were possible, and we had an entire life to figure out how high we could go.

“God, me, too, baby. Come with me. I want you to come with me.” The way his words fought to get around his sharp canines made my body react viscerally. Even his hands felt bigger as he gripped my hips, pounding in and out of me with abandon. “I want you to come right on my cock. Can you do that?”

I nodded fervently, tilting my hips up to get more of that delicious friction. But then, just when it seemed like we were both about to tumble into the abyss together, he stopped.

“Wha...?” I huffed, more than a bit flustered, my vocabulary not exactly fully loaded in my mind.

“Your hair,” he murmured, and strangely, he looked almost... awestruck?

“What about my hair?” I asked, frustrated as my orgasm slipped further and further away.

Leo reached to his side and grabbed one of the more reflective plates, holding it in front of me so I could see a very hazy rendition of myself. But even in the imperfect reflection, I could see that nearly a dozen flowers had bloomed in my hair.

“Oh, my God!” I cried, reaching up, but when I gently enclosed my fingers around one of the buds, it lifted easily, no stem. So, they weren’t growing out of my scalp or anything horrific like that. They’d just... bloomed out of nothing.

Wow. I’d really only just begun to scratch the surface of my powers, hadn’t I?

“You’re beautiful,” Leo rumbled as he rolled his hips again. “A goddess. You’re perfect.” His words were more than enough to rev me up even more. His head dipped down to kiss me at the same time as his hand snaked between us to rub my clit.

That was all I needed to get over that final hump. I arched upward, crying out into the night sky. I was well aware that the sharper-eared of our group would be able to hear me, but I didn’t give a damn. I was awash with waves of pleasure that nearly lifted me off the ground and probably would have if Leo wasn’t on top of me.

Somewhere in the rush of my orgasm, I heard a primal sound tear its way out of Leo, and then I felt his warmth fill me, our sweat-slicked bodies crashing together as we rode out the deluge.

When we eventually came off from the high, I shivered. The night air was cool, and the sweat on my skin turned clammy. Leo rolled off me and pulled out another blanket, then wrapped me in it.

“You really thought of everything, didn’t you?” I mused, snuggling into his side once

we arranged ourselves.

“I try. Thankfully, I’ve got some pretty great motivation.”

“Is that me?” I said through a yawn.

“Yeah, it’s you.”

We shared another kiss, then settled into our happiness. I didn’t care that we weren’t presentable or that anyone could come across us like this. For the moment, we were exactly how we needed to be.

15

LEO

“It’s your birthday.”

I frowned. “Pardon?”

“It’s your birthday,” Philip repeated. “Look here!”

He turned the laptop around, showing me the calendar. Sure enough, it was indeed my birthday. Huh, where had all the time gone?

“So it is,” I said before returning to my conversation with Frank on how to use the latest smartphones. Technology changed so fast in a short amount of time, and Frank was stuck on the fact that phones didn’t have headphone jacks anymore.

I had to admit, that was a pretty inconvenient tech decision.

Ven suddenly jumped to her feet. “What do you mean it’s your birthday?”

Before I could answer, America stuck her head out of the back door. “Wait, did I just hear that it’s your birthday?”

“Yeah, it is, but it’s not a big deal. Really. I’m just grateful to be alive and have all of us here.” I was being sincere. I’d never been big on birthdays, and with everything we’d gone through, the peace was enough for me. I really didn’t need anything else.

“Oh, bullshit,” Ven said. “When was the last time you even had a birthday anyway? You were stuck as your wolf for so long. None of you were supposed to ever have another birthday again, so we are going to celebrate, and we’re going to celebrate hard.”

“Really, I promise, I’m happy.” I sent my love a grateful smile, thinking that would be the last of it. I didn’t think my opinion was something I could be wrong about, but I was quickly corrected of that notion when everyone around me insisted we needed to celebrate. Birthdays were us laughing in the faces of the very warlocks who had tried to end us all.

They had point there.

And that was how I’d ended up being whisked off on a long run with Ricky and several others while everyone set up for one hell of a shindig. There would be no punches pulled because half the people setting it up were Latin. Although I hadn’t hung around many coyote shifters, I knew their celebrations were full of delicious food and often carried on until three in the morning. At least Ven lived deep enough in the country that we wouldn’t be getting any noise complaints.

I tried my best to convince them I didn’t need to celebrate, but it was all in vain, so I simply enjoyed the run. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d truly sprinted with my packmates in the wild. Running was a huge part of our culture, and it felt like it was one more thing we were reclaiming for ourselves.

I couldn’t say quite how long we ran, but it was long enough that I was pleasantly exhausted when we returned, my flank on the verge of overheating. It was also the longest I’d ever been in my wolf form since Ven had broken my curse. I had forgotten what it was like to just be my wolf self rather than only taking that form to rush into battle. Now that things were calmer, I could take the time to do more leisurely things so my inner wolf and I could both stay healthy and on the same page.



“Man, that smells amazing,” Ricky said as we approached the opening in the woods around Ven’s land.

I had to agree with him. I’d always been a fan of barbacoa, tamales, empanadas, and the like, but I only ever had it when I traveled, and that rarely happened. My mouth watered as we approached the house, but even with all the smells and sounds, I still wasn’t quite expecting what awaited me.

There were six long folding tables set up in the yard, the kind that reminded me of church potlucks. A combination of folding chairs and camping seats surrounded them, while yet another two long tables were laden with tinfoil-covered containers. Someone had pulled up a grill, which was smoking pleasantly on the far side of the garden, and the kitchen windows were open, so another bouquet of mouthwatering smells drifted out from it.

“Holy shit,” I said, well and truly shocked that they’d managed to do all this in a few hours. It hadn’t even felt like we were gone that long.

“Do you like it?” America asked, bounding up to me out of nowhere. I had to admit, the girl moved fast.

“It’s definitely impressive.” I didn’t mean to sound cagey, but I was truly surprised by the lavish display and the fact that everyone present seemed so excited. My birthday wasn’t a big deal to me, but clearly the little slice of normalcy was a huge deal to everyone else. I wouldn’t be a wet blanket about it. If people wanted to celebrate, then I would celebrate.

“But do you like it?”

“I love it. It’s really amazing what you guys have done so far.”

America beamed at me, and I got swept up a bit in the festive spirit. It was hard not to when everyone looked so eager. “This ain’t nothing. If you ever want to see a real party, you should come down to one of my nieces’ quinceaneras . We’ll show you how we really throw down. Although, you’ll have to bring your rhythm. Dancing is obligatory.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Have you seen Ven around? I want to steal her for a minute.”

“Actually, I have to call ixnay on that. She’s busy in the kitchen and gave me orders not to allow you in there until she gives the word.”

“Really? I’ve been banished from the kitchen?”

“Effective immediately.”

I laughed. I was alpha, so I could order her to stand aside and march right into the kitchen, but I didn’t even have the faintest compunction to do that. My father always told me that being the best alpha wasn’t about how much you could order your people around, but how well you listened and provided for your people. Instead of arguing, I shook my head and looked at Ricky.

“I guess we’re a bunch of kitchen fugitives now.”

“Sorry, boss, but from what I’m hearing, you’re the only one who’s been banished, not the rest of us. I’m going to head inside and see if there’s any morsels I can sneak a taste of.” He clapped my shoulder. “Have fun being social with all our lovely guests.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, glowering. “Traitor.”

“Blame your mate’s excellent cooking.” He gave a jaunty little salute, then strode

toward the kitchen like the cocky beta he was.

It turned out that time flew quickly with loved ones, even with Ven locked away from me in the kitchen. Before I knew it, two hours had passed, and it was suddenly time for the punch and everyone to enjoy some appetizers.

And, boy, were there a lot of appetizers.

Even though all the mains were still cooking, the food tables were practically overflowing with finger food. Granted, we were all shifters, so a lot of food was necessary. Honestly, if a dozen or so of our pack weren't still recovering and on a simple diet, the dishes would have been empty within minutes.

I was worried Ven would stay locked in the kitchen and miss the entire first spread, but she finally emerged, dressed in denim shorts and a ruby-red tank top that made me want to ditch the party and carry her up to her bedroom like a caveman.

I wasn't an idiot, though, and I knew she had put a lot of work into the party. So, I strode forward and kissed her stupid before offering her my arm and guiding her over to the appetizers.

"Happy birthday, my love," she said, grinning up at me. The sparkle in her dark eyes made my heart thunder.

"Thank you for making it the best one I've ever had."

She laughed and playfully jostled my arm. "Wait until you taste my cooking before you get all sappy."

"I don't need to. It's the best birthday because I get to spend it with you."

And there it was, the blush I loved so much rushing up her neck and spilling across those cherubic cheeks of hers. She really was pretty in pink in every way possible.

“That’s not fair, babe,” she murmured.

From anyone else, that was a bad statement, but with my beautiful Ven, I knew exactly what she meant. After a life of so much detraction and people trying to chip away at her confidence, genuine compliments disconcerted her. I kissed the top of her head as we loaded our plates up with the delicious fare.

We sat at the head of the table and dug in, chatting idly with everyone around us. I was going with the flow, but when Ricky handed me an ice-cold beer, I was struck with how incredible this was.

Not too long ago, we’d all been wild animals. Mindless and completely disconnected from our humanity. Lost. But thanks to one woman giving me a simple kiss on my snout, we were alive and restored to our natural way of being. Just a couple of months ago, we were a tragic story. A tale of caution for going up against the powerful. But now? Now the men who had hurt us and so many others were dead, and we were thriving. We were celebrating life together when the brothers had meant to strip it from us forever.

Incredible.

For the rest of my life, I would never take such things for granted again. The ability to have a cookout. The ability to talk and laugh as loud as we wanted to while stuffing our faces. Telling old, embarrassing stories about teenage me, listening as those around me remembered more and more of their lives. Sitting with my arm around my lover, with no threat hovering over our heads.

At least that’s what I thought.

Thunder cracked over our heads out of nowhere, startling a good number of us. While storms were a fairly normal occurrence, this was no normal storm. A normal storm would not have the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

The sky grew dark, like night was rolling in, and lightning flashed a beat later. I rose to my feet, about to order everyone to get inside, when a figure emerged from the clouds and descended downward.

Who the fuck was that? All the brothers were dead, so it couldn't be one of them. And it wasn't like they had a lot of allies in the magical world since they'd pissed off or killed everyone they came into contact with. Who could possibly?—

A scent hit me, and I knew exactly who it was. My blood ran cold, and I had to swallow hard to prevent bile from rising in my throat. It was like the brothers', but more. Older. More powerful. It had a deep allure that went beyond physical appeal.

“Vanessa, I need you to run. Go to the cave.”

“What—”

“Just go!” I hissed. There was no time to explain that the raven-haired woman hovering in the air was none other than the mother.

Katarina Morgana, the powerful witch who hadn't been seen in over fifty years.

Jet-black hair, alabaster skin, eyes so green they practically glowed. Supposedly directly descended from Morgan La Fay, carrying a power all her sons had tried to emulate.

