



Their Defiant Mate (Rydarian Mates #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She can fight all she wants. She'll still be theirs.

When three savagely sexy shifters told Tara she belongs to them, they didn't just strip her bare, spank her into shameful surrender, and then ravage her mercilessly.

They bound her to their bed and made her beg for it first.

But even as they force one brutal, desperate climax after another from their helpless human mate, she knows these feral beasts aren't going to be content to fill her with their seed one at a time.

Soon they'll claim her all at once.

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Tara Hughes felt her pulse accelerate as she approached the massive A-frame lodge.

She'd been living in the feline village for six weeks now and anxiety still overtook her each time she entered this building.

Little wonder really. The first time she'd visited the lodge she'd been forced to watch as her best friend, Lexie, was ruthlessly dominated by three lion/human hybrids.

The males were now Lexie's mates and she was thrilled with the arrangement, but Tara could still hear the swoosh of the belt and Lexie's pleading as her mates disciplined and dragged pleasure from her trembling body.

Worse, Tara had started fantasizing about similar situations.

She was curious about raw, animalistic desire, and wondered what it would feel like to surrender control completely.

Steadying herself with a deep breath, Tara climbed the steps to the railed porch and heaved open one side of the double doors.

She'd been summoned by Zion, the pride leader, so this visit was mandatory.

Few were brave enough to question Zion's decisions.

No one challenged his authority. A huge fire blazed in the fireplace to her right, warming the meeting room.

The large open space was empty now, but it never stayed that way for long.

Communal meals were held here as well as village meetings and social functions.

She let her fur-trimmed hood drop back as she unzipped her parka.

Rydarian weather was merciless, and it would only get colder once winter arrived.

Her gaze swept upward, taking in the dramatic logs supporting the tightly fitted timbers of the roof.

A nested stairway was tucked away in the corner to her left.

The stairs led to the restricted area, which consisted of Zion's apartment, an office/conference room, and several storerooms. Of the three settlements on Rydaria, the feline village was by far the largest and most advanced.

The hybrids—shapeshifting soldiers illegally created by Nuevo Biotech—had been allowed to repurpose most of the technology on their transport ships.

The primary engines and communications systems had been disabled, of course.

Under no circumstances were the hybrids allowed to leave the planet.

But solar generators and molecular conversion units had allowed the hybrids to maintain a better quality of life than they would have had without the technological assistance.

Humans, on the other hand, had been dumped here with nothing but tents and primitive tools.

They'd all worked for Nuevo Biotech, so most considered their exile a fitting punishment.

No one was surprised when four months after their arrival most of the humans were dead and the rest were so desperate that they threw themselves on the mercy of the hybrids.

Tara looked around with a sigh. She could no longer deny that she fell into the desperate category.

If she didn't allow a group of male hybrids to claim her soon, she would be back out in the cold with nothing to eat but field rations.

A group of laughing females hustled by, carrying trays of refreshments.

Claire, one of the six women Tara had shared a tent with when they first arrived on Rydaria, separated from the group and paused.

"Are you coming to the gathering tonight?" Claire had vivid red hair, bright green eyes, and a curvy figure that immediately drew the attention of their male companions.

Despite the recent death of her younger brother, Claire remained positive and caring.

Tara had liked her from the start. She just felt closer to Lexie.

"I haven't decided yet," Tara admitted. The gatherings were the Rydarian equivalent of singles bars and dating apps. They allowed human females to interact with hybrid males hoping to make an emotional connection.

"You should come," Claire encouraged. "It's fun, and it's not like you have anything

else to do. I saw Bianca earlier. She's completely recovered."

"Thank God," Tara murmured with a distracted smile.

Tara had originally been allowed into the feline village to help care for Bianca.

Bianca had pneumonia at the time and had been very near death.

They'd been quarantined in one of the cabins, a luxury they hadn't known since arriving on Rydaria.

The cabin had private bedrooms, actual beds, indoor plumbing, and a hot shower.

It was warm, comfortable, and safe. For obvious reasons, Tara didn't want to return to the wilderness beyond the village walls.

"We hardly see each other anymore," Claire pointed out. "I'd love to catch up."

"I'll try," Tara said, and meant it. Claire was a sweetheart, and Lexie had been largely unavailable since finding her mates. It would be nice to talk to someone still struggling with these decisions. "I need to get going. I've been summoned by Zion. I'll see you tonight."

"You better or else." Claire softened the threat with a friendly smile.

Tara waved as she continued toward the stairs. A burly guard stood at the bottom of the staircase. He glanced at Tara, but didn't speak.

"Zion is expecting me." The statement brought a fresh rush of anxiety. She didn't like Zion. Thought he was arrogant and abrasive. If she were being honest, he intimidated her, so she avoided him as much as possible.

“Tara Hughes?” the guard asked.

“That’s me,” she offered with forced cheer.

He nodded and moved out of her way.

She headed up the stairs, but her mind drifted back to the beginning.

It had been five years since the atrocities at Nuevo Biotech were discovered.

Backed by the nearly limitless funding of a military cooperative, the ambitious medical research company had been combining the genetic material of apex predators with that of humans, primarily males in the prime of their lives.

The field of study had been outlawed for nearly a century, but Nuevo didn’t care.

Their headquarters was an autonomous outpost that orbited Earth’s moon, so they thought they were beyond the reach of the law. For over two decades they were right.

Known as the Griffin Project, the experiments first incorporated segments of lion DNA.

Encouraged by the results, they moved on to wolves and birds of prey.

The scientists refused to admit what the final stages of exploration involved, but the division had been labeled ‘exotics’ and some of the hybrids had been barely recognizable as human.

The project’s crowning achievement was identifying the exact combination of genetics and environmental stimuli to trigger shapeshifting.

Tara looked around as she ascended, admiring the results of the lions' efforts.

The lodge, like the rest of feline village, was impressive.

The craftsmanship was admirable, the design architecturally interesting.

With running water, electricity, and access to utility printers, the lodge could have been the focal point of any wilderness resort on Earth.

But Rydaria wasn't a resort. For hybrids and humans alike, it was a prison.

Anyone involved in the Griffin Project had been arrested and tried for a laundry list of crimes.

It didn't matter how indirect their role at Nuevo had been or that many had no idea what was really going on; everyone was found guilty and exiled to the same planet where their former victims now ruled.

It had taken a couple of months for the wolves to lash out, but they came damn close to wiping out the human encampment.

Even if the wolves hadn't attacked, it was unlikely the humans would have survived.

They were research scientists, physicians, and clerical support staff.

They were highly educated, but completely dependent on technology.

Clearing forests and growing food, hunting animals and cooking over an open fire were simply skills the urban-bred humans had no reason to develop.

Tara was no different. She'd been an executive assistant at Nuevo and a couple of

camping trips in her youth was the extent of her wilderness training.

She reached the top of the stairs and refocused her mind.

Like it or not, she was stuck on Rydaria, and it was adapt or die.

She wasn't sure what Zion wanted, but it couldn't be good.

Zion only summoned people when there was a problem, or there was something he needed them to do.

She raised her hand to knock on the door to his office, but someone pulled it open before she could.

Tall and sleekly muscled, the male appeared fierce yet controlled.

His dark hair had been closely trimmed yet the curly texture was still evident.

His skin tone reminded her of warm caramel, but his eyes were pale green.

The combination was striking, and she found it hard to pull her gaze away from his handsome face.

Many of the hybrids were good looking. She'd never been impressed by outward appearance before.

Something about this male made her restless and hyperaware.

She wanted to touch his face and press her body against his muscular form.

His gaze gleamed as he motioned her into the room.

Tara gave herself a firm mental shake and eased past him.

The room was surprisingly large. A rustic table on her left served as Zion's desk while a much larger table on the right allowed him to conduct planning sessions.

Zion sat at the head of the larger table.

He was massive, by far the biggest hybrid she'd ever seen.

With dark hair and piercing golden eyes, he could silence a crowd with a look.

His shoulders would span most doorways and his entire body was corded with thick muscles.

Unlike the male who opened the door, all Zion made her feel was anxious.

"Have a seat," he directed.

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Her mouth dried out, so she nervously licked her lips and moved to a chair about halfway down the long table.

Another male she'd never seen before sat on Zion's left.

His shiny dark hair flowed away from his face in distinct waves and his sculpted features hinted at Asian descent or a mixture of Asian and European.

Like his hair, his eyes were nearly black and gleamed with each movement of his head.

Damn. He was even better looking than the doorman and this male watched her with obvious interest. Her nipples tingled and her core began to ache.

What the hell was wrong with her? She'd never gotten this turned on by looking at a male.

Thank God her coat hid her body's bizarre reaction.

The doorman sat down beside the other stranger and a whispered comment passed between them. They clearly knew each other, but Tara had no idea why they were here. Or why she was for that matter.

"This is Isaac and Jonathan," Zion introduced.

"I prefer Jon," the dark-eyed male corrected.

“Fine,” Zion grumbled. “Isaac and Jon. They’re two of the three members of Shadow Team One.”

Tara’s anxiety spiked. Rumors and speculation about the Shadows ran rampant. Some said that they could turn invisible; others claimed that they could turn into smoke. Everyone agreed that they were psychic, but no one knew the exact nature of their clairvoyance.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said as a chill dropped down her spine. Zion hadn’t introduced her, so she presumed Isaac and Jon knew who she was and likely the purpose for the meeting.