We were so fucked.

Thankfully, Ven didn't argue with me. She took off running at full speed, but it wasn't fast enough. A translucent wall of black shot up all around the garden and cabin, blocking everyone in.

"Now, now," Katarina chided. "No getting away now. Not when I finally found you."

Her voice was unlike any other I'd ever heard. Ancient but smooth. Full of honey and ash. It was the promise of total devastation while also hinting at forbidden bliss. I could understand how she'd had so many lovers in the magical community. There was something borderline eldritch and untouchable in her words.

She raised her hand, and lightning cracked down again, hitting Ven's cabin. I heard Ven scream behind me, and I couldn't blame her as a good quarter of her home went up in flames.

As Katarina's feet touched the ground, she waved her hand again and the flames died out, smoke drifting through the air. She did it without even batting an eye, and fear coiled in my belly. We were facing the closest thing to a god.

Fuck.

I was only halfway through my shift when the witch sent a powerful blast of wind whipping through the gathering. Tables rose up, sending paper and cups flying, even hitting people with chairs. The debris from the cabin soon joined in, making a vortex of dangerous flying objects. I wasn't too worried about myself or my people—we would heal if anything hit us—but Ven was so much softer and more vulnerable. Although she seemed to have incredible powers, too, she didn't have enhanced healing, nor could she call upon her plant powers at will. They only seemed to manifest at times of great stress, or even as a survival trigger.

I braced myself as I waited for the torrent to end, knowing I stood no chance, but

hopefully, I could give my family time to run.

16

VANESSA

I crawled out from under the pile of boxes I'd been flung into, my entire body screaming. It could have been a lot worse.

One moment, we were all gathered around the tables, enjoying ourselves and having one big party, the next we were in a war zone. I had no idea what was going on or who the strange woman was who had decided to destroy half my home.

My mind couldn't even begin to think what we were going to do about that. How did I explain that to my landlord? At least if insurance agents inspected it, they would see it was a freak lightning strike that had destroyed it.

Most importantly, where were my babies?

As I struggled to my feet, I saw the woman was now on the ground, magic crackling in her hands. There was something so intensely otherworldly about her, it made my skin crawl and intrigued me at the same time. I was caught up in her, like she had a naturally hypnotic effect on me. It took some effort, but I shook myself free, and as I did I remembered some of the stuff I'd read online in the past couple of months with all my research. It could be bupkis for all I knew, but it was all I had.

Running to my greenhouse, I grabbed all the dill I had been drying. Sprinting back out, I threw it as high in the air as I could, and it formed a wobbly circle that encompassed most of the shifters splayed about.



God, I was going to look like a complete ass if this didn't work, but I had to do something. A sliver of hope sputtered within me when the woman stopped and tapped her fingers on the air in front of her. To my surprise, her fingertips sizzled when they tried to cross over the line of dried leaves, making little sparks that crackled through the air before disappearing into nothingness.

"Cute." The witch smirked. "But you're fooling yourself if you think a protection spell from a diluted dryad will last more than a few minutes against my full power. Even your mother couldn't hold up against my son. What chance do you possibly think you have against me?"

My eyes widened, and time stood still. My brain stuttered, trying to decipher her words. Suddenly, the things Frederick had said rushed back into my mind, and I put a bunch of fragmented thoughts together in very rapid succession.

First, the woman in front of me had to be none other than Katarina Morgana, mother of the warlock brothers we'd taken down. As far as I knew, she'd disappeared decades earlier. Never in a million years had I thought I would see her in the flesh.

Secondly, her son Frederick had known my mother. And I had a horrible, sinking feeling he might have had something to do with that fateful night when my mother had been ripped away from me because I'd been too scared to come out of the closet I'd hidden in.

Katarina clocked my reaction instantly, and her expression became a touch concerned in a mocking way.

"Oh, my dear. Did you not know? What a travesty."

"Know what?" I hissed, acid dripping from every single word.

“Well, this is awkward now. I came here to avenge my sons, and I ran into an old sin.” She let out a sigh, and all the magical tension in the air dissipated. I had no idea what was going on. I’d expected all hell to break loose. But no, the witch seemed almost... reasonable? That didn’t make any sense.

“You see, a mother does her best, but there must be something inherently lacking in my parenting ability because all my sons saw fit to try to challenge me rather than live the blessed, relaxed life I had set up for them. Frederick especially had grand plans. He thought if he were to produce progeny with the ever-so-rare dryad, then he would be able to make his own brood to one day usurp me.

“I wasn’t concerned, so I didn’t stop him, and for that I’m sorry. Last I heard, your mother refused him and managed to escape for a good long while. When he realized she wasn’t going to cooperate, he made sure nobody could have her.”

Shock. Horror. Disgust. Revelation. All those emotions flowed through me at once, making my stomach twist and my heart beat so hard I was surprised I didn’t puke. My mind was racing through a million things at once, replaying the same nightmare that had been in my head ever since I was a child.

“Venny, come out, please. I’m here to help you!”

“Ven, I can’t find you. Please, come to Mommy. Come out!”

“There you are!”

I remembered being unable to see and my lungs burning as my mother hauled me out of the closet. We’d tried to stay as low as we could to the ground, and against all odds, we stumbled out of our apartment building into the pitch-black night. My mother kept carrying me—a block, then two—until she collapsed entirely.

The smoke inhalation had killed her. She'd spent too long looking for me. I'd always blamed myself, because if I hadn't hidden we would have gotten out in time.

"Your son killed my mother?" I shrieked, lunging forward.

I was blind with rage and had no idea what I planned to do, but thankfully Chiga caught me and held me back.

"I know. It is such a shame, isn't it? I don't even remember the last time there was a dryad running around in these parts."

Some small part of me couldn't help but question what the hell a dryad was, but it was buried under the torrent of exponential hate burning through me. I had always felt bad for Leo and his pack for being preyed upon by the brothers, but it turned out one of them had orphaned me.

"This does indeed complicate things, doesn't it?" the witch mused as if we were having a normal conversation. "I came here seeking to even things out, but as it were, you were merely retaliating for things my sons did to you. Wicked, cruel things you didn't deserve."

Was... was she about to call it even?

"I hope that finding out about your heritage and knowing what happened brings you peace. I do wish you the best in your journey, and honestly, it would be a shame for it to end so soon. I am not an unreasonable woman. I know my sons got what was coming to them, but you must understand, I loved them. They were all my babies. And blood demands blood. "

Her gaze turned to the wolf in front of me, whose hackles were raised in warning. I hadn't even realized Leo was standing between all of his charges and the witch who

could easily destroy us all.

“Ah, you’re the alpha. I’d know that posture anywhere. Let me propose a deal. I will take care to personally destroy every single member of your pack in the most violent way possible, especially that lovely dryad of yours.” What? That sounded completely at odds with what she’d just said! “ Or you can submit yourself to me to experience every one of my sons’ deaths over and over again until even your healing magic won’t save you.”

What?!

“Don’t do it, Leo,” I cried, struggling against Chiga’s grip. “Fuck her!”

“The choice is simple really, but I will not pressure you. You have one week to decide and complete anything that may be on your bucket list.” She flicked her hand, and a shining gem fell to the ground, bouncing right up against the line of dill I had thrown.

“This will lead the way for you. If you choose not to surrender yourself, you may run, but know that I will find you. I will spend every ounce of power within me hunting down all you’ve ever loved, and I’ll make you watch as I destroy them.”

Slowly, she began to rise into the air again, but she paused a few feet up. “I apologize for interrupting the party. It did smell quite lovely.”

Without another word, she continued her ascent and disappeared into the clouds, leaving the lot of us devastated and in shock.

What the fuck were we going to do?

17

LEO

V en was a dryad.

That was about the only good news that came out of our unexpected encounter with the most powerful witch on the continent. It answered a lot of questions, and I was glad she had those answers just in case...

Well, just in case something happened to me.

How could I not sacrifice myself to keep everyone I loved safe?

“Come on, one of us has to have a connection with some conclave of witches!” Ricky barked, slamming his hand on the table. Normally, I wouldn’t let him disrespect Ven’s furniture like that, but Ven didn’t have any kitchen furniture anymore. Mostly because she didn’t have a kitchen.

When Katarina had first left, we’d all been paralyzed by the sheer shock. Ven had been the first to move, screaming her cats’ names and running into her destroyed house. I feared the worst, but somehow, despite all odds, she found all three of them. They’d been clustered together under her bed, tails wide and bushy, the whites of their eyes showing. They were doing much better now in the greenhouse with their food, litter boxes, and Ven’s mattress.

“It’s called a coven, actually,” America corrected, but she sounded more weary than

anything else. “And no, none of us do. Most magic users left this area when Katarina’s sons rose to power. And even if there were some lingering around, most of us would avoid them like the plague for obvious reasons.”

“Fuck,” Ricky snapped before standing and pacing the room. I hated to see my beta so wound up. He was frothier than I’d seen him in a long time, his scent sour and full of brimstone. “Then, we send word out to every single shifter we can find. She’s powerful, sure, but even the most powerful sorcerers can be brought down with enough numbers. Look at what we did with the brothers. And we fought multiple of them at a time. Imagine what we could do with a hundred of us!”

I admired Ricky’s passion, but I already knew what I was going to do. In my mind there was only one option. I would do what was necessary to save my pack without risking the lives of hundreds.

Besides, I was never meant for the softer, finer things in life. For kindness. For luxury. I was always destined for war, and with all the brothers gone, I’d served my purpose. So, if a simple sacrifice was enough to secure the future of my pack and everyone they knew, it was a no-brainer.

“We have been sending the word out,” Alicia said. “And we have many people coming in. People who owe your pack everything. But I don’t believe it’ll be enough. Katarina Morgana is the most powerful witch alive. So powerful that all her sons combined still didn’t feel comfortable challenging her. Those same brothers who managed to almost completely destroy your pack and enslave goodness knows how many of us. We need to be realistic about our chances.”

“We’re not giving up,” Ven said hotly. “We’ve already done the impossible, and we can do it again. Katarina knows that her sons did wrong, and although she says we have to atone for that, it’s not like she’s fighting from the heart. We can do this.”

Oh, dear. My beloved mate. I would miss her more than anything. But I felt better knowing she had my entire pack to take care of her. And know she knew what she was.

A dryad.

I'd heard legends of them when I was very young, but that was all they were. Legends. Old-world magical creatures that didn't exist anymore, wiped out hundreds of years ago with their cousins, the nymphs, only barely surviving because of they'd disappeared into the trees and rocks. Never in a million years would I have guessed that Ven was one of them, nor that her mother had known Frederick. It really was such a small world. I just wished I could stick around longer to comfort her.

I had a week, and I would spend that week loving and cherishing everyone I was lucky enough to have in my circle. I didn't mind giving them an hour or two to plot around the table, but soon, I would excuse myself. There was too little time to waste on futile scheming when I had already made up my mind.

Of course, Ven noticed that I was checked out, and when the meeting adjourned, she gently gripped my arm.

"Can we take a walk?"

"Of course," I answered. "Whatever you want."

We linked arms and headed toward that same river and cave that had become so significant to us. I would never forget the first time I showed it to her, and I was incredibly grateful I'd found someone to share my life with, even if it was only for a short while.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect once we reached our destination, I was just happy

to be there with Ven. Once we reached the riverbank where citronella grew wildly, she whirled to face me, her expression far stormier than I was used to seeing.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

I blinked at her in surprise. “Come again?”

“I didn’t stutter. What is wrong with you, Leo? You’re completely checked out. It’s like you’ve given up!”

Ah. I was foolish to think my mate wouldn’t pick up on my mood. She was always so insightful, and she knew me better than anyone, save Ricky.

“I’m not checked out, baby. I’m sorry if I gave that impression. I’m... I’m at peace with the situation.”

I’d expected Ven to understand or at least accept what I meant, but the storm clouds in her eyes grew that much darker.

“What do you mean you’re at peace? Because to me it seems like you’ve completely given up.”

I reached for her, my heart aching. If I were in her position, I would be just as vehement, but I was sure this was the right decision. And I would make it again, and again, and again, as long as she was safe.

“Baby, baby, I haven’t given up, but I know what I have to do.”

I wasn’t prepared for her to shove me away. My beloved Ven so rarely rejected my affection that it seemed entirely wrong.



“You’re going to give yourself over to that witch?”

I wanted to embrace her again, to cover myself in the comfort of her, but it wasn’t the right time. She was righteously upset, and I supposed she had every right to be even if I hated seeing her that way. “If that is what needs to be done.”

“Bullshit! It’s all bullshit! We didn’t literally scratch and claw our way to freedom just to have you give up at the end. We are all more powerful than she could ever imagine. Hell, I’m one of the last dryads on this entire continent. That has to count for something.”

Suddenly, she was in my arms again, looking up at me with beseeching eyes.

“Please, Leo. We’ve finally gotten time together. You can’t throw that away to go off and... and—” She cut herself off, and guilt settled in my gut at the tears she was barely holding back. I didn’t want her to be in pain, but I also didn’t want her to go up against a behemoth of a magic user and end up dead. Surely she could understand that? “You can’t! What about everyone in your pack who are only beginning to heal? Don’t they deserve to have their alpha around before losing everything again?”

Ven’s tone became higher pitched with every passing second, and her scent became more and more bitter with panic. I hated the idea that I was torturing her, and I knew a week of dreading my inevitable demise would tear her heart in two.

“Leo, I don’t think I can live without you. I thought I could get by in life on my own, that I was destined to always be alone. But now that you have shown me what true love is like, I can’t go back. I won’t ! Do you hear me? I won’t!

“Call your wolf to the front and tell it to summon as much bloodlust as it wants, because I won’t hold him back. We’re going to fight, and we’re going to win. Our family will stick together.”

Such a beautiful, impassioned plea. It was hard to believe it was for me, and yet I knew it was. I would never understand what twist of fate had put me into Ven's path, but I would always be grateful for the moments we shared.

I didn't want our last moments to be full of pain and tears.

So, I lied.

"Okay," I said, gently stroking her hair.

"Okay? Do you mean it? You'll stay? You'll fight?"

"Yes," I said, so incredibly grateful she couldn't smell the shame inside me. I hated lying to her. "I'll stay."

I didn't want to keep uttering vile and untrue words, so I kissed her. I kissed her with everything I had, because when she thought about me in the future, I wanted her head to be full of happy memories and sensations.

When we parted, she wept openly into my chest, repeating "thank you" over and over again. While I knew I was doing the wrong thing, I was relieved that the last days we had together would be full of joy and not tears.

"Come on," I said, wiping her tears. "Let's head back and see if there's anything we can add to the plan."

Five days.

In the end, I spent five days with my love and the rest of my pack. It was difficult walking the line between appearing to be invested in the fight and not wasting so much of the precious little time I had left. Every moment I stored in my chest and

treasured it, trying to make sure everyone in my pack had the groundwork to flourish when I was gone.

Once Katarina got her revenge, there was no one else who could remotely hold a candle to our network of allies, and even the most brazen usurper wasn't likely to roll around any time within a couple generations.

I watched Ven's chest rise and fall steadily in her sleep. Each inhale was a gift, another moment in her presence, and each exhale was a whispered promise of more as it flitted past her plush lips. I wanted to trace that gorgeous face of hers, to gently trail my finger along her lashes, the bridge of her nose, to that perfect mouth. But I couldn't risk waking her, not even for a lingering goodbye kiss.

It was time for me to go. I was tempted to wait yet another day, to squeeze in another twenty-four hours of happiness with my mate. But if I waited too long to leave, I ran the risk of being caught by multiple people in my family, and I really didn't want them to raise a ruckus. I did not want my last action with my pack to be a fight to get away from them. Hopefully, they would all understand why I did what I did.

Although it went against every instinct in my body, I slowly slid out of bed. I knew I should leave immediately, but I couldn't help myself. I leaned across the bed and brushed my lips over Ven's forehead.

"I love you," I murmured, my voice hitching. "And I will always love you. Even death cannot take that away from us. Be safe, my darling. Live the life you truly deserve."

Fuck. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to gather her to my chest and feel her heartbeat against mine. But I couldn't.

I had to do right by her and my pack.

With one last fleeting look at Ven curled up on her bed in the middle of the greenhouse, I pulled the gem out of my pocket and headed out into the night.

No matter what, my pack was going to live.

### VANESSA

I woke up with a lazy yawn, my dreams having been vague but pleasant. Eyes still closed, I reached over, feeling for Leo. There was nothing quite like a sleepy, early-morning cuddle before my bladder got too insistent and I had to run inside to the upstairs bathroom. Unfortunately, the downstairs half-bath had been destroyed, along with the kitchen, my reading area, and part of my living room. There had been talk about getting a porta potty, but no one had gotten their hands on one yet. It certainly made things more complicated.

All thoughts of the bathroom fled my head as my hand found nothing but an empty space next to me. Brow furrowing, I patted this way and that, but no, Leo wasn't there.

I finally rolled over, cracking my eyes open. I had to admit, I was quite disappointed to see his side of the bed was utterly empty, and when I rested my hand in the slight indentation his body had left on my mattress, it was cold.

Oh, well. It wasn't entirely out of the ordinary for him to get up before I did. Shifters didn't need as much sleep as humans. Still, I hurriedly threw on some appropriate clothes and headed out to find him. I couldn't even be mad because if he was getting up at the crack of dawn, it meant he was taking the planning seriously, and that was all I'd asked of him.

When he'd first admitted he was going to hand himself over to Katarina, my heart

had shattered into a million pieces. All of a sudden, the future I had begun to believe could be mine was gone in a puff of smoke. I couldn't believe it. Thankfully, I'd gotten Leo to see reason.

"Hey, have you seen Leo?" I asked Tabitha as she came out of the bathroom.

"Uh, no, I can't say that I have. But I only got up, like, twenty minutes ago."

"Oh, that's okay. No worries."

In truth, I was starting to get worried.

I tried to keep myself calm as I went from group to group, but a sinking feeling grew in my gut with every person who hadn't seen him. He wasn't with Ricky. He wasn't with the mercenaries. He wasn't in the garden.

I asked every single shifter, which took me nearly an hour. When I knocked on the door of the last RV and the shifter inside said they hadn't seen him since the night before, I came to a truly horrifying conclusion.

No, I had to be wrong. He'd promised me he wouldn't do it.

He promised !

Hoping against all hope that I was wrong, I ran back to the greenhouse as if I would suddenly find him there. But there was no strapping alpha waiting for me. Only my cats and my mattress.

No.

No, no, no !

It was getting harder to deny by the second, and I sank to my knees, fighting off the urge to scream. I had to be wrong. I just had to.

My cats were all over me, sensing my heightened stress levels. Mudpie was head-butting my side, demanding attention, while Fork was sniffing around, no doubt trying to figure out what had upset me. Goober caught my attention. Or rather, the folded piece of paper tied in a loose ribbon around his neck.

It was a miracle it hadn't fallen off as it was quite slack, but I took it with trembling hands and unfolded it. I knew what it had to be, and yet I didn't want to believe it, even as I began to read the hastily scrawled words.

My darling Ven,

I am sorry to do this. I know what I promised, but I also know what I must do. I don't need you to understand, but I do need you to keep yourself safe.

My entire life has been one of uncertainty and violence. Even before I had to fight the usurper who orphaned so many of us, I still faced challenges no child should have to go through. My life was not meant to be an easy one, and I've always known that.

Meeting you changed all that, my beautiful Vanessa, and nothing will ever take that away from us. You showed me things and gave me experiences many alphas can only ever dream of. I want you to rest easy knowing how much joy you brought me.

I know you struggle to see it in yourself, but I promise you, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I'd do everything all over again as long as it ensured I met you. Your kindness. Your smile. I love all of it. And I carry it with me in my chest as I march to my end. I wish we could spend more time together, I do, because even a hundred years wouldn't be enough.

I am so incredibly grateful for the time we've had.

I am madly in love with you, and I always will be. I know you think I'm giving up, but I'm not. I'm choosing life.

I'm choosing you.

If this one small thing will buy you a life of peace and happiness, it's worth it. You'll have the entire pack to protect you, to give you the community, the family, you've always been searching for.

I love you, Vanessa. And I always will love you. I know you'll cry for me, but don't let the sadness overwhelm you. You've given me the best time of my life.

With love,

Leo

I stared at the paper, turning it front to back as if it would change the words written on it. It stayed the same, and the cold, sinking realization of what was happening washed over me with a vengeance.

Leo was gone.

I screamed. Long and loud and with a feral brokenness that could only come from utter betrayal. He had promised me he would stay, that he would fight. Lots of people had broken their word to me over the years, but I never expected Leo to be one of them. Already my mind was zooming off, imagining what horrible torture that witch was putting the love of my life through. It wasn't fair.

It just wasn't fair.



Naturally, the pained sound tearing from my throat drew lots of attention, and Ricky burst through the door.

“Ven, what’s wrong?”

I brandished the letter like that would inform him of what was going on, but I certainly wasn’t going to let him read it.

“He’s gone.”

“Wait, who? What’s happening?”

Admittedly, my declaration wasn’t exactly very explanatory, but my voice raised even higher in irritation—or was it desperation?—when I replied again.

“Leo’s gone! He went to that fucking witch! He’s going to sacrifice himself for us.”

“He’s not!” Ricky shot back on instinct, and honestly, I couldn’t fault him for the denial, not after I’d run up the entire river. “This whole week he’s been...” But then his eyes finally focused on the letter, and all the air left his body at once. “Son of a bitch!”

He whirled, fist raised as if to punch out one of my windows, but he seemed to realize the destruction that would cause and pulled back at the last moment. Honestly, I didn’t even care if he shattered my windows. What did a greenhouse matter when the love of my life was marching to his death? I’d give it up, and every single plant I’d ever nurtured to life, to make sure Leo was safe.