“How are your meetings with Akari going?” Zion prompted. “Has there been any progress?”

Tara tensed. Akari was one of only sixteen female hybrids who survived the Griffin Project.

Happily mated to three feline hybrids, Akari had been thriving on Rydaria.

Then the wolves kidnapped her to punish Zion.

She’d been beaten and terrorized for six horrific days.

Then the wolves dumped her in the forest expecting her to die.

Tara had worked at a crisis intervention center before being hired by Nuevo Biotech, so she had experience working with the survivors of violent crimes.

When Akari stopped speaking to her mates and refused to eat, Zion asked Tara to meet with her.

Tara was willing to help in any way she could.

“She’s starting to open up,” Tara told him. “But this sort of thing takes time.”

“We don’t have time. There must be a reckoning,” Zion said firmly. “It’s against the law to harm a female, any female. Her attackers must be held accountable for their crimes, or our laws are meaningless.”

“I understand that, but Akari is incredibly fragile right now. If I ask her to describe her attackers, it will?—”

“That’s not what we need her to do,” Isaac cut in. “Working together, Jon, Kyle, and I can extract information without the person being aware of it.”

Tara just stared at him, horrified by the implications. She should have paid more attention to the rumors. “If you can do this without her knowing about it, what do you need me for?”

A sexy grin parted Isaac’s lips, but all he said was, “Would you like to hear the list?”

Desire curled through her body and her nipples tingled again. She had a few things she’d like him to do too, but now was not the time. Akari was her client and her friend. That meant she was responsible for protecting Akari’s mental health. And the last thing Akari needed was any sort of invasion.

“Entering someone’s mind without their permission is a violation,” Jon said firmly, dark eyes flashing.

“We only do so if lives are at stake or the person we’re interrogating has committed a violent crime.

Akari will feel nothing. In fact, it could be done while she's asleep, but we will not proceed unless she agrees. ”

Relieved by what he'd just said, Tara nodded. “I'm glad you feel that way.” She nervously licked her lips and dragged her gaze back to Isaac. “You mentioned someone named Kyle. Who is he?”

“Kyle is the third member of our coalition, as well as Shadow Team One.”

She nodded again, forcing herself to stay on task. “I'm not sure Akari trusts me enough to believe any of this. I can't risk abolishing what trust we've managed to build.”

“You misunderstand my position,” Zion said, his expression suddenly grim. “I'm not asking for your opinion. You will convince Akari to allow this, and the sooner the better.”

Tara bit back the ‘fuck you’ that was ringing through her mind, but she glared at Zion. “And if I refuse?”

“Then you will move to the shelter like all the other unclaimed females. You've received special treatment long enough.”

Clenching her hands so tightly that her fingernails bit into her palms, Tara took several deep breaths.

It always came to threats and ultimatums with the feline hybrids.

Every human female had been subjected to a similar choice.

It might have been presented in the form of an alliance, but the result was the same.

Women could submit to male hybrids or starve.

The only way Zion would allow human females to be part of the feline village was if they mated with a coalition.

Most of the coalitions consisted of three males and all of them were eager to claim a female of their own.

Tara's first night in the feline village had made it glaringly apparent that no human female would escape this decision.

The only reason Zion was allowing them to live was because his soldiers needed mates.

Tara's gaze shifted to the Shadows. Were they looking for a mate?

Zion's threat was meaningless if she agreed to let a coalition court her.

Heat cascaded through her body at the thought of being pressed between them, of feeling their hands sliding boldly all over her body.

She'd attended a couple of the nightly gatherings, but had yet to meet a coalition that interested her.

Her attraction to these two was undeniable, but was physical appeal enough? Hybrids mated for life.

She shook away the distraction and looked at the arrogant jerk who ruled over the feline village. It was bullshit like this that made her dislike Zion so intensely. "I'll do what I can to convince Akari, but it's unlikely that she will agree."

“I’ve seen you with the other humans,” Zion growled out, displeasure forming deep furrows in his brow. “You can be persuasive when you choose to be. You will convince Akari or your stay in my village will come to an end.”

“I heard you the first time,” she snapped, tired of his bullying.

“Watch your tone,” he warned.

Her chair made a screeching sound as she shoved it back and stood. “Is there anything else or am I free to go?”

Zion pushed to his feet as well, looking as if he’d detain her. He scowled at her for a moment then jerked his head toward the door. “Go.”

She pivoted on the ball of her foot and rushed from the room.

Nothing good ever happened in the lodge.

That’s why she hated coming here. The hybrids had chosen an asshole to lead them.

What the hell was wrong with them? Couldn’t they see what a fucking jerk Zion—someone touched her upper arm and her mental tirade scattered.

She gasped and looked back over her shoulder.

Isaac stood behind her, Jon at his side.

“Don’t let Zion’s attitude dissuade you,” Isaac urged. “This is incredibly important.”

“Akari is incredibly important,” she countered. “Zion seems to have forgotten that our first concern should be protecting her.”

“Ask her if she wants her attackers punished.” Challenge rang through Jon’s tone. “What we’re suggesting might not be as traumatizing for her as you think.”

He was right. Akari should make this decision. Knowing that the monsters who abused her were punished might give her closure and allow her to heal. “I’ll ask.”

“Thank you.” Isaac’s lips curved into a sexy smile. He moved closer, green eyes shimmering in the diffused light of the corridor. “I don’t smell another male on you. Are you considering any other coalitions?”

She stood her ground, her gaze locked with his. “It would be foolish to consider bonding with males who can extract information from my mind without my knowing about it.”

Jon’s chuckle rumbled from somewhere behind Isaac. “Who said we were going to give you a choice?”

Stepping to the side so she could see him, Tara said, “Then I know I’m not interested.

” Her heart thudded in her chest as his dark gaze bore into hers.

Isaac shifted to the side, making room for Jon, and soon she was faced with a solid wall of aggressive males.

She took a step back and felt the wall behind her.

Isaac extended his arm, pressing his hand against the wall on one side of her.

Jon did the same on the other. She was surrounded by them, caged.

Her pulse thudded and her breaths came faster. Each inhalation filled her nose with

their combined scent. Rich and fresh like the forest with just a hint of smoke. She shivered. The smell stirred sensations in her that she didn't understand, a longing she couldn't quite define.

Isaac touched her first. He ran his index finger along her jawline then followed the pulse pounding in the side of her neck. "Have you felt this connection with anyone else?"

She shook her head, but whispered, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Jon pushed his hand into her hair and formed a fist. He wasn't hurting her, but the move was overtly aggressive. "We don't tolerate lying." He leaned down, brushing his lips over hers. "Don't do it again."

"Or what?" she challenged. She'd had enough of bossy males. What little patience she'd had for bullies had been exhausted by Zion.

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Rather than respond with words, Jon released her hair and grabbed her wrist. He led/dragged her farther down the hallway and pulled her into one of the storerooms. As well as the usual bundles and boxes, this one contained stacks of chairs and miscellaneous furniture.

Jon took her to the nearest table and bent her over the dusty surface.

She sneezed and reared away from the offending grime, but he roughly forced her back down.

“Let me go!” she yelled. “This isn’t funny.”

“It’s not meant to be.” Jon drew her arms to the small of her back and held them there while Isaac unfastened her pants.

As soon as Tara realized what they were doing she went wild. Kicking and twisting, she cried out and yelled, hoping to draw attention.

Jon slapped her ass hard, then ordered, “Settle down, hellion.”

“Screw you!”

“If that’s an invitation, we’d be happy to oblige,” Jon mocked.

When Isaac had her pants and panties down around her ankles, they switched places. Isaac’s hold on her arms was not as hard, but she still couldn’t move her upper body. “You are not my mates,” she cried. “You do not have the right to discipline me.”

“We will be soon enough.” Jon stroked her bare bottom, giving each side a firm squeeze. “Consider this the official start of our courtship.” He lifted his hand and brought it down on one cheek and then the other.

Tara gasped and then yelped. The sharp sound was shocking and then came the sting. “Why are you doing this?”

Jon spanked her twice more before bothering to answer. “You lied to me, then challenged me. I am simply answering your question.”

“What question?” Her voice was sharp and accusatory, which made his next set of spanks even harder.

She cried out in frustration and surprise.

The added intensity caused the strangest heat to travel beyond her ass.

Her pussy felt heavy and—God above, was she getting wet? Why was this making her pussy wet?

“Or what,” he reminded, then rained down stinging slaps on her quivering behind.

She squirmed and twisted, humiliated by the situation and her body’s odd reaction.

She was bent over a filthy table, with her pants down around her ankles.

One veritable stranger held her down while another spanked her naked ass, and she was seriously aroused by all of it.

Her core clenched and her clit tingled. If she rubbed against the edge of the table, she would probably come.

“Stop,” she pleaded. “Please, stop. I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“Are you?” Challenge lowered Jon’s voice to a menacing rumble. “I’m not convinced.”

Over and over his palm impacted her bottom.

She held still, concentrating on the pain to combat the pleasure.

Had she always been like this or was there something about these hybrid males that triggered these needs?

A harsh sob shuddered through her. She didn’t care.

She didn’t like it, didn’t want pain to arouse her.

Her entire behind was a throbbing mass by the time he stopped spanking her. “Are you ready to be a good girl?”