A knock sounded on the opposite door of the greenhouse, and we both turned to see Andromeda and Tabitha there with blankets over their shoulders. They were still a bit frail but had largely returned to a much healthier size, and their skin didn’t look so

ashen anymore. I was getting good at caring for shifters.

“Did we hear right?” Andromeda asked wearily. Although I was utterly devastated, I felt bad for her as well. She had only just been reunited with her alpha and still didn’t have all her memories back. To have him ripped away from her had to be like reopening the wounds that were only just beginning to close. “Leo’s gone to the witch?”

“Yeah, he has,” Ricky said. God, he sounded so broken.

“What do we do now?” Tabitha asked, sounding forlorn. It was like we were all being orphaned all over again, which was a crazy shared trauma to have.

It was too much heartbreak in such a small space, and suddenly, I was done. Done having things happen that were over my head, done being a damsel. I wasn’t going to allow Leo to sacrifice himself, and that was that.

“Gather everyone up,” I said, surprised at the steel in my voice. “Get them all out front.”

“Why? Are you going to announce it to all of them?” Ricky asked.

I was uncharacteristically short when I answered, but every second was precious. “Ricky, just get everyone. We don’t have a ton of time.”

I was grateful when no one argued with me, and the three of them hurried off. They assembled everyone quite quickly. I stared out at the small sea of faces as I stood on the steps of my greenhouse, marveling that they were all here because we’d chosen to stand up against what was wrong. It hadn’t been an easy path, not at all. But the pain, the loss... it was all worth it. Because we were all safe. And it made no sense for that safety not to extend to the man who had sacrificed so much already. Leo might be

ready for his life to end, but I wasn't.

“As I'm sure all of you have heard by now, or maybe even surmised on your own, Leo has taken Katarina's offer of his life in exchange for all of ours. He is buying our salvation with his blood.

“So, for those of you who wish to honor that, you are free to go live your lives. Free to have the peace that he's bought with his flesh. I won't hold it against you.” It was hard to say those words, but it was true. If we wanted to go up against the most powerful witch, I could only have people who were one thousand percent sure they were where they wanted to be. No wishy-washing. No one who felt pressured.

“But those of you who are like me, who aren't willing to let him die alone and in pain at the hand of someone who knows her sons were in the wrong, it's our time to help Leo.”

“What do we do?” someone in the crowd asked, and I understood their trepidation. Even with my limited understanding of magic, I had felt Katarina's awe-inspiring power. She'd destroyed my house without so much as blinking, which was telling of what she could do to simple flesh and bone.

“We fight. I don't know the specifics yet, but I'm sure if we all put our heads together and call on every single ally who's willing to join the fight, I'm willing to bet we could beat the odds. Again. A month ago, many people would have told us we were insane for trying to go after the brothers, but we defeated them. I believe we can do that again.”

Murmurs erupted throughout the people gathered, and I left them to it as I headed to the house. There had to be maps or literature or something I could rustle up from the debris. I would see who chose to join us eventually, but I wanted everyone to make their choice out from under my watchful eye. Again, the whole pressure thing.

I wasn't worried. Leo had made his choice, sure, but I'd made mine.

And it was time for one last plan.

19

LEO

I was prepared to die. That was such a strange sentiment to have since I'd spent my life fighting for survival, but it was the truth. The gem had led me on quite the long journey, especially on human foot, and in my hours of walking I'd had even more time to digest the reality of what was going to happen.

Sure, I wished I'd had more time with Ven, and I wished I didn't have to go through the pain I was about to go through, but it would be worth it.

At least, that's what I told myself.

The gem's light finally dimmed, and I looked ahead. The foliage shifted apart, revealing a deep-set shadow even my enhanced vision couldn't see through. The entire thing was foreboding and dripped of evil.

As far as I knew, there were no residences or cities anywhere near here. It was rare to find such places of wilderness within America, and I was sure Katarina's heavy enchantment was to thank for it. As much as I was all for anything that helped keep the wilderness as the wilderness, the way the witch went about things felt so unnatural.

Taking a deep breath, I walked forward and stepped into the dark. The time it took to travel through that space was barely a breath of a second, and yeah, that made my skin crawl. That strange lack of light was almost oily in nature. Viscous, slippery,

clinging to my skin with an almost desperate persistence.

Once I stepped through the other side, I half-expected to come out encased in the stuff, but there wasn't even a speck of it on me. Rather unsettling.

I quickly forgot about that phenomenon when I looked up and saw what could only be Katarina's home. We were still in the forest, but it was different. Gnarled trees curled in unnatural ways. Leaves ranged from pitch black to deep purple to oil green and shifted color with the breeze. The foliage was overgrown, and leaves were just as likely to have teeth at their tips as they were to have thorns. Flowers bloomed crimson, and I swore they dripped actual blood from their silken petals.

At the center of it all was quite possibly the biggest living organism I had ever seen. It was a tree to rival all other trees, standing so high and wide that its shadow blocked out all light around it. Built into the center of that tree's trunk was a witch's cabin but dialed up to eleven. Everything about it screamed luxury and opulence, from the polished wood walls to the mass of gemstones encrusted in meticulously rendered murals across different parts of it. Even the roof tiles seemed to be made from precious metals with crystals embedded within them. It was easy to see where her sons had gotten their lavish taste, but the warlocks had all seemed to go for new age, whereas Katarina's home spoke of old money. Ancient money. Money that was just as likely to be carved of bone as it was to be squeezed out of blood.

It made sense. She'd had centuries to accumulate wealth, and she used to be a lot less tame than she had been when she crashed my birthday party.

It was weird to think that her casually destroying half of Ven's house with a flick of her hand was tame, but it absolutely was. While she hadn't been a common fixture in stories growing up, I had heard she'd eradicated entire villages by turning their bodies inside out. She'd raised cathedrals high into the sky only to slam them back into the ground. Katarina had done things that made an impression. The woman who had

arrived at Ven's had seemed much more reasonable, which was why I trusted her to keep her promise after I was gone.

Hopefully, that trust wasn't misplaced.

The sound of a door opening caught my attention, and I glanced at the entrance. Katarina stepped out. She wasn't dressed in the black leathers akin to armor. She was wearing a beautiful, flowing, red dress, the kind that looked to have been handcrafted in another age. Given what I knew about her, it probably had been.

"You're early."

That really was the one way I could have surprised her. She'd expected me to either surrender myself or to fight, but arriving like I had a schedule probably wasn't on her list of probabilities. Who, when only given a week left to live, would waste an entire day of it?

Me, apparently. But it was worth it to make sure Ven and everyone else I loved was safe.

"I didn't want to be late."

"Your punctuality is appreciated." She tilted her head a bit, and those unnaturally bright eyes of her narrowed. "You didn't want your lover to try to convince you not to come, did you?"

I didn't know if women were naturally more perceptive, or if Katarina had done this to so many people that she knew from experience. Either way, I shrugged. She didn't need to know everything about me. I was sacrificing my life to save people she was intent on harming. That would have to be enough.

“Come inside, dear. I’d rather not do this out on the lawn.”

“Or you could not do this at all.”

It was a long shot, but I had to try.

Katarina shot me a rueful smirk. “Come now. You’ve been so brave. Don’t ruin it by trying to weasel out at the end.”

“All the more reason for a little humor.”

“Fair enough. They say life is too short not to laugh. But for me, at least, so little brings me actual joy.”

What a statement. It almost made me feel bad for the witch, but it was hard to feel anything for her when she was about to kill me in a way more painful than I could ever imagine.

I walked up to the porch, and she stepped aside so I could enter. The room was about five times bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside. Real police box vibes. But instead of being full of all sorts of technology and bits and bobs, it was quite organic. Everything was made out of trees, stone, and crystal, with wide open spaces and multiple gaps in the architecture so one could see out into the massive tree. Ven would love this place. Well, she’d love it if the plants weren’t so carnivorous.

“Right this way,” she said as if she were a receptionist showing me around an office, gesturing toward an actual waterfall tumbling down from floors high above my head. As beautiful as it was, the huge space had to be lonely. Especially for one woman. But then I remembered she used to have seven sons who’d lived here with her.

We stepped onto a crystal dais in front of the waterfall. The cascade didn’t slam into



the floor and make a mess though. No, even with magic, that sounded awfully messy. Instead, there was a sizeable pond surrounding it, the center turbulent but the edges calm enough for me to see fish and other aquatic creatures moving through it.

A flurry of movement caught my eye. Snapping my head in that direction, I saw a bear idly ambling in from another entrance. His eyes had that glassy look that spoke of an enthralled shifter, and his thick hide was covered in battle scars. I couldn't imagine what would leave such deep and obvious marks on a shifter given our healing ability, but it reminded me that the woman beside me was not as affable as she seemed. Sure, she was polite, but much like her sons, she wasn't above enslaving shifters.

Abruptly, railings shot up from the floor around the crystal dais, then it smoothly moved up like the magical equivalent of an elevator. Why was Katarina showing off for me? She could have killed me in her yard. There was no reason to take me on a grand tour.

"I loved my sons, you know," she mused as we went ever higher. "I know they had their flaws, but when I think about them, I still see those chubby cheeks from when they barely came up to my hip. I remember the gaps in their teeth, I remember holding them when they had nightmares at night. I suppose they were also old, at least to your perspective, but they were my little babies."

Perhaps she was just musing to me, but I couldn't help but feel a wave of irritation course through my system. Was this woman really trying to play the pity card to me when she was about to execute me?

"They were also trying to kill you."

"Not actively. It was a lofty goal of theirs, and one they would never have reached. While they would never admit it to themselves, they were all mama's boys. My little

angels.”

I scoffed openly at that. I couldn't help it. But honestly, why even hide my derision? I was going to die anyway. What was she going to do, make it extra super painful? She'd already made it clear she was going to do that.

“I know it's hard for you to understand because of what they did to your people. But all of it, and I mean all of it, will end now. The violence will stop. My bloodline is wiped out, and your pack will be scattered to the winds. I will spend the rest of my years alone, as I can't go through all of that again, and even if your love finds another, there will always be an empty space for you. Everyone has earned their fate, and our fate is tragedy fueled by revenge and loss.”

The sudden drop in her walls and admission of the bleak future we were facing surprised me. Once more, it seemed almost like she had no desire to kill me. Rather, she was doing it out of obligation.

But I also knew that was total horse shit. If she really wanted the violence to stop, all she had to do was let me go. That was it. But it was clear to me that while most of her battle-lust and evil desires had faded in her elder years, Katarina was still a cruel, prideful woman at heart. She knew her sons were murderers, and yet she wanted to punish their victims for standing up to them. She wanted to act like a victim herself.

It was insulting, really.

“What do you think of the house?” she asked, all smiles as I saw floor after floor. Some of them had closed rooms, which I guessed were where her children had spent their long childhoods, but most were open concept and a strange mix of old-fashioned and over-the-top luxury. The kitchen looked like it was straight out of the Middle Ages, complete with uneven stone brick built into the tree. It seemed oddly impossible to have a full firepit for roasting in a tree, but I supposed that was slightly

more understandable than actual witches and people shifting into animals.

I didn't answer, though. I was done with this pretending to play nice. It was another form of torture, and I wasn't going to participate in my own torment any more than I had to. I had to say, my execution was going far differently than I'd imagined it. I had planned to go into it with my head held high, no begging, hardly any tears if I could help it, but I hadn't anticipated that I would have to deal with idle chatter or discussions on interior decorating.

"What's the matter?" Katarina said as if she was surprised by my silence. "Cat got your tongue?"

I cocked an eyebrow.

She sighed. "Right. I suppose it was foolish of me to expect good conversation. Years on my own have somewhat ebbd my ability to read the room. Perhaps I simply never had good social skills to begin with."

"You managed to seduce all of your son's fathers," I said, surprising myself. Antagonizing the witch who was going to torture me didn't exactly seem like a good idea.

Katarina merely smiled. "I really did, didn't I? But you'd be amazed what a pretty face and untold power will do to cover for poor social skills."

She had a point there.

The conversation stilled as the crystal dais finally stopped and the railings dropped back into the floor. For a brief moment, I allowed myself to be impressed with how smoothly the circle slid into the wood, leaving not even a crack to see down below, but then the witch ushered me forward.

“Stand here,” she said, pointing to a spot on the floor.

Although it grated at my nerves, I did as she said. I was not an alpha she could order around, but I was an alpha who was choosing to do what he had to for his people.

Katarina walked away from me without even a glance behind her, settling in a throne more than a dozen paces in front of me. Behind her, I saw the only window I’d spotted in the place—a giant, stained-glass mural of an angel descending from the clouds, laying a serpent on a baby’s crib that was surrounded by roses.

“Do you like it?” the witch asked, following my gaze. “It’s my birth.”

“Is it a literal thing? Or a metaphorical one?”

“Look who’s suddenly in the mood to talk.”

I leveled her with a flat expression. “If I’m curious, I’ll ask a question. If you need genuine information from me, I’ll answer. But I’m not interested in being your dancing monkey. So, no, I won’t reply to anything frivolous. I know some people would stall for time, but I’m not interested in that, either.”

“I would argue that achieving the perfect interior design is far from frivolous, but I understand your point, and I have to respect it. And to answer your question, it is quite literal. I was born a human, to regular human parents, then this great and terrible creature descended from the sky and put a seven-headed snake in my crib. That’s how I was born, although some would say that’s how I was cursed. I don’t much care about the semantics.”

That was news to me. I’d never heard anything about an angel-like figure or any reptiles in the legends about her. All I knew was that Katarina had begun terrorizing her town at the ripe old age of ten and had escalated from there. Some even

whispered she was the reason witch hunts became so popular. Now, I had a feeling that was more propaganda than actual fact.

“You’re right. There’s no need for me to draw this out. Normally, I would delight in such things, but you delivered yourself to me, and you delivered yourself to me a day early. You deserve for me to make this quick.” She paused, then a slow smile spread across her features. The grin was suddenly filled with teeth that weren’t human at all. They were far too large and extended down to needle-like points. She was letting me see a true part of her. The part that the terrible magic in her had corrupted entirely. “Grab him.”

I had no idea who she was talking to until two stone golems emerged from mossy, rocky murals on opposite walls.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m still going to do everything to you that you did to my sons. I’m going to hurt you until you’re right on the edge of Death’s door, then let you heal and do it all over again.”

The golems shoved forward, hulking in their steps, and their too-large, three-fingered hands gripped my forearms before hauling me off my feet.

“And I will repeat that over, and over, and over, until whatever magic that fuels you shifters runs out, and your wounds bleed freely. Then, and only then, will you have peace, and our feud will be over.”

Ow. My shoulders would definitely feel that the next morning—if I lived to see the next morning. I could only pray the torture wouldn’t last that long.

“I won’t interrupt things with theatrics. I won’t give you false hopes only to take them away. I won’t let you rot for weeks, thinking I forgot about you, just to bring you out and start it up all over again. I will be as direct as I can as I eviscerate you.”

“Am I supposed to be grateful for that?” I spat.

Again, I knew it wasn't the smartest thing to create conflict with a somewhat amicable executioner, but her fake, magnanimous tone rubbed me the wrong way. She was acting like some poor, put-upon person who'd been ordered to do some terrible action and had no choice but to fulfill her duty. She was framing herself as the victim when really she was the aggressor.

“You should be,” she mused, before resting her chin in her hand and making the slightest gesture with a single finger.

It felt like I had been set on fire, and I had to bite my tongue not to scream out in pain and surprise. It caused such strange dissonance in my brain, because when I looked down, there wasn't a single flame on me. I didn't know if it was in my mind or whether her magic was in my nerves, but it didn't matter. I was literally burning alive, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

It was pure, undiluted agony. I didn't remember ever setting any of her sons on fire. Maybe this was a warm up for her. And if it was just a warm up, that did not bode well for what was to come.

My inner wolf thrashed, panicking hard as it desperately tried to find a way to survive. I clamped down on it with all I had. There was no running away this time. This was our sacrifice to our pack.

He bristled at that, but stilled. If there was anything my wolf and I knew, it was that our pack was our ultimate responsibility. They came first in every way, as did our mate.

Ven.

Picturing our love gave us something to center on, and it was exactly what we did. It wasn't all that different from how I'd retreated from the torture at the medical facility, except already this seemed so much more profound. I had no idea how I would endure everything the witch had in store for me, but I would do it.

"There it is. That's the pain I wanted to see on your proud features. This is how my sons looked when you killed them all, isn't it?"

I didn't know what possessed me to respond, and it was definitely stupid, but I pulled my lips back from my teeth and snarled, "Usually they either had a dumb look of surprise or were crying as they begged for their lives."

Even when I was trying to be noble, the more brutish side of me could still slip out. Oh, well. What was she going to do? Kill me harder?

"And here I was being so gracious."

She raised her free hand, and it felt like every single bone in my body was being ripped through my skin. I screamed. But once more, when I looked down, nothing was moving under my skin, and my bones were all safely where bones were supposed to be. It seemed the son who specialized in pain had gotten his powers directly from the source.

"I don't have to be nice, you know. I don't expect you to be the politest guest, but do not mock me about my loss."

Her loss? I wanted to spit at her, but I couldn't. My jaw was locked in place, and it felt like my teeth were bleeding. Yes, her seven evil sons had died, but what about Ven's mother? What about my pack? What about all the shifters who had been kidnapped and sold off or used as their personal harem? What about the ones who'd been turned into mindless security guards? What about the families her sons had torn

apart, and what about all those who died? Their lives ended alone, possibly mind-controlled, separated from everything they knew and loved.

She knew nothing of loss. As far as I was concerned, she was a giant baby trying to masquerade as the boss, when really she was throwing her toys out of the cot because she was mad that her family finally got their just desserts.

“I see that contempt in your eyes. I’ve heard stories about you, Leo. I didn’t believe them because you are so very young, but in truth, it would take someone very special to take down all my sons.”

She squeezed her hand into a fist, and several of my bones cracked. This time it wasn’t just in my mind because I could feel the bones healing. The golems never let go of my arms, leaving me hanging in my torment.

A sharp scream tore out of me, and Katarina sat back in her throne, a pleased smile on her face. She lifted that clenched hand once more, and I braced myself for whatever awful sensation was going to come next, but it never did. Suddenly, a glass bottle went sailing through the air and shattered on the throne right above the woman’s head.

“What the fuck?” she blurted as the liquid poured over her.

What the fuck, indeed.

As soon as the contents of the jar hit the witch’s skin, it began to sizzle and slough away, like acid eating her flesh. I watched her eye collapse in on itself and part of her cheek disappear.

Katarina jumped to her feet and waved her hand. Her skin returned to normal, like it had never happened at all. I got the impression that wasn’t usually the case when a



witch was hit with whatever had been in that jar.

“What’s this?” she spat, her demeanor changing entirely. “I knew there was no way you were noble enough to come willingly!”

I had no idea what she meant until I craned my neck back. I gasped in horror as dozens of my pack members poured in from the open areas on the branches of the tree. Wolf shifters. Coyote shifters. Eagle shifters swooping in. Even a couple of bear shifters, and the giant of a man who waited until he was on solid ground before shifting into the behemoth of a moose he was.

“No!” I cried. “You can’t do this! She’s too powerful!”

Most people would be relieved to see their family rushing in to save them, but all I could feel was abject terror. I had been ready to die. I had sacrificed myself so they would live. But if they were here, there was a very good chance that we would all die, and everything would have been for naught.

Katarina raised her hands, and suddenly a massive tornado formed in the middle of the room before rapidly moving to catch the sudden incursion of shifters.

“Get out of here! Are you insane?”

“Yes,” Katarina said. “Listen to your alpha. There’s no need for all of you to die, but I will bleed every single one of you out and dance on your corpses if you dare try to stop my revenge for my sons!”

“Your sons deserved what they got,” a familiar voice said, and for a moment I couldn’t believe it was actually her. Ven stood on a balcony a floor above us, determination etched on her face. “I will give you one chance to let our alpha go, and you are welcome to live out the rest of your long life however you want. But if you

insist on enacting this insane revenge plot on your sons' victims, then we will be forced to end your line entirely. The world will likely be better for it."

It wasn't often that I heard such steel and fire in Ven's voice, but she spoke with total authority. The way she was standing, elevated above us, the high wind and the canopies buffeting her clothing and hair, almost made her seem like a beautiful Valkyrie. A war goddess. As much as I didn't want her here, I was in total awe.

"You think your ragtag group of zoo animals can defeat me?" Katarina spat.

"No," Ven answered, her voice icily calm. "I know we can."

With that, my love raised her arms high above her head, her palms flat, and the throne behind Katarina came alive, parts of it extending to grab at the witch like it was trying to tear her limb from limb.

Not missing a beat, Ven vaulted over the balcony railing. I shouted in shock once more, wondering what the hell she could be thinking, when a branch broke through the floor, rapidly rising up and extending giant leaves that caught my love and gently deposited her on her feet.

Since when could she do that ?

"Leo!" She ran to me. The golems moved to attack, but she flicked her hand, and the moss between their rocks rapidly expanded until they fell to the floor as a random collection of stone. I dropped down to the floor, too, and that was honestly the only thing that stopped my chin from dropping down to my chest. I had seen the incredibly impressive and powerful things Ven could do when we were fighting Frederick, but this was on an entirely different level. Did she come into her own because she now knew what she was? Was it because she'd found out Frederick had been responsible for the death of her mother? Or was it...

Was it because of me?

“Ven, what are you doing here?” I gasped as she caught me in her arms, clinging to me tightly. “I was doing this for you!”