“Yes.” The word sounded broken and breathless. She just wanted him to stop.

“Then spread your legs. I want to see if you’re as wet as you smell.”

Horried, she shook her head and squeezed her thighs together. “I’m not,” she cried. “Just leave me alone.”

“Did you just lie to me again?” Jon sounded disbelieving.

Isaac released her arms, and her coat was pulled off before she realized what they intended.

They draped her coat over the small table and turned her around.

Her pants were still bunched around her ankles, but they didn't give her time to pull them up.

Jon lifted her to the table, and she gasped as her tender behind made contact with her coat.

He pushed her legs toward her chest then they drew her knees apart, spreading her thighs.

Her ankles were still bound by her boots and pants, but the position clearly displayed her pussy.

Humiliation and need washed over Tara in alternating waves. Would they fuck her now? Would they take her one after the other, or one in her pussy, the other in her mouth? The thought sent a fresh rush of liquid pooling between her thighs.

As one, the males inhaled deeply and growled.

“Still going to deny being wet?” Jon sneered. He reached between her thighs and ran his fingers along her slick folds. “Then what's all this?”

She just shook her head and refused to speak.

“What happens when you lie to me?”

Again she shook her head.

With their gazes locked, Jon slapped her pussy. Tara cried out more in shock than pain.

“I do not tolerate lies.”

She tried to close her thighs, but he wedged himself between her legs. His second slap was harder.

She clenched her teeth and tried not to scream in frustration. She needed a long, thick cock in her pussy, not a freaking spanking!

He spanked her twice more before asking, “Is this pussy wet for us?”

“Yes!”

“And how did it get that way?” When she didn’t answer fast enough, he delivered two breath-stealing slaps right over her clit.

A shrill scream tore from Tara’s throat and she tried to kick Jon in the face. He shoved her legs forward, pinning her to the wall with her knees.

The door flew open and Zion stood framed by the doorway. He took in the scene with one assessing glance and grinned. “Carry on. And you have my blessing. That one has needed a firm hand for as long as I’ve known her.”

Tara let out an exasperated cry and resumed her struggles.

Isaac gathered her arms and stretched them above her head, pinning them against the wall.

Jon tugged off her boots, then finished removing her pants.

With Isaac’s help, Jon pulled her sweater off over her head and unfastened her bra.

She slapped at both and twisted, kicking all the while, but they soon had her completely naked.

“Much better,” Jon decided as he knelt on the floor in front of her. “With a body like yours we might never allow you to wear clothes.”

“It won’t be your decision,” she sneered.

He laughed and casually draped her legs over his shoulders. Jon slipped his hands beneath her ass and raised her hips off the table. She yelped as his hands squeezed her still-throbbing cheeks. Then his mouth covered her slit and his tongue ventured between her slick folds.

Tara moaned helplessly, her head dropping back against the wall. Jon’s mouth moved over her pussy, his tongue stroking boldly. She canted her hips, helplessly offering him better access to her wetness. He lapped at her core and sucked on her swollen clit.

Isaac bent and covered her mouth with his, exploring her lips just as eagerly as Jon explored her pussy.

Isaac shifted her hands into one of his so he could fondle her breasts.

Moving back and forth, he squeezed firmly then pinched and twisted her nipples.

She gasped and arched her back. So many sensations, so much stimulation.

They attacked so many of her erogenous zones all at once.

She gave herself over to the pleasure, unable to do anything else.

“God, you taste good,” Jon murmured when he finally raised his head. He carefully lowered her bottom to the table then stepped out from between her legs. “Taste her, brother. She’s unbelievably sweet.”

Isaac paused mere inches from her face. His gaze searched hers, his expression unreadable. “We weren’t looking for a mate.” His lips brushed over hers, warm and patient. “But now that we’ve found you…” He didn’t bother finishing his sentence. The meaning was clear.

“I’m not your mate,” she panted. “I don’t even like you.”

Chuckling, Isaac released her arms and moved in front of her.

She was so dazed by their aggressive seduction that she simply lowered her arms to her sides.

Isaac knelt and caught the bend of her knees.

He pushed her legs up and out, spreading her thighs even wider.

He traced her slit with his tongue then shifted her knees higher, rolling her hips upward so he could push his tongue deep into her core.

It was shockingly sexual, even uncivilized. He was literally fucking her with his tongue. Tara had indulged in oral sex before, but her lovers always focused on her clit. This was darker, blatantly carnal. She arched against his mouth, unable to ignore the persistent ache between her thighs.

“This is cruel,” she objected. “I need to come. Please let me come.”

Isaac licked his way up to her clit then slid into her pussy with two of his fingers.

She tightened around him, bearing down as hard as her needy body would let her.

He growled against her wet flesh, lashing her clit with punishing force.

She pressed her back against the wall and rocked against his fingers.

It felt good, but it was a pale foreshadowing of what she really wanted.

She needed to be filled, stretched around their cocks.

She needed to be fucked long and hard—by her mates.

No, she would not bond with these two. They were too bossy, too domineering, too savage.

Isaac continued to suck on her clit and fuck her with his fingers while Jon took her face between his hands and kissed her deeply.

His mouth tasted strongly of her, but that only added to the carnality of the act.

Having them both touch her, penetrate her, set her off like nothing else.

She cried out against Jon's lips and spasmed around Isaac's fingers.

Pleasure blasted through her entire body.

Her nipples peaked and her clit throbbed as wave after wave of sensation washed over her.

“Still going to deny that we're your mates?” Jon challenged, dark eyes gleaming hungrily. “Next time you come it will be our cocks buried deep inside you.”

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Another moan slipped from her as a vivid mental image was triggered by his words. She saw herself kneeling on a bed. Jon stood behind her grasping her hips. He drove his cock into her fast and hard while Isaac fucked her mouth.

Panting harshly, she hopped down from the table and frantically dressed.

Isaac tried to help her, but she slapped his hands away.

“There won’t be a next time,” she insisted as she zipped up her pants.

“I don’t like bossy males, and you two are the worst I’ve ever met.

” She snatched her coat off the table, grabbed her boots off the floor, then threw open the door. “You are not my mates.”

Their laughter followed her down the stairs as Tara sprinted from the lodge.

“I love it here,” Akari said softly as she stared out over the rippling blue-green water.

A river spilled over the edge of the jagged cliff ninety feet above and poured into the small pool.

From there the water flowed through the middle of the feline village, ensuring that the hybrids would never be cut off from the life-giving water.

The village had been built in a semicircle around the waterfall, utilizing the high cliff walls as part of the protective perimeter.

Tara took in the tranquil scene and the troubled young woman at her side.

Thanks to a combination of medical technology and paranormal healing, Akari had recovered physically from the ordeal, but her emotional state was fragile at best. This was their sixth session and Tara felt as if Akari was starting to trust her.

Hopefully, the order Tara had been given that morning would not obliterate that trust.

“Is it just the scenery that you enjoy or is there something else about the setting that appeals to you?” Tara was careful to keep her tone light and conversational.

As soon as Akari felt defensive, she shut down.

She’d hardly spoken at all the first two meetings.

But Tara was patient and stubborn, and she genuinely cared about her new friend.

Akari strolled along the grassy shore. Motion seemed to soothe her. Their first session had been in a traditional office setting and Akari had paced like a caged animal. “I like that the sound of the waterfall blocks out other noises. It makes me feel like I’m alone in the world.”

Many victims isolated themselves, even from the people they loved. That was what Tara’s sister had done. She’d been surrounded by a loving family, yet she wanted to be alone. “What else do you like?”

“The cliffs are high and steep.” She motioned to the rugged stone walls curving around the back of the pool. “It makes me feel safe.”

And safe was something Akari hadn’t felt since the wolves abducted her. “Feeling safe is important. Is there anything or anyone else who makes you feel safe?”

“Can we just talk?” Akari challenged with a frustrated sigh. “I need a friend, Tara, not a therapist.”

Tara was relieved by the reaction. She wasn’t a psychiatrist, didn’t pretend to be.

She was a good communicator, she was compassionate, and the tragedy surrounding Tara’s sister gave her a common ground with Akari.

“All right. Let’s talk. Your mates are terrified that you’ll hurt yourself and frankly I am too.

My sister escaped her pain the only way she knew how.

I would be heartbroken if you made the same choice. ”

Akari stopped walking and pivoted to face Tara. “Your sister was... something happened to her too?”

“Her name was Jessica, and she survived a vicious attack, but couldn’t cope with the memories or the shame.

” Tara gave that a moment to sink in before she stressed, “She had absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, but too many people blamed her for the evil that had been done to her . The first question out of my father’s mouth was ‘why were you at that party?’”

Akari shook her head, obviously disgusted by the reaction. “How did it happen with her?”

Tara hesitated. Would hearing about Jessica trigger Akari or would it help her feel less alone? Tara hadn’t intended on getting into the details, but Akari asked so she was obviously interested. “We were born fourteen months apart and I graduated

early, so we went off to college together.”

A faint smile curved Akari’s lips and she started walking again. “Your parents must have loved that.”

“They’d gotten married young and had kids right away, so they were looking forward to the empty nest. They hadn’t expected it to happen all at once, but they took it all in stride.”

“Did you go to the same university?”

“We did.” Tara matched Akari’s strides, letting her set the pace. “Jess was going to be an engineer, and I was going to be a lawyer.”

Akari looked at her, clearly confused by the statement. “Then how did you end up at Nuevo?”

“That’s another long story. You asked about Jessica.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

Tara nodded. “We shared an apartment just off campus. Neither of us were big into parties, so sorority life wasn’t for us.”

“Yet you said she was at a party when she was attacked.”

“We were juniors, and the year was just ending. Jess let her best friend talk her into going to a fraternity bash. They were there for a couple of hours when her friend hooked up with someone, leaving Jessica alone and uncomfortable. She called me, but I was fighting a migraine, so I’d turned off my phone and gone to bed.

” Tara’s voice broke as a familiar flash of guilt stabbed through her being.

“The night was warm and Jessica desperately wanted to go home, so she left the party on foot.”

“What happened?” Akari persisted when Tara said nothing for a long time.

“Three drunken assholes followed her from the party. They dragged her into their skimmer and took turns hurting her.”

Akari’s jaw clenched and for a moment she just stared out over the water. Then she took a deep breath and looked at Tara. “Please tell me the assholes are rotting in prison.”

The vehemence in Akari’s tone made Tara wonder if Jon was right. Maybe Akari would be more willing to go after her attackers than Tara thought. “She reported what happened to campus security because it happened in the shuttle lot behind the football stadium.”

Akari shook her head, anger sparking in her eyes. “They were football players?”

“No, but they were well known on campus. I’m sure you know the type.”

“Then they were never charged?” Akari sounded horrified and her eyes were saucer round.

Tara shook her head and released a sigh, glad that the story was nearly through.

“The assholes claimed that Jessica wasn’t just willing, but that she pursued them.

Campus security said it was her word against theirs, so the police were never called.

I tried to convince Jessica to go to the police directly, but she refused. ”

“It’s easy to see where this is leading,” Akari blinked back tears, but she sounded angry. “Everyone called your sister a whore and the assholes went on to abuse the next girl.”

“I don’t honestly know,” Tara admitted. “Five months later Jess was dead, and I dropped out of school.”

Akari gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “She took her own life?”

Tara nodded, barely able to speak past the lump in her throat. “We did everything we could to support her, but she shut us out.”

“Being at the mercy of others makes you feel abandoned and alone. Even the ones that love you can’t truly understand.” Akari’s voice was a tremulous whisper, and tears escaped the corners of her eyes.

Tara reached over and placed her hand on the center of Akari’s back. Akari didn’t twist away, so she said, “The ones who love you will do anything to support you. All you need to do is let them try. Shutting yourself away amplifies the pain and gives the memories more power.”

Akari impatiently brushed away her tears and inhaled shakily. “This is why you went to work at the crisis center?”

Tara nodded again and lowered her arm, more than ready to move on.

The tragedy happened seven years ago, but the memories were still painful.

“My sister and I had always been inseparable, so I took her death really hard. After

the fiasco at the university, my parents were determined to find me the best therapist money could buy. Her name was Dr. Korstan and she was wonderful. She supervised the crisis center. That's how I found out about it. "

"If you enjoyed working there, why did you apply to Nuevo?"

There was no accusation in her tone, but Tara didn't want to move from one painful memory to another. "Let's leave that story for another day. I have a question I need to ask you."

"How does hearing about Jessica make me feel?" Akari mocked. "Or would you rather hear about my childhood?"

"Do you want them punished?"

Akari didn't ask Tara to clarify. They both knew who she meant. "Not enough to relive it all. I can barely stay ahead of the memories as it is."

"If there was a way to access the information without dragging you back through the memories, would you allow it?"

"Allow what?" Akari wanted to know. "What are you talking about?"

"The Shadows can access your mind while you're sleeping, but they will not do so unless you give them permission."

Akari looked at Tara, a combination of confusion and concern tightening her features. "I wouldn't remember their visit in the morning?"

Tara shook her head, surprised that Akari was even considering it. "Jon said you would feel nothing."

“Do you believe him?”

Tara thought about it for a moment then nodded.

“I do. He has no reason to lie about this.” She hesitated to make the next point, wasn’t sure if it would help or terrify.

“They could have just done it and not told you a thing, but they wanted your permission. That indicates a sort of code that I think we can trust.”

“And what will be done to the wolves?”

“I don’t know. Zion said it’s against the law to hurt any female. I guess they would?—”

“This isn’t about the law,” Akari cut in. “It’s about the war. Zion wants a reason to kill wolves.” She was walking so fast now that Tara had to jog to keep up with her. “We’ll kill a bunch of them, and they’ll kill a bunch of us. Nothing ever changes.”

Tara didn’t respond. She happened to agree with Akari, but Akari needed to make this decision on her own.

“However.” Akari heaved a loud sigh. “If the wolves get away with what they did to me, it will embolden Elias.”

Tara knew enough about the wolf leader to agree with Akari. By all accounts, Elias was an evil bastard.

“Can I think about it for a day or two?”

Zion had said time was of the essence, but Tara didn’t care. She would not pressure

Akari into doing anything she didn't want to do. "Of course you can. Take all the time you need."

"Why do I get the feeling that's your offer, not Zion's?"

Tara smiled. "Because you've met the pride leader."

Akari returned Tara's smile, and for the first time since Tara met her, the warmth went all the way to her eyes.

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Crouching behind a massive boulder outside the walls of the lupine village, Isaac took a moment to center his mind.

He'd been distracted ever since Tara walked into Zion's office that morning and he struggled to rid his memory of her image.

She was a delightful distraction, one he welcomed and intended to explore for the rest of his life, but now was not the time for romantic strategies.

He was leader of Shadow Team One and every mission they undertook was dangerous.

Are you in position? Isaac sent the question across the heavily shielded mind link he shared with Jon and Kyle.

In their human form, all three could effortlessly refract light.

Their lions were stronger, faster, and more powerful, but this mission required stealth and patience.

The energy shield projected by Shadows made them invisible to their enemies.

Unfortunately, it also made them invisible to each other.

Two is ready , Jon responded.

Three is waiting on One , Kyle assured, his tone light and annoyingly calm.

Jon approached each mission with a hyper-focus that allowed him to spot the most minute details and anticipate problems. Kyle's easygoing manner balanced out the intensity of the other two.

Isaac was able to see the big picture, to assess each move in context and anticipate possible ramifications.

It was the combination of their personalities that made them such a good team.

Here we go , Isaac added and crept toward the perimeter wall.

The guards, all four of them, were huddled around a relatively flat rock.

The evening meal had been delivered a few minutes ago and the wolves were using the rock like a table.

They glanced around, pretending to keep watch, but they were paying more attention to their food and the lively conversation than their surroundings.

It was a habit Isaac had capitalized on numerous times before.

Agilely climbing a massive tree that should have been cut down years ago, Isaac belly-crawled along the thick branch that extended over the wall and dropped to the ground on the inside of the village. He heard the crunch of fallen leaves as each of his teammates joined him.

Travis, a wolf spy, had given them the location of their target, but asked not to be directly involved. Isaac had no problem with the stipulation. Until Elias wised up and cut down Isaac's favorite tree, the Shadow teams could come and go as they pleased.

Creeping along in the shadows of the crude cabins, Isaac made his way toward the

center of the settlement.

He could sense his teammates following, but their steps were as silent as his.

Lupine village was a smaller, messier version of the feline village.

It was unlikely that Elias had patterned his layout after the feline village, but certain features simply made sense when setting up a secure community.

He passed a small group of wolves huddling around a fire.

They laughed and mocked each other, completely unaware of the intruders.

A bit farther down the path, an argument raged inside one of the cabins.

The door flew open and a hybrid was shoved out into the yard.

The male still inside the cabin tried to shut the door, but the other hybrid charged him.

“Fuck you, asshole,” one of the wolves yelled as they began to grapple. They tumbled out into the front yard snarling and growling as both smoothly shifted into wolves.

Drawn by the disturbance, the group around the fire ran over to the other cabin. They didn’t attempt to break up the fight. They stood back and cheered.

Isaac sensed his teammates slowing. Ignore them. We have work to do.

The cabin Travis had indicated was set slightly apart from the communal buildings in the center of the village. Isaac stopped well back from their destination and signaled telepathically for Kyle and Jon to do the same.

This was a recon mission, assess and investigate only.

The order didn't sit well with any of them, but information was all Zion wanted, for now.

Travis had warned them that Dr. Babcock, the driving force behind the Griffin Project, was still alive and working with the wolf leaders.

The wolf raid on the human encampment had been so violent, so savage that not all the dead could be identified.

Clothing and proximity led them to believe that Babcock was among the dead, but Travis swore it had all been a ruse.

A movement to Isaac's right drew his attention. A tall, thin person made their way toward the target cabin. The stranger paused on the stoop and pulled off his glove so he could scan open the door.

Show time , Isaac announced as he slowly approached. The Shadows' ability to disappear was widely known, or at least widely presumed. Their more exotic abilities, however, varied greatly from person to person and were more closely guarded secrets. Go around back , he directed. I'll let you in .

As he approached the cabin, Isaac drew energy into his body and prepared himself mentally for the maneuver he was about to perform.

Releasing his corporeal form took absolute concentration and an immense amount of energy so he used the ability judiciously.

If he lost focus for even a millisecond he could materialize inside a solid object.

He reached the cabin and pressed his hands against the rustic logs.