“We don’t need you to sacrifice yourself. Look around you! You may have lost faith, but I know we are strong enough to take her on. So, get on your feet and fight for your family! We can’t do this without you.”

She spoke with such authority. Normally, my alpha side would bristle against something like that, but I was completely touched. Honored. More shifters were pouring in—far more than had been in our ragtag, merry band. All week, everyone had been reaching out to allies, but I thought I had left early enough that they had no chance of assembling. Clearly, I was wrong, because there were nearly a hundred shifters in the room, and they were all dialed in to fight the witch and whatever she conjured up.

“Look, Leo. We’re all united because of you. So, lead us to victory, do you hear me? Because I’m not living the rest of my life without you.”

Well, it looked like a change of plans was in order.

20

VANESSA

It was a knockout, drag-out, ultimate fight between shifters, the world's most powerful witch, and little ol' me. We didn't have the best chance, but when Leo pulled out of my arms and stood to his full height, shoulders squared, I truly believed we would win.

Because we had something Katarina would never have.

Unity.

"You heard her, Katarina. This is your last chance. Stand down or die," Leo said in that booming voice of his that never failed to give me goosebumps. Did I have an authority kink? Potentially. Something to explore later. Because we were most definitely going to have a later. I was certain of that.

"You think your ragtag pack of mongrels can bring me down? The gods chose me and blessed me with their power. You are nothing to me. You may as well be ants!"

"I guess that answers that question."

Leo shifted, launching himself forward in a blur of steam, and fur, and teeth. He didn't make it all the way to the witch. None of us expected him to. If there was one thing I had learned about fighting magical people it was that you had to wear them out enough until they were distracted, then take advantage of that distraction as

quickly as possible. It was a game of attrition, with one side having unchecked power and the other side having impressive healing capabilities. It really was the epitome of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object.

Except for me.

I was the spanner in the works, and I fully intended to use my skills to the maximum of my ability.

Starting with trying to bind the witch with vines.

I called forth the longest, thorniest vines wrapped around the outer branches of the tree and sent them all toward the witch's back. They were thick, green, luscious things, full of a malevolent energy that went far beyond the plants I'd interacted with before. I figured it was a side effect of the strange pocket area we'd followed Leo into, but I still braced myself to make sure they didn't contaminate me.

As lively and virulent as those vines were, they withered and crumbled as soon as they got within a foot of Katarina.

Her gaze flicked to me. Shit, I didn't have the same element of surprise I had with her sons. None of them had known I was a dryad. Frederick had been the only one who'd come even close to realizing it. But Katarina knew. She'd told me what I was.

"Let's get you out of the way, shall we?" she hissed, raising both of her hands.

I ran for it. I wanted to fight, but I would have to evade whenever I could. As she went to throw a spell at me, three different wolves charged her, all leaping for her limbs. She released the blast before she could get her aim, and I managed to dive safely behind a marble statue of... Actually, I had no idea what it was. It was one of those abstract art pieces people with too much money put in their too-large sitting

rooms to show off to guests who also had too much money.

The witch rebuffed the three attackers with a shimmering force field that blasted out from her core. They were thrown far, one of them sailing out of an opening, but I was confident they'd be able to catch a tree branch before hitting the ground far below.

Five other shifters charged her. An eagle shifter swooped down at her head, trying to claw at her eyes, while a coyote shifter leaped for her throat. Two bear shifters were charging her at full speed while Leo went for her back.

For a moment, I thought we really had her, but then giant, slate rocks shot up from the flooring all around her, forming a barrier, and she flew up into the air, hovering ten feet above our heads. That was certainly going to complicate things.

I needed to think differently, because the vines wouldn't be enough. I reached out into the considerable amount of foliage all around us and latched on to the branch that I'd used to descend from the balcony. Had standing up there been a touch dramatic? Absolutely. But I figured I deserved a little flare of drama considering we were in for the fight of our lives.

Filling the branch with the sizzling energy within me, I besieged it to call upon a sibling. A moment later, another branch grew through the floor, moving around like it was water instead of a solid object. I was still pretty hazy on all the rules of my new ability, but it worked better when I didn't question anything.

I placed my hands over my heart, letting the branches feel the steady beat of it and become part of me. As I crouched behind that stupid marble statue, I had one of them swing at the witch.

I must have caught her off guard, because the branches came down on her head with a sickening crack. Again, I thought I'd done it, that maybe cracking her skull would

be enough of a distraction for everyone to surge in and finish her off.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. The crack I heard was the branch breaking in two, the top part falling to the ground below.

Nevertheless, I persisted. I tried to wallop her with the second branch. She was wise to my scheme, though, and all it took was a glare from her for the branch to burst into flames.

I fully planned to beat her with that burning branch, but when I swung it down again, it disintegrated into ash that rained down onto the floor. Okay, so witch fire was different than regular fire. Good to know.

Katarina focused on me, but then my companions swarmed her again and she had to fend them off. I appreciated their protection, but their cries of pain whenever her spell hit made my stomach heave.

I decided to leave the offensive for a bit and do a round of triage, running to the various bodies lying around—thankfully, none of them were in human form yet.

I was armed with both a messenger bag and two fanny packs, one high on my waist and the other on my hips. It wasn't exactly glamorous battle armor, but what mattered was that it was chock-full of things that would help with healing, and a few offensive vials I'd whipped up last minute after doing some research online. I had no clue whether any of it would work.

Luckily, that first one had packed quite a punch. It was dill, salt, holy water, and some of the ash from where my home had burned. I had been surprised it had worked at all seeing as witches weren't vampires, and as far as I knew only vampires had a reaction to holy water. It had definitely sent a message, though.

The offensive potions could wait, though, because I reached my first pack member and knelt down to help them. I did everything at a rapid pace. When I finished pouring different concoctions over their wounds, I placed my hands on their flank and did my best to channel my energy through them.

My relatively new power sizzled a bit, as if in confusion, before trickling into the body beneath my palms. The hesitation must have been because I was helping a wolf and not a plant, which was where the majority of my power came from. I had a hunch that my ability could be turned toward healing as well. Not just because of myths, but because of how quickly the shifters had healed in my care when I had only a basic understanding of their anatomy and no understanding of magic. I figured it had been a subconscious thing, so I hoped I could tap into it more directly.

It seemed like nothing was happening, but then I felt something almost click within the wolf, and their own natural healing ability surged up to meet me halfway.

Perfect.

“Get yourself to safety for a few minutes before rejoining,” I said, already on my feet to the next person who needed my help. “We can do this.”

As I ran to one of the bear shifters pinned under a pillar of rock, my legs were yanked out from under me, and I was suddenly in the air. It reminded me of how Alric, the metal-controlling brother, had snatched me up, and my body reacted before my mind could. Hundreds of vines shot up from between cracks on the floor that hadn’t been there before, wrapping around my legs to my waist and trying to pull me back to safety.

“There you are,” Katarina said, floating over the chaos of battle until she was a few feet from me. “You know, I really was looking forward to one of your kind being able to run around these parts. Maybe restore the balance a little. But you had to go



and waste it, didn't you?"

"Did you really think I would sit back and let you kill our alpha?"

"I had hoped you would, yes." She drew in a deep breath, then gestured at the wild battle all around us. There were whirlwinds spinning this way and that, sending shifters flying. Lightning cracked down from the ceiling and through the openings between the branches. There were more stone golems spawning out of nowhere, and occasionally, long tentacles of fire randomly appeared out of the walls to slash down at the closest shifters.

It was an insane display of power, and if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it came from one woman. No wonder the combined powers of her sons couldn't take her down. It seemed she had all their abilities, but she'd had centuries to hone them. While I was still determined to beat her, I couldn't help but wonder if I would make it through the fight.

If I didn't, at least I could say I'd gone down swinging, and that was what mattered to me.

"Thanks to you, all your friends are going to die. It's a pity, isn't it? Revenge always begets more revenge."

"This isn't revenge! Not on our part. We're protecting the man we love and admire. Our leader. We're saving him! You're the one trying to avenge the justice that your raping, murdering sons got served to them!"

I almost expected a witty repartee, as Katarina seemed quite unruffled by many of the things we did. Instead, I saw pure anger flash across her face, and she raised one hand, curling her fingers as if she was choking someone. Almost instantly, my air supply cut off, and my lungs desperately tried to draw in breath.

“All these lectures! I have tried to be kind. I have shown the lot of you mercy, and yet you still dare to speak to me this way. I am a superior life form. Your kind only exist because I deem it so! And now, I will enjoy watching you suffocate in front of me while your little friends are helpless to stop it. I’ll laugh as your face turns burgundy, as all those little blood vessels in your eyes pop with desperation, and then as you piss yourself like the filthy animal you are. Goodbye, little dryad. What a waste.”

The squeezing sensation around my throat grew tighter and tighter. I tried to pull my arms down to claw at my neck, but Katarina’s magic held them fast above my head. I tried to call for help, but I couldn’t make any sound. I hoped someone would jump in with a sudden distraction, but no. Everyone was occupied with their own battles. I didn’t know if any of them even realized what was happening with me.

Help me, Leo! Please!

I scanned the area for him, but my vision grew too fuzzy and the battle too hectic. Then I remembered I had no interest in being the damsel, so I desperately tried to think of a way to buy myself time. I knew Leo would come for me. I knew it.

What could I do? I couldn’t move. I couldn’t run. Katarina’s hold on me kept yanking me up while the plants I’d conjured were desperately trying to pull me down. I supposed the only reason the witch didn’t incinerate them outright was that between holding me, choking me, and keeping up everything else she had in the room, she didn’t have the attention to divide. Really, I only needed a second or so of slack to get free, or even draw a breath.

My thoughts grew sluggish, taking on that unreal quality that came after waking up from a long, intense dream. I had a few moments left at best. People didn’t realize that usually it took a really long time to actually choke a person into unconsciousness, but that was when magic wasn’t involved.

The plants around me began to writhe, their little leaves rattling almost as if they were trying to ask me questions. They could tell I was in crisis, but they didn't know what to do. They weren't advanced enough for that kind of high-level thought. Besides, it wasn't like they would understand what strangulation was. As long as their leaves and vines were exposed to air, they had thousands of different places they could bring in carbon dioxide.

Wait a minute.

Actually, I didn't have a minute, so all I could do was wait a second before trying something so insanely stupid that there was no way it could work, but I did it anyway. I sent all the magic I could fizzing down into the plants covering me. There wasn't a lot of physical contact considering my clothing, but some of those vines and leaves were wrapped around my belly or had gripped my ankle and calf. I focused on my connection in those places and ordered them to breathe.

The first tiny little bit of oxygen that hit my lungs was hardly more than a sip. I was so shocked, I nearly laughed. Except I couldn't, because the witch still had a stranglehold on my throat.

But the next rush of oxygen was like a full gasp, and my panic receded. It was an insanely strange sensation not to breathe through my nose or feel the air go down my throat, but I wasn't about to complain.

I played dead.