Cold wind wafted across his face, but he ignored the distraction.

Through many years of trial and error, he found that releasing his form a section at a time was less exhausting.

Pouring energy into his hands, he dissolved their bones and flesh, allowing pure energy to sink into the wood.

As his forearms entered, his hands re-solidified.

He eased himself forward, rolling the shift through his body so he passed smoothly through the wall.

Weakness hit him on the other side and his knees nearly buckled. He blindly reached for support and found the back of a chair. His shield was still active, so he took a moment to catch his breath.

The cabin's occupant stood by the door taking off his coat.

His back was to Isaac, but already murderous rage welled inside him.

Graying brown hair, slim build, even the arrogant tilt of the man's head was horribly familiar.

The Shadow Program was one of the last and most successful divisions of the Griffin Project so Babcock supervised the procedures personally.

Babcock turned around and Isaac felt his claws extend.

He could release his lion and rip out this demon's throat before Babcock even realized he was there.

Isaac pictured the act, felt warm blood coat his tongue and savored the metallic taste.

This fucker deserved death a thousand times over, but first they needed to know what the hell he was doing with the wolves.

Babcock wasn't the only scientist on Rydaria.

If Isaac killed his tormentor, the wolves would likely move on to someone else.

Calming down enough to retract his claws, Isaac walked across the cabin and made his way to the back of the house.

As with the basic layout of the village, the wolves had patterned their cabins after the cats'.

A small utility room was tucked away in the back corner of each cabin.

Isaac eased open the back door and felt Jon and Kyle brush past him.

Travis is right. It's Babcock, but we don't have permission to kill him , Isaac stressed. Believe me, I want to as badly as you do.

In single file formation, the team edged their way into the main room of the cabin. A long table had been set up along the front wall. Isaac recognized the molecular scanner and a primitive data access terminal, but the other equipment was unfamiliar.

Babcock analyzed some sort of report, entering data from time to time and reassessing the resulting figures and diagrams. Isaac stared at the holo-display for

several long moments before admitting, I have no idea what that is .

Same here , Kyle said with a sigh

I think it's...no, I've got nothing. This is a waste of time , Jon concluded, obviously frustrated by the outcome.

Someone knocked on the front door and Babcock quickly deactivated the display. "Come in."

A rangy lupine male entered followed closely by a human female. She kept her head down, eyes on the floor. There were no bruises or other obvious signs of abuse, but her demeanor bothered Isaac.

Babcock picked up a small device and approached the female. "How did you tolerate the last injection?"

"A few hours of nausea," she told him. "But I got through it."

Babcock ran the scanner over the female's body from shoulders to knees. He never actually touched her, just skimmed the device an inch or two above her.

"She was... unusually responsive that night," the wolf said and smiled at the female.

"That's to be expected," Babcock assured them.

What the hell were they talking about? What sort of injection made a female 'unusually responsive'?

Babcock paused and scrolled through the readouts on the handheld scanner. "Everything looks good here. Shall we move on with the next injection?"

“Will she become that needy again?” The wolf sounded a bit concerned, yet desire ignited in his yellow eyes.

“The dose increases each time so the side effects will likely intensify as well.”

“She’ll be even more desperate? Shit,” the wolf muttered. “It took me and both of my brothers to settle her down before.”

Babcock shrugged, completely unconcerned with the complication. “So invite a couple of friends. Willing partners shouldn’t be a problem in this village.”

A distressed sound escaped the female and she shook her head. “I don’t want to go through that again.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, and she kept her gaze on the floor.

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The wolf went to her, cupping her chin and raising her face. “We didn’t hurt you, did we? I was there the entire time. I made damn sure no one hurt you.”

“But that’s not me. I would never...” A soft sob rattled her chest and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“I thought you wanted this as badly as I do,” he chided, displeasure hardening his features.

“I do, but I didn’t realize what it would take.”

“No one will hurt you.” He kissed her forehead. “No one will touch you unless you want them to.”

“But I’ll want them to,” she cried. “I’ll want all of them to.”

“Then there isn’t a problem.” He smiled broadly and brushed his lips over hers. “You’re sexy as hell when you’re fucking. You know I like watching you.”

She looked at Babcock, lips trembling, eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “How many injections will this take?”

“It’s hard to say. Six, perhaps as many as ten.”

Another distressed cry escaped her lips and she shook her head. “I don’t think I can do this.”

The wolf lifted his hands and took a step back. “We do this together or not at all. I will not make you do any of it. I told you that from the start. You know how badly I want this, but the decision is yours.”

The wolf’s attitude surprised Isaac. He’d expected pressure, even outright coercion.

But everything indicated that the female was a willing participant in this experiment.

Experiment , he shuddered. Just the word brought his captivity back in vivid detail.

Endless painful procedures and weeks of isolation as he gradually became a being he didn’t recognize.

“I want it too,” she finally relented. “If a few wild nights are the price I must pay, then so be it.” She looked at Babcock and said firmly, “I’m ready for the next injection.”

I’ve seen enough , Jon growled. Let’s get out of here before I forget our mission parameters and rip out all their throats.

Agreed , Isaac responded.

They exited through the back door and hurried through the village.

Reaching the tree limb was no easy task from inside the walls.

Isaac and Kyle hoisted Jon up and then Jon hung down and helped pull them up.

It required Jon to become partly visible long enough for them to grasp his hands, so the maneuver always made Isaac uncomfortable.

But the mission was completed without complication, and they were soon jogging through the forest on their way back to the feline village.

Once they were well on their way, they dispersed their shields to conserve energy.

They hadn't gone far when someone shouted, "Halt and identify yourselves!"

Isaac glanced behind him and found two wolves with pulse rifles pointed in his direction. Run! he ordered. I've got this.

As he turned to face the wolves, Isaac released his animal nature.

Searing energy swept over his body, momentarily driving the breath from his lungs.

He absorbed the pain, welcomed it, as he frantically shed his clothes.

His joints popped and his muscles stretched.

He was bare to the waist when the change hit him, so he skillfully shifted out of his pants and boots.

The metamorphosis only took a few seconds, but it was long enough for the wolves to fire.

The first pulse zinged over his head. The second drilled into his shoulder.

Isaac roared angrily and lunged for the lupine hybrids. Seeing a massive lion charging toward them, both guards turned and ran.

Cowards, he snarled inwardly. Damn it. He was in the mood for a good brawl.

Panting for a moment, Isaac paused to refocus his mind. Bloodlust pounded through his veins, and the wound in his shoulder throbbed.

Kyle gathered up Isaac's clothes and walked back toward his friend.

Isaac released the shift, reluctantly caging his lion. "I told you to run."

Kyle shrugged as he handed Isaac his pants. "I did run, but then I circled back."

After quickly tugging on his pants, Isaac poured energy into his shoulder. The wound had been closed by the shift, but the surrounding tissue was still charred and bruised. "What were they doing out this far?"

"Elias must have ordered more patrols," Jon supposed. He stood slightly back from Kyle patiently waiting for the others.

Isaac finished dressing and they continued their trek toward home.

"Any idea what the injections are about?" Kyle asked as they zigzagged through the trees.

"Some sort of conversion," Jon mused. "Maybe sexual compatibility. The wolves are even more animalistic than we are. Human females might not enjoy their idea of sex."

"It didn't sound like she was having trouble adjusting to his demands," Isaac pointed out. "Are those fuckers trying to breed her?"

Jon stopped running and faced him. "That isn't possible, is it?"

"I don't know." Isaac shook his head. "I hope not. The last thing we need is more wolves."

They resumed their trek through the trees, all three of them lost in thoughts and speculation.

Isaac reached out telepathically for Diego, Shadow Leader, as they approached the feline village. We're back. Would you like an update now or in the morning?

Lexie and I are babysitting the gathering . Diego did not sound happy. Please, come distract me.

Wishing they had something more definitive to report, Isaac told him, We're on our way.

Rumbling laughter and boisterous conversations echoed through the lodge.

Tara watched it all with a vague sense of detachment.

There were thirty-eight women and well over a hundred hybrid males mingling in the large open room.

The number of attendees was supposed to be limited to one hundred twenty, so both sides were bending the rules.

Fresh fruit and thinly sliced meats had been used to create a variety of finger foods.

There was even a bar offering a small selection of Rydarian liquor.

Each item appeared to welcome the females.

In truth they were temptations, subtle enticements meant to wear down the women's defenses.

“Are you alright?” Lexie asked, her voice warm and filled with compassion. “You’ve hardly spoken a word all night and we both know that’s not like you.”

Tara glanced at Lexie and sighed. “Zion gave me an ultimatum this morning. If I don’t convince Akari to let a team of Shadows take the images of her attackers from her mind, he’ll make me move into the shelter.”

“Sounds like Zion.” Lexie shook her head and the overhead lights gleamed off her long blonde hair. “How did Akari react, or haven’t you asked her yet?”

“She’s thinking about it.”

They lapsed into silence for a moment. Tara took a sip of iolla berry wine and struggled with the fallout of her conversation with Zion.

Her wrestling match with the Shadows in the storeroom had a lasting effect.

She hadn’t been able to rid her mind of their images or the sensations they’d unleashed in her.

Having an intense weekend encounter with them would be amazing, but binding herself to someone so domineering was far less appealing.