I made a good show of it. I gasped and concentrated on trying to make my face red. I crossed my eyes. I struggled. The key was not to succumb too soon because I didn't want her to catch on to the fact that I was faking.

When it came time for the big finale, I couldn't bring myself to pee down my leg, but

I did let out some horrendous choking sounds and dribbled spit all down my chin. Gross but effective, because the magical stranglehold released me, and Katarina cackled.

“Do you see, Leo? The futility of trying to fight what must be. Your precious mate is dead now, and soon the rest of you will all join her.”

The howl that issued from my lover was so pained, I felt guilty. I hoped he could sense I was alive, but he was obviously too far away for that.

I did, however, hear a host of other shifters answer his mournful cry, and those that were free all rounded on the witch.

I cracked a single eye open from where I was slumped over in my little plant cocoon. Katarina’s back was completely exposed to me. Leo had somehow managed to get a mouthful of her dress. It was the first significant physical contact any of them made. Leo had come through for me, just like I knew he would. I couldn’t do it without him.

“Do you have any idea how old this is? The designer is dead !” Katarina cried, her hands raised, no doubt ready to cast some sort of awfulness at the people I loved.

The bitch really should have made sure I was dead.

Drawing in a deep breath, I grabbed all the magic I possibly could within me, reaching deeper and further than I ever had before. I poured it out into the air around me. I let it flow like the very waterfall I’d passed on my climb up the tree, spilling over anything and everything it touched.

A host of sensations I couldn’t really understand flooded my every sense with its bubbling, popping, fizzing nature. But then I finally felt a connection. Something slow and ancient but resolute. Something eternal.

I had tapped into the tree's life force.

I couldn't quite describe how it felt to be connected to the wellspring of knowledge and power that resided inside the living wood around us. It had seen things. Terrible things. It had absorbed blood, magic, and tears. It wasn't evil by nature, but it loathed what it had been turned into. It wanted peace.

A peace it could never get while Katarina Morgana was inside of it.

Letting my plants drop me down to the floor, I placed my palms on it and pressed my power through the marble. It was as if the tree and I were both inhabiting my body. Me, the one sentient enough to understand battle, and it being the one with the power to end the witch.

Focusing my mind's eye, I watched as the marble floor cracked in two below the witch, and she dropped down into the hole. She let out a sharp shout of surprise, but before she could fly out of it, the opening sealed shut around her. I could feel her magic crackling against it, but the tree absorbed it, drinking it down like it had consumed so much of her poison throughout the years.

"What is this? What the hell have you done?"

She tried to pull one arm out, but the floor sucked her farther down, sealing her entire body until only her shoulders and head remained. I knew it was squeezing her and squeezing her, and by the time I reached her, she seemed to know she was beaten.

"You think you can end me so easily?" she asked, her eyes flashing malevolently. Her hair was mussed, her face was covered with a thin sheen of sweat, and a thin line of blood trickled down her forehead. It was the messiest I'd ever seen her, and I took no pride in it. What I was about to do would be violent. Merciless. But it needed to be done. Mercy was a luxury, and with people like Katarina Morgana, it wasn't

something we could afford.

The hatred in her expression only blazed more as the shifters behind me skidded to a stop.

“Disperge animas vestras o ? —”

I knew a curse when I heard one, and yet again, I reacted before I could think. The vines burst back to life, shooting forward and around the witch before shoving their way into her mouth. It was an awful sight as more and more of them continued to push down. And down. And down. Katarina let out an awful, muffled scream before her face went gray and she stilled completely.

Had we done it? Had we really done it? Or was she playing dead?

Our answer came when her skin began to crack. It was like a fine spiderweb that spread out all across her face and neck until she crumbled into dust. The moment she did, magic surged out from where she had been, and although I didn't know what changed, I could feel that something had.

“Vanessa!”

Suddenly, I was swept up in a crushing embrace, but I didn't panic as my nose was filled with Leo's familiar scent. He hugged me tightly before kissing me for all he was worth.

We were both breathless and filthy, but I didn't give a damn. Finally, finally, we would have true peace.

Katarina's entire bloodline was gone.

We were free.

“I thought you were dead,” Leo whispered before kissing me again. I melted into it, craving the affection I thought I’d never have again. “How did you even find me?”

I reached into what remained of his tattered pants and removed a thick seed I’d slid into it after Katarina’s offer, when I’d gotten a sense that he was going to play the noble hero. “Thousand-year squash seeds. I got them from a native preservation group. They’re unique enough that I was sure I’d be able to track it even through her magic. When I got lost, I asked the trees for directions.”

“Since when could you do that?”

I shrugged. Explaining how my powers worked was a bit like explaining breathing. “Since I decided I could.”

Leo shook his head, then laughed and kissed me again. God, I loved kissing him. Once we parted, I shoved his chest.

“You are never going to do anything like this again, do you understand me?”

He was clearly surprised at first, but then he grinned. “You got it.”

“Damn right, I do.”

Then we were kissing again. Cheers erupted from all around us as our friends and allies shifted into their human forms.

It was time to go home. We were going to throw one hell of a party.

And this time, there would be no witch to interrupt it.

21

LEO

“ A re you sure you’re ready for this?” Ricky asked, grinning like a loon as he finished setting up the bonfire.

I would have been fine doing it myself, but my second-in-command had insisted on taking care of the setup so I could concentrate on what was important.

And what was important was officially having Vanessa join our pack.

In all the rush to defeat the brothers and our surprise run-in with their mother, I had assumed Ven was a part of our pack as a matter of course. That night, after we’d defeated Katarina, as we held each other and marveled at the fact that we were all alive, Ven had asked if she could swear fealty like Jason and Miranda had. My inner wolf had rumbled with satisfaction, and my heart had swelled with joy.

Of course, Vanessa was pack, shifter or no shifter. She was my mate , after all, but the fact that she had seen Jason and Miranda become pack and wanted to go through the same process meant the world to me. It meant the world to the rest of my pack as well. Andromeda and several others had built a new cat tunnel with a full on catio so the three felines could join in the celebration. Could that effort have gone into rebuilding the house? Potentially, but it was habitable after nearly every shifter in the tri-state area had come to help out. Apparently, when you wiped out a malevolent bloodline that was responsible for the death, imprisonment, and cursing of untold shifters and magical folks, word got around.



It felt strange to have so many strangers we didn't know roll up and ask if we were the ones who had killed the Morgana line and whether they could help out. Strange but amazing. As hard as it was to keep on top of everything, I made sure either me or Ricky got their contact information. Maybe I was being overly ambitious in the wake of our success, but I wanted all shifters and magical folk in general to be less separated. Not only because so much loss of life in stupid territory and ego battles was a waste, but also because I never wanted another evil force to take advantage of us again.

Granted, I didn't have any idea what my long-term steps were to accomplish that goal, but being able to get in contact with different people would make a huge difference. After all, it had only taken Ven teaming up with America to start a connection that had saved my hide multiple times over.

“Are you ready?”

I looked up from the paper, where I'd jotted down a little speech. Over the past week, it had become well-worn from my reading it so much. Although the words of the pack ritual were pretty set in stone, there was more I wanted to say. This wasn't a wedding, per se, but it was a union in more ways than one, and I wanted to honor that. Even if I had no idea what I was doing.

“Hey, Chiga,” I said.

The man was dressed in a crisp blue suit with silver accents. It was a bit more dressed up than many of us were, but it suited the giant mercenary. I smirked at the color, and he gave me a sheepish grin.

“Sorry, the honey picked it out for me. He didn't consider the faux pas of silver to a wolf shifter gathering.”

“Eh, that’s all right. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.” I stood, tucking my speech away and clapping the large man on his shoulder. “When am I going to get to meet this special love of yours anyway?”

“Actually, he’s here now if you’d like to meet him.”

“Hell yeah, I’d like to meet him.”

I knew it was my own bias, but it was so hard to imagine the giant, muscled moose shifter as a doting boyfriend. But I’d seen a softer side of him when he and Ven had their heads together in the downtime.

“Ah, there he is,” Chiga said, pointing at a small group of people before striding across the clearing. “Benny! Benny, I’ve got someone here to meet you.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected, maybe another equally tall shifter to turn, or perhaps a petite, more-femme man, but instead it was a portly fellow of average height, and even whiter than I was. His cherubic face was basically alabaster, with a smattering of freckles to match his ginger hair. His eyes were a vivid blue, and I didn’t miss the way they crinkled at the corners the moment he saw Chiga.

“Oh? Who is this, honey?” Even his accent was Midwestern, with a longer drawl that indicated he was more south than west.

“Leo. I told you about him.” Chiga radiated a prideful energy. It was very sweet, and I hoped people could tell I felt the same way whenever I was around Ven.

“The Leo?” Benny offered his hand, and when I took it, I wasn’t surprised that his grip was firm but not crushing. “I have indeed heard so much about you. I had to admit, I was dubious when my darling told me he needed to go off and fight in what sounded like yet another war, but thanks to you, we’ve already been able to relocate

three lost children from our area back to their tribes already. You have no idea how much this means to us.”

For some reason, the passion in the man’s voice surprised me, and I almost felt a little bashful. Everything we had done would have great significance in the shifter and magical community and was likely to spread out for quite a while, but it had only been a week since our victory with Katarina, so some of the practicalities of that were still seeping in.

“I’m happy your communities were able to recover their little ones. There’s a lot of healing in store for all of us.”

“You’ve got that right.” There was a spark in the man’s eyes as he drew closer and, goodness, the fondness on Chiga’s face seemed almost too personal. Like I was intruding. “Actually, that’s something I wanted to talk to you about. You see, I’m a certified child psychologist with a specialty in trauma, and I’ve been working with a couple of therapists who are either magic folk or familiar with our world. We want to help these victims recover from this trauma, and I’d love to interview your pack sometime. Once things are more settled, I’d love to get some of you, or hell, even all of you, into our program.”

I blinked at the man. I wasn’t against therapy, but I’d never really thought of it as an option for shifters. Naturally, the pause was a bit awkward, and Benny cleared his throat.

“Not that any of you have to. It’ll take at least a year before we get anything off the ground. I didn’t mean to offend?—”

Chiga tensed, and I could tell he was ready to defend his partner if needed, but I wasn’t alarmed.

“No, no. No offense taken. I just need to reframe my mind. I’m sure you can understand that most of us are orphans so, uh, that kind of thing wasn’t exactly on the table for most of our lives.”

Benny let out a nervous chuckle, and Chiga draped an arm around his shoulder. Oh, Ven was going to love him.

“Right! Of course. Chiga has told me y’all come from pretty dire circumstances. I gotta admit, I come from a huge family with seven brothers and three sisters, so I can’t even imagine. It really is miraculous what you’ve all managed to accomplish.”

Seven brothers and three sisters? Now, that sounded like a pack and a half.

“We’re just happy to be alive and able to celebrate together,” I said, inclining my head. “Lovely meeting you.”

“And you as well.”

I left them with the cluster of people. I had about two minutes to myself before Ricky and Andromeda found me, one with a bottle of water, the other with a small packet.