“There you are,” Claire cried as she worked her way through the crowd. “Can you believe this turnout? There are even more people tonight than the last time I attended.”

Lexie nodded. “People aren’t obeying the rules.”

“Can you blame them?” Claire defended. “It’s been years since any of these guys have touched a female, and the women are trying to avoid starvation and freezing to

death.”

“You make it sound so transactional,” Tara grumbled as her gaze swept the room. Without even realizing it, she was looking for her Shadows. Her Shadows? Oh, this wasn’t good. “I want companionship and stability, protection and passion.”

“And the right coalition can provide it,” Lexie assured with a dreamy smile. “I’ve never been happier.”

A bit of Claire’s cheer fell away as she asked, “Where are your mates? I’m surprised they let you out of their sight.”

“Kane and Malik are out on patrol. Diego is around here somewhere.” Lexie rolled to the balls of her feet as she tried to spot her mate, but apparently the room was too crowded. She shrugged and turned back to Claire. “Has anyone caught your eye? You’ve been to several of these, haven’t you?”

“This is my third, and there has been no real spark with anyone yet.”

“Keep an open mind and it’s bound to happen.” Lexie shifted her gaze to Tara, a playful smile curving her lips. “What about you? Did sparks fly between you and Zion this morning?”

“Good God, no! I can’t stand that jerk.” Tara shuddered just thinking about the arrogant hybrid.

This was not really the time or place for this conversation, but getting Lexie alone was almost impossible.

Besides, it might be nice to have more than one opinion on the possibilities.

“Do you know Isaac and Jon from Shadow Team One?”

“Zion ordered Team One to work with Akari?” All playfulness vanished from Lexie’s demeanor and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Team One is Diego’s go-to team. He uses them for everything, but Jon can be downright scary. Was Kyle there? You didn’t mention his name.”

Pivoting toward her friends, Tara lowered her voice as much as the noisy room allowed. “Isaac mentioned Kyle, but he wasn’t there this morning. What’s he like?”

Lexie’s brows arched and her smile returned. “Is there a particular reason we’re talking about Shadow Team One?”

Lexie knew Tara too well. They’d been through too much together to attempt to keep secrets from each other. “I might have had a private conversation with Jon and Isaac after we left Zion’s office. I was wondering if the conversation might have been less... overwhelming if Kyle had been there too.”

Claire listened intently, but said nothing. Like Tara, Claire looked at Lexie and waited for her to answer.

“You’ll like Kyle,” Lexie predicted. “He’s less intense than the other two.”

Tara let out a shaky breath as she fought back erotic memories of what had gone on in that storeroom. “Jon and Isaac could definitely use a little balancing.”

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“You brought it up, so tell us about this conversation,” Lexie prompted, her smile broadening into a pleased grin.

Lexie was clearly having fun, but Tara didn’t want her to get the wrong idea.

“I admit I was intrigued. None of the other groups have pursued me so aggressively. But I don’t think they’re the right coalition for me.

I’m too independent. We’d drive each other crazy.

” So why couldn’t she stop thinking about them?

“I think all of the Shadows are terrifying,” Claire admitted. “I definitely need someone more laid back.”

Lexie studied Tara for a long silent moment then shrugged. “I just want you to be happy. What about Flynn and Levi? I know you’ve interacted with them. You’re staying in their cabin. They could just move back in and?—”

“As of this morning, they’re courting Bianca.”

“Really?” Lexie smiled, clearly happy about the news. “I hadn’t heard.”

Tara nodded. She was happy for her friend, but it left her in an awkward position. “I think they make an adorable couple, er, trio, but the men are moving back into the cabin soon, which leaves me out in the cold.”

“You’re only in the shelter until you find a coalition you’re willing to date,” Lexie countered.

“So, date someone,” Claire reinforced. “That’s what I intend to do. I will never be cold and hungry again. Not when the alternative is so interesting .”

Tara and Lexie laughed at her melodramatic inflection, but Tara’s mind was drawn back to that morning.

She’d been alone with Isaac and Jon for less than ten minutes before they had her naked and completely under their control.

She shivered. The experience had been way beyond interesting, but she didn’t want to spend the rest of her life with anyone that...

dominant was the only word that truly fit.

“I’m going to go mingle,” Claire said. “Let’s all get together for lunch or something. I’d love to hear more about mated life.”

“I’d like that,” Lexie told her.

“Me too,” Tara added.

Claire melted into the crowd and Lexie looked at Tara. “Is she really as well adjusted as she’s pretending? Her brother was torn apart right in front of her a few weeks ago, yet she is ready to party. It doesn’t make sense.”

The reminder filled Tara with guilt. She’d been so focused on Akari that she forgot that one of her friends had been traumatized too. “She’s hiding from the pain. I’ll talk to her, see if she’ll let me counsel her.”

“Good. I’m worried about her.”

Everyone around them started whispering and the crowd suddenly parted. Tara looked across the room to see what had caused the disruption. Diego was returning from the refreshment table where Lexie had sent him a short time before.

Diego’s dark gaze locked on his mate and Lexie smiled. “Took you long enough,” she chided playfully.

After handing Lexie the wineglass, Diego took her face between his hands and kissed her mouth. The exchange was a carnal mating of lips and tongues. “You like it when I make you wait,” he teased when he finally raised his head. “How much longer do we have to stay here?”

Lexie laughed. “Until we find Tara a coalition.”

As if hearing her stipulation, the massive doors to the lodge banged open and Isaac, Jon, and another male strode in.

Tara had never seen the third male before, but it stood to reason that he was Kyle.

Everyone scrambled out of their way, much as they had for Diego.

Did Shadows practice intimidation, or did it come naturally?

“You don’t look happy,” Lexie noted as the Shadows reached her and Diego. “Were there complications?”

Ah, this wasn’t a social visit. Shadow Team One was reporting to their leader.

“The mission went smoothly,” Isaac told her. His vivid green eyes shifted toward

Tara for a moment and a sudden rush of heat cascaded through her body. “Unfortunately, we were unable to determine anything useful.”

“We’re not scientists,” Kyle grumbled. “I have no idea why Zion thought we would be able to figure out what the hell they’re doing.

” His shaggy brown hair just brushed his shoulders and he had pale blue eyes.

He was lean and exuded a sense of leashed strength.

Lexie was right. Kyle wasn’t quite as intense as the other two.

“Maybe if you explained what you saw, or better yet show the images to someone with a medical background, they could figure out what it all means,” Lexie suggested.

Show them images? Tara was pretty sure Lexie didn’t mean photographs. Shadows could extract images from a person’s memory without them knowing about it. Why was she surprised that they could pass them from mind to mind?

Diego nodded. “I’ll have Malik contact you in the morning.”

“It would be helpful if Kane were there too,” Isaac said, suddenly tenser than before.

“Kane?” Diego was clearly surprised by the request. “What does Kane have to do with this?”

Isaac looked at Tara before he responded. “Is it alright to discuss this now or should the details wait?”

Diego followed the direction of Isaac’s glance and chuckled.

“Tara is my mate’s best friend. Whatever Lexie knows, Tara knows.

” Then he realized what he’d just said and turned to Tara.

“I’m being rude. This is Shadow Team One, as you’ve likely figured out.

Isaac is team leader.” He motioned to each male in turn. “That’s Jon, and finally Kyle.”

“I met Isaac and Jon this morning,” she said softly. “But it’s nice to meet you, Kyle.”

“Likewise.” A smile slowly passed across his lips and his vivid blue gaze lingered on her face.

He held out his hand and she shook it. His fingers engulfed hers and tingling heat zinged up her arm.

A warm flush crept up her neck and pinkened her cheeks.

Was Kyle as sexually aggressive as the other two?

How soon could she find out? Her mouth went dry, so she quickly raised her glass and took a sip of wine.

“Please continue,” she urged when she could speak again. “I didn’t mean to derail the conversation.”

Isaac turned back to Diego and went on. “A couple entered the cabin while we were there. She seemed intimidated at first, but the rest of the conversation convinced me that she was not being abused.”

“That’s debatable,” Kyle grumbled. “Babcock is giving her injections that spike her libido. Her mate’s attitude was upsetting.”

“Spiking her libido wasn’t the purpose for the injections. It was a side effect,” Isaac argued.

“And she still agreed to be injected?” Tara wanted to know. “If she was being forced in any way, we need to?—”

“She wasn’t,” Jon assured. “Her mate insisted that the choice was hers and she agreed to the next injection. She might feel pressured by her desire to please him, but she was not being forced.”

“You think they’re trying to breed her.” Diego guessed. “Is that why you want to speak with Kane?”

Isaac nodded. His hands were clasped behind his back and his features remained tense. “I know he hates talking about his captivity and I won’t ask any personal questions. I just want his insight into what we witnessed.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Diego told him.

“Thank you, sir,” Isaac responded. “I wish we had better news.”

Nearly all the hybrids had been, or in many cases still were, in the military when they’d been captured by Nuevo Biotech.

The familiar culture and heightened aggression of the hybrids led them to create societies with strict rules and rigid power structures.

Each village had chosen its strongest member, or members, to lead.

Any misbehavior was dealt with swiftly and severely.

Social dynamics were arranged similarly.

Each feline coalition had its own cabin and the coalition leader's word was law.

Not surprisingly, females were expected to do as they were told.

According to Lexie it was only in the bedroom that their submission was absolute.

The rest of the time, women were encouraged to find challenges and meaningful ways of contributing to the village.

It was the absolute submission part that worried Tara. Lexie had adapted to Rydarian expectation with relative ease, but Tara valued her independence. She wasn't sure she would ever be happy under someone else's control.

"Are you enjoying the party?" A hint of mockery rippled through Isaac's deep tone.

Awareness pulsed between them, warm and electric. "I know these gatherings are necessary. We don't have a lot of opportunities to interact with anyone. Still, there are much better environments if you want to get to know someone."

"Like the storeroom upstairs?" Jon suggested with a fleeting grin.

Tara just glared at him and took another sip of her wine.

"My teammates have the advantage over me." Kyle's friendly tone drew her attention.

"I wasn't at the meeting this morning, but I'd love the opportunity to learn more

about you.

” Kyle managed to appear engaged without seeming predatory, until he said, “Our cabin is nearby. We can escape the noise and get to know each other.”

Tara swallowed hard. She knew damn well what would happen if she went to their cabin.

Finding mates was the point of all this, and Isaac and Jon had already indicated their intention to claim her.

Hybrids were driven by instinct. It took them minutes or days to determine compatibility, not months or years.

She sucked in a steadying breath and considered her options.

If she wanted to remain in the village, she had to choose a coalition.

And these three were the only males who had attracted her interest. She found them physically appealing and was intrigued by their abilities. Why not find out more about them?

She licked her lips and stated, “I’d like that, as long as you understand that all I’m agreeing to is conversation.”

“You’re safe with us, Tara,” Jon assured her, but the smoldering intensity in his dark eyes made it hard to believe.

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They were engineered to hunt, overpower, and dominate. Trepidation gathered in Tara's belly, and she looked at Lexie. Lexie knew all the Shadow teams. Wouldn't she have warned Tara away if this one was dangerous?

Lexie lightly elbowed Diego in the ribs and nodded toward his subordinates.

"I expect all three of you to be on your best behavior." Diego's voice rang with authority and his serious expression grew even more stern. "Tara is my mate's best friend. You will treat her with the same respect you would offer Lexie."

"Yes, sir."

"Of course, sir."

"Understood."

The overlapping responses made Tara smile. Her father had offered a similar lecture to her sister's first boyfriend. The 'behave or else' threat had been relatively effective with the sixteen-year-old football player, but she was less sure it would curtail the behavior of three sex-starved Shadows.

"Let me grab my coat," Tara said. The Shadow team went with her and again everyone seemed to scurry out of their way. "Is the entire village afraid of you?"

"They're curious about us," Kyle answered, "but they're afraid of Diego."

She understood that reaction. Diego was nearly as intimidating as Zion.

Still, Diego changed whenever he was around Lexie.

He softened and became more personable. “Did you guys know Diego before the Griffin Project? Did you know each other? A lot of the people I’ve spoken with were in the same military unit. ”

“I was Kyle’s commanding officer,” Isaac told her. “We met Jon during our captivity.”

“I see.” She knew better than to delve any deeper into that subject. None of the hybrids wanted to talk about the atrocities they’d endured while under the control of Nuevo Biotech. Tara didn’t blame them. Her past had been shaped by tragedy as well so she knew how easily it could take over.

She dug through the pile of coats on the table until she found her trusty parka.

Kyle helped her into the knee-length coat, and she raised the hood before braving the outdoors.

The Shadows wore long-sleeved tactical garments, but no outerwear.

Most of the hybrids could regulate their body temperature, so they weren’t as susceptible to harsh weather as humans.

They stepped out onto the wide wraparound porch and Tara hesitated.

The night was cold, but calm, and stars filled the sky.

Tara looked around, enjoying the tranquility.

The common buildings edged one of the training fields on three sides, reminding her

of Jackson Square in New Orleans.

Beyond the village walls rose steep, snowcapped mountains, though they were shadowy impressions in the moonlight.

“This is nice.” She took a deep breath, allowing the cool night to calm her.

“How long have you known Lexie?” Kyle moved up beside her, resting his hands on the railing.

He was the most talkative of the three, so Tara found herself being drawn to him. She felt a connection with all three of them, but the others were harder to engage. Isaac was too serious, and something about Jon still scared her.

“Lexie and I were in the same detention center during the trials,” Tara answered.

“Ironically, we never knew each other during our years at Nuevo. She worked remotely while I was in the corporate headquarters on the lunar outpost.” The wind kicked up and Tara shivered violently and burrowed deeper into the warmth of her coat.

“Let’s get you out of this wind.” Isaac motioned toward the stairs leading off the porch.

She nodded and followed him down. The Shadows formed a semicircle around her as they made their way through the village.

Isaac strolled along on her right. Kyle walked on her left, his hand lightly touching the small of her back.

She could sense Jon behind her, but he didn’t speak again until they reached the

cabin.

The feline village had been arranged in orderly clusters.

Each cluster contained fourteen cabins and housed hybrids with similar jobs or interests.

There was a small grassy area in the middle of each cluster where the occupants could gather to socialize or cook their evening meal.

The morning meal was generally casual and eaten in the cabins.

Food was available midday in the common dining hall so most of the hybrids didn't bother going home until their workday ended.

The clusters were easily accessed on a wide graveled path.

Tara had never made the entire circle, but the path wound its way through the entire village.

As Kyle had said, their cabin wasn't far from the lodge.

Isaac opened the door and ushered her inside.

She glanced around, but there wasn't much to see.

This cabin was nearly identical to the one she'd shared with Bianca for the past few weeks.

The kitchen, dining area, and living room were one open space.

Four doors ran along the far wall. Three led to bedrooms and one to a bathroom.

The largest bedroom also had a small private bathroom.

The main bathroom could be accessed from the living room and both the smaller bedrooms. The floorplan was simple, but functional, making the most of limited space.

Jon took her coat and hung it on the wall rack near the door. His dark gaze followed her, but he remained quiet and watchful.

“Would you like something to drink?” Kyle asked with an engaging smile.

She shook her head. “I had more than enough at the gathering, but thanks.”

Isaac motioned toward the couch. “Why don’t you get comfortable?”

She moved to the far end of the sofa and sat, feeling tense and awkward. This had seemed like a good idea in the lodge, but she was vulnerable here, not in danger, just outnumbered. The Shadows watched her closely, their hungry gazes following every movement she made.

“I talked to Akari today,” she told them, hoping the fact would please them. She hadn’t achieved what they’d asked of her, but at least she’d tried.

“Did she agree?” Jon wanted to know.

Tara shook her head. “She was more receptive than I expected, but she asked for time to think about it.”

“If she’s honestly considering it, that’s fine,” Jon responded. “But don’t let her use it

to avoid a decision.”

There was no way in hell Tara was going to pressure Akari. Rather than argue, she changed the subject. “You guys have told me just enough about being Shadows to make me curious. Can you tell me more or is it all top secret?”

“A Shadow is what I do,” Jon insisted. “It is not who I am.”

Jon’s point was valid. No one should be defined by their job, unless their occupation was all they had. Half the people at Nuevo had been like that and she found it sad. Still, she needed more information before she could make any sort of decision.

“We’ll get to the personal questions in a bit. I promise.” She smiled at him, but his expression remained inscrutable. “Are Shadow teams strictly recon or do you perform other tasks?” She was looking at Jon as she asked the question, but Isaac answered.

“We do whatever Zion needs us to do.”

It wasn’t much of an answer. Damn it. This was harder than she’d expected. Did they want to get to know her or not?

“The Earth equivalent of what we do is special ops, like Navy SEALs or Space Force Specters,” Kyle told her as he sank onto one of the chairs facing her.

“Our training was extensive, both before and since we arrived on Rydaria. Each team has unique abilities so different teams are dispatched for different missions.”

Encouraged by his willingness to indulge her, she grew braver. “What does your team specialize in?”

“Danger,” Jon offered as he sat down next to Kyle. With his glossy dark hair and

flashing eyes, he personified the word. “We’re assigned missions too risky for the other teams.”

Isaac moved to the wood-burning stove and quickly built up the fire. Once the room began to warm, he joined her on the couch.

“So, what does an average mission entail?” she prompted. “There has to be more to it than sneaking into the lupine village to observe Dr. Babcock.”

“None of our objectives are pleasant,” Jon warned. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Will you please answer one last question before we move on?” She sweetened the request with her prettiest smile. Flirting didn’t come naturally to Tara, but she really wanted to understand what a Shadow team did.

“I cannot agree to answer without hearing the question.” Jon crossed his legs, his gaze gleaming in the subdued light of the cabin.

“How many of the rumors are true?” She shivered as all the possibilities ran through her mind. “Are all the Shadows psychic? Can you control people with your minds? Can you really turn invisible?”

Jon chuckled, but the sound was dry and humorless. He narrowed his eyes and a wave of rippling distortion passed over his body as he gradually faded from view.

“Oh, my God,” Tara breathed, covering her mouth with her hand.

Disbelief gave way to awe as she stared at the empty space where Jon sat moments before.

She’d heard that the hybrids could shapeshift, but it wasn’t until she saw it for herself

that she believed it was true.

Apparently, turning invisible affected her the same way. “How are you doing that?”

Jon’s voice was disembodied for a moment then he became visible again. “We produce an energy field that refracts light. It creates the same optical illusion used in armor and military shielding all over Earth-controlled space.”