“Drink up,” Andromeda said, flicking off the cap for me. “Don’t want your mouth to get dry.”

Although she hadn’t gotten a ton of time to bond with Ven like Ricky had, Andromeda had made it plenty clear she was fond of the dryad. Part of it was their mutual love of cats, and part of it was that Ven had orchestrated my rescue. They were on genuinely friendly terms, which made me beyond happy because Andromeda was like a sister to me.

“And this is for luck,” Ricky said, handing me the packet.

I frowned down at it. Why was he giving me lettuce seeds? “What’s this?”

“That’s Ven’s favorite lettuce.” He grinned. “Figured if she can sense such things, it might be a nice bit of comfort for her, given how she’s not the biggest fan of the spotlight.”

Yet again, I was truly touched. Without another word, I pulled the two of them into a hug. The warlocks had tried to destroy us, yet despite everything, we were closer than ever before. And maybe, if things kept going how they were, we would end the cycle of trauma that permeated shifter culture. With people like Benny and Ven, and who knew who else, it felt like we could accomplish things our parents never even dreamed of.

When I parted from my two pack mates, I drew in a deep breath. “Gather everyone up,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “As soon as Ven is ready, I want to get started.”

“Eager to get it over?” Andromeda teased, gently nudging me in my ribs.

“Eager to start the rest of my life with all of us unified as one pack.”

They nodded at me, then hurried off. They were good at what they did, because within fifteen minutes, I was standing in the center of the clearing, surrounded by friendly faces and supportive spirits.

I didn’t recognize everyone, but everyone was an ally. They’d fought with us, and those who hadn’t had come to help afterward. I wanted all of them to see us welcome a non-shifter into our pack.

It was quiet, almost eerily so, until Chiga began a low sound somewhere between a hum and a chant. It didn’t take long before several others joined in.

Cluster by cluster, different tones sounded, until a beautiful but somewhat intimidating sound rose up into the cerulean sky above us. It spoke of ancient power and bonds that could never be broken. It echoed the earth itself, ever present, and called back to ancestors beyond those we even knew.

I let it move through me, awestruck at the beauty we could create when we were united as one, and that feeling only increased exponentially when part of the crowd stepped aside, allowing my beloved to step through.

Vanessa was always beautiful, but in this moment, with the sun shining down on her hair, her cheeks pink from excitement and nerves, she looked truly stunning. Someone had given her a green dress that befitted her nature. It hung off her shoulders and hugged her curves. She truly looked like a dryad of myth, too spectacular and important to touch, and yet all I needed to do was reach out, and she would be right there beneath my fingers.

The song swelled as she walked toward me, ancient melody and rhythms carried through our souls as much as our DNA. It surrounded us, echoing the profundity of the moment, only stopping when Ven was right in front of me.

My friend.

My mate.

My savior.

My beloved.

Those gorgeous, deep, heather eyes of hers focused on me and everything else faded away, leaving only the two of us. When she spoke, her voice carried the weight of everything we had been through, the incredible and sometimes impossible journey

we'd been on.

"Leo Reihl, I pledge my loyalty to you. You will be my alpha, and I will be your follower. Through war, through famine, we are stronger together than apart."

Tears pricked at the corner of my eyes, and my inner wolf howled in triumph. It didn't matter that she wasn't shifter. What mattered was that Ven was Ven. Perfect in every way just by being her.

"Then, you, Vanessa Goode, are now our blood." As would our children be. And our children's children. We wouldn't be like her aunt, who always treated Ven as an outcast. She would be protected. Treasured. "I am your alpha and you are my pack. I swear to protect you, I swear to guide you, and I will keep you safe."

"So mote it be," she said. Her voice cracked, and tears shimmered in her eyes. God, I loved this woman. Loved how deeply and truly she felt things.

"So mote it be." I waited a beat, but before people could think things were over and celebrate, I continued. It wasn't exactly orthodox, but who cared?

"And it is here, with our pack, and our allies, that I claim you as my mate for all to know. Whether wolf or not, whether dryad or not, we are bound by fate."

I knelt on one knee. It wasn't quite a proposal, but it was closer than either of us had ever expected. "I only ask now that you claim me."

"Yes!" The next thing I knew, Ven threw her arms around my shoulders and hauled me up so she could kiss me silly. As our lips locked and cheers erupted all around us, I knew I had truly unlocked the key to happiness. "Forever and always," she whispered, my enhanced hearing only barely catching it above the happy furor of the crowd.

“Forever and always,” I agreed before kissing her again.

What happened after that was a bit fuzzy, obscured with happy tears and hugs from many people around us, along with congratulations. The abundance of joy continued as our group organically drifted back toward Ven’s house, where multiple tables were set out with quite the feast—and no ancient witch on a quest for revenge would interrupt it this time.

This was what life was supposed to be about. Community. Support. Celebration. The connections we all made together rather than what drove us apart.

And it was all because of Ven.

“Hey, not to intrude, but I wanted to give you something before I forget.”

Ven and I paused our conversation to see Esperanza standing beside our table, looking excited but a bit bashful.

“Hey, you’re back from your studies?” Ven asked, all smiles.

“Well, I’ve got a few more tests to pass, but it’s a special occasion, ya know?” She handed a business card to Ven. It had no words, but it did have a QR code in the middle.

“What’s this?” Ven asked.

“Uh, after I found out about your whole, uh, situation, with being a dryad and all, I did as much digging as I could in online forums. Most people have never actually met any in their lives, but I followed some leads, and that’s supposed to lead to a group of them. It’s by invitation only, but I figured it’s a place to start.”



Once more, I was moved by how thoughtful and connected our allies were. “You found this online?”

“Weeeellllll, I may have had to call in some favors with a couple of mindwalkers I tutored, but, yeah. I can’t say if it works or not, but I figured it might be nice to, ya know, learn about your people.”

“Thank you,” Ven said, jumping to her feet and embracing the young woman. “Thank you so much!”

“It’s nothing, really. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m gonna get more of those ribs.”

Esperanza excused herself, no doubt a bit embarrassed at the overflowing affection, leaving Ven and me to stare down at the card.

“I don’t have to follow this,” she whispered, looking up at me with wide eyes. “I’m happy being your people, I don’t need to be anything else.”

I closed her fingers over the card. “Ven, you are dryad, human, and our pack. Pursuing more knowledge about a part of yourself won’t make you any less part of the pack. It won’t make you any less anything. I meant what I said, I’m by your side, forever and always.”

“Forever and always,” she repeated, finally letting the tears spill over.

I kissed her again and held her, assuring her we would always be together, no matter what the future brought.

And I meant every single word.

### VANESSA

My leg bounced as we drove along, anticipation bubbling up inside of me. After three months of living in my greenhouse while we repaired my home, it was finally time to move. We could have left my ruined cabin like it was, but that would be an awful thing to do to my landlord who had let me do whatever I wanted with the property. I wanted to pay him back in a way, so restoring his rundown, one-bedroom place to a slightly more modern cabin that he could possibly rent out or retire to seemed like a good way to do it. I would miss the place, but I couldn't wait for what was to come.

“Easy there,” Leo teased. “You’re going to wear a hole in the floor.”

I grinned at him, too thrilled to speak.

A few days earlier, I'd finished my last shift at the grocery store, closing that chapter of my life forever. I had been tempted to flip Tiffany off on my way out—or maybe even slash her tires—but I decided the best thing to do was ignore her entirely. Not because I was taking the high road, but because Tiffany thrived on attention, and denying her so much as an acknowledgment was likely to drive her crazy.

And, boy, did it. She was fuming when I left after making my rounds. Even after several days, I still got plenty of satisfaction from how peeved she'd looked. She would be even more pissed once she realized she had to do everything she'd always palmed off on me.

“What, did you chug a couple of energy drinks?” Ricky joined in from my other side, but I could tell both men were pleased that I was so excited. None of us had ever

expected this to happen, but thanks to all the riches we'd taken from Katarina's home when freeing the tree, every single shifter who joined in battle walked away with a nest egg that would have them set for life.

"Nope, all natural here," I said, craning my neck to look out the window as we turned down the last long road to our destination. It was a cool, end-of-autumn morning, the sky a pale gray as we pulled up to an impressive plot of land with a main house, five supporting cabins across the property, and enough infrastructure for a small hobby farm.

Except, it wasn't simply any impressive plot of land, it was our impressive plot of land. The entire pack had pooled a tenth of our gains after the battle and found a place where we could all live, grow, and run together. More cabins would need to be built, naturally, and maybe we'd end up expanding onto more land, but for the moment? It was perfect.

"It's beautiful," I breathed as more of our convoy pulled up beside us.

Most of Leo's pack didn't know how to drive or couldn't remember whether they did but, once again, America's family came in clutch and offered to chauffeur the twenty-six of us. Me, Leo, Ricky. Jason and Miranda. Andromeda. The dozen we'd found in the cave. And finally, the rest who had been found or wandered onto my property after we took Katarina down. Apparently, she had created the enthrallment curse and forced shifters to be locked into their animal form, despite her acting like it had all been her sons. How typical.

"Wow, this looks even better in person," America said, hopping out of the car and striding over to us. "Where's my room?"

We laughed at that, but I wanted her to know there was also a serious side to that, so I gripped her hand and squeezed it firmly.

“You can visit whenever you like and stay for however long you want. Our land is your land.”

She blushed sweetly. “I was kidding. I know this is your pack’s territory.”

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s everyone’s territory,” Leo said, his voice as firm as ever. “Besides, you’re basically...” He paused. “Pack-in-law.”

“Pack-in-law? Who got married?”

“I dunno,” I cut in. “I feel like all of us kind of did on the battleground. At the very least, we’ve all probably bled on each other.”

“You’ve got a point there. All right, we can swing by from time to time, but only if you come down for Cinco De Mayo .”

“Have you ever got a deal,” I said, letting go of her hand only to pat her on her shoulder. I wasn’t going to give up a chance to miss good cooking and great music anytime soon.

The conversation died down as our pack all lined up to look at what was now ours. Finally, after so many years, I had a real family, a farm of my dreams with the man I loved, and financial stability. I could focus on writing a book. Or catch up on my reading list. And of course, build my new garden from the ground up.

Did I also mention... Chickens?

Leo turned to me, and when I returned his gaze, tears sprang to my eyes. I was about to be a weepy mess, but I couldn’t help it. I was so happy!

“We did it,” I murmured, my voice cracking.

“We did,” he confirmed, his large, warm palms coming up to cup either side of my face. “All thanks to you.”

“All thanks to us. ”

With that, he kissed me, and just like every other time, my stomach flipped, my heart thundered, and the world narrowed down to the two of us. Him and me, and all the love we had for each other.

I truly was the luckiest woman in the world. Or, uh, dryad, I supposed, and I couldn’t wait for our extended family to start on our journey together.

And, of course, to get to planting.

The End.

Thank you for joining us on the journey of The Healer and The Wolf !