“Well, it’s damn effective,” Tara assured him as she shifted her hand to her throat.

She’d been afraid he wouldn’t answer her.

She certainly hadn’t expected a demonstration.

“The trials revealed that you guys can do a lot more than most of us realized, but I keep learning about even more. I didn’t believe you guys could shapeshift until I saw it happen during the raid on our encampment.

Can all the Shadows manifest this refracting shield? ”

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“Some of us are better at it than others,” Kyle said. “Two of our members can’t refract light at all.”

“Then what makes them Shadows?”

“Other skills,” Isaac stressed, making it obvious he had no intention of elaborating.

“Okay, let’s talk about your skills,” she countered, feeling a bit feisty. “Are you telepathic?”

All three of us can slip our thoughts into the minds of others, but interactive mind-speak usually requires a link.

Isaac’s deep, commanding voice sounded inside her head and a shiver dropped down her spine. “You said you can retrieve images. What else are you able to do?” She was almost afraid to ask. Imagining someone with paranormal abilities and meeting one—or three—was a very different experience.

Desire flared within Isaac’s green eyes, and he motioned her toward him. “Slide over here and I’ll show you.”

Heat spread across her cheeks as she boldly met his gaze. “We’ll get to that shortly, but I’d like to know more about you first.”

“Fair enough,” Isaac grumbled, but he didn’t sound pleased by the delay.

“Where’d you grow up? Were you and your family close? Have you ever been in a

serious relationship?”

“We’re being interviewed,” Kyle observed with a smirk. “Make your answers good or she’ll reject our claim.”

The playful mockery in his tone fueled Tara’s feistiness. “You’re next, so think seriously about what you intend to tell me.”

He laughed and saluted her. “Yes, General.”

Shifting her attention back to Isaac, Tara asked, “Do you mind talking about your background? If it’s painful I can focus on something else.”

“It’s not painful as much as immaterial. We’ve all changed so much since our years on Earth that it doesn’t seem real anymore.”

Off-world communication was forbidden, so there was no way for anyone on Rydaria to maintain a relationship with anyone they’d left behind.

Four years was a long time and every person on Rydaria had been ripped from their old life against their will.

The hybrids had been changed, literally transformed into another species.

It was probably less painful to disassociate from the past and focus on the future.

“My last apartment was in Colorado Springs,” Kyle volunteered, “but I’ve lived all over Earth-controlled space.”

Kyle was the most personable of her potential mates, so it wasn’t surprising that he was willing to share.

Still, she appreciated the openness. “Did you move around by choice or did your occupation require it?” Military service was the most common reason for frequent moves, so she asked, “Were you an army brat?”

“Guilty as charged. I had three brothers and a much younger sister. All my male relatives and half of my female relatives served in the military in one capacity or another,” Kyle explained.

“It never occurred to me to consider any other occupation. We never had a lot of money, but family was everything to us.”

She smiled wistfully. Her childhood hadn’t been that different from Kyle’s. All her memories centered on family. But her sister’s death had changed that forever. Her parents divorced and her brother broke off contact. Even her mother, who had been the life of any party, became sad and withdrawn.

“Which branch of the military did you join?” she asked, trying to stay focused on Kyle.

“Space Force. That’s where I met Isaac. And I’ll spare you the trouble of asking the next set of questions.

We were stationed at the Mars Annex when our entire unit was kidnapped by Nuevo Biotech.

We were tested and four of us were assigned to the Shadow Program.

We were their prisoner for six years and every minute of it was utter hell.

Now I’m here.” He spread his arms, indicating the cabin.

With six years in captivity and four years here, it had been a full decade since any of them had participated in their old lives. No wonder Isaac said it was immaterial.

“We weren’t kidnapped. We were sold to Nuevo,” Isaac muttered bitterly. “The military filled their laboratories for decades and everyone just turned a blind eye.”

“I’m sorry. The added betrayal makes it even worse.” She wasn’t surprised by the revelation, but nothing like that had come out during the trials. All the accusations, all the blame, had been focused on Nuevo Biotech and their employees.

The public outcry had been terrible. A list of names and personal ident codes had been released online, so Tara and many others received death threats.

She’d had things thrown at her and she’d been called every obscene name in the book.

The worst part was that she hadn’t deserved the abuse.

She’d trusted the wrong people and failed to ask enough questions, but she honestly hadn’t known anything about the Griffin Project while she worked for Nuevo.

She shoved the memories aside and looked at Jon. “Were you part of Isaac’s unit as well?”

Jon shook his head, but said nothing.

“Were you in another branch of the military?”

One corner of his mouth quirked as he said, “Depends who you ask.”

What the hell did that mean? It was obvious that he didn’t want to talk about this, but

she couldn't consider them as serious suitors until she understood the forces that shaped them. "That sounds intriguing. Will you please explain?"

"My team had a codename, but officially we didn't exist," he told her. "My skillset has been augmented, but being a Shadow isn't that different from what I did on Earth."

"I see." Did he only gather information or was he some sort of assassin? A chill tingled down her spine and Tara shivered. It was all too easy to picture Jon slipping a blade between someone's ribs or wrapping his hands around their throat. The male exuded danger like no one she'd ever met.

Before she could think of a clever way of digging deeper, Jon asked, "What did you do for Nuevo?"

"I was an executive assistant for the CFO. I had nothing to do with the experiments." It was important to her that they knew that.

Performing medical experiments on a person without their permission was beyond reprehensible.

"I was in the admin building on the other side of the complex from the labs. I had no reason to interact with any of the medical personnel."

Jon accepted her statement with a subtle nod. "Santa Rosa, California."

It took her a second to realize why he'd offered the location. "That's where you grew up?"

"It's where I lived the longest. I was born in Sacramento."

“Kyle is from all over, Jon is from California.” She looked at Isaac and arched her brows. “Are you still refusing to participate?”

“We’re all Rydarian now,” he countered stubbornly. “Our childhood homes are irrelevant.”

“He’s from Chicago,” Kyle provided, waving dismissively. “He’s one of four kids, all boys. Jon was an only child until his mom married husband number two and then he had three stepsiblings. What about you? If we’re going to compare childhoods, you need to play too.”

“I grew up in Santa Fe with a sister and a baby brother. I was in my twenties when I moved to Phoenix. That’s where I was living when... that was the last place I lived on Earth.”

“Why’d you apply to Nuevo?” Isaac wanted to know. “There are all sorts of executive assistant jobs on Earth.”

Emotions surged through her mind, subdued yet familiar.

She’d lost her sister seven years ago. Why did it still have the power to affect her?

Stupid question. It would always have the power to affect her.

That sort of loss never disappeared entirely.

She had just learned to manage the pain.

How often had she taught the people she counseled similar strategies?

“I desperately needed a change of scenery after my sister died.” Talking about Jessica

with Akari had been necessary. She really didn't want to get into it all over again.

A long, tense pause followed so Tara thought they'd let it go. Then Kyle asked, "How did she die?"

Tara sighed. She had probed into their pasts. It was only natural for them to be curious about hers. "Suicide."

"Jesus," he muttered. "I'm so sorry."

"Tell us what happened." As usual, Jon's autocratic tone made it sound like a command.

"Jessica was raped during her junior year at college, and the counselor she was assigned by the university was utterly incompetent. Jess fell into a deep depression and never recovered. My parents and I were powerless to help her. We tried everything we could, everything the idiot counselor suggested, but none of it worked. Jessica took her life five months after the attack."

"Oh, my God." Isaac scooted closer and reached for her hand. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

Tara had heard the words so often through the years that they had become meaningless.

She didn't blame Isaac for responding automatically.

No one knew how to react to another person's grief, especially someone they'd just met.

Instead, she continued, "Jess and I had always been incredibly close, so I didn't deal

well with her death.

After the fiasco at the University, my parents refused to trust my care to anyone else.

They searched for and found a therapist that specialized in victim recovery.

She was wonderful. Her name is Dr. Korstan and she runs a crisis prevention center.

Working there, helping survivors rebuild their lives, was good for me. ”

“Then why leave Earth?” Kyle asked carefully.

“There were a couple of reasons, but primarily everything I did, everywhere I went reminded me of Jessica. I had to get away.”

“This is why Zion asked you to work with Akari,” Isaac realized.

Tara nodded. “I’m not a licensed psychologist, but sometimes all people need is an objective listener.

In fact, that’s how I’d like to spend my time once I choose a coalition.

Everyone in this village, everyone on this planet, has suffered significant loss and been subjected to all sorts of trauma. I want to help as many as I can.”

Isaac scoffed. “If word spreads that an unmated female is willing to meet alone with males, half the village will line up for sessions.”

She glared at him. “Zion already made it clear that it won’t be allowed until after I’ve been claimed.”

“Good,” Jon reinforced. “Meeting alone with any male is an open invitation.”

“Meaning this is an ‘open invitation’?” Affronted, she stood up and moved toward him. “I made it clear when I agreed to come here that all I was inviting was conversation.”

Jon stood as well, closing the space between them. “Then why are you challenging me?”

“I’m not challenging you. And I sure as hell don’t want—” The rest of her argument was silenced by his mouth.

His long fingers tangled in the back of her hair and his lips urged hers to part.

She closed her eyes and braced for the sensual attack promised by his gleaming dark eyes.

His arm wrapped around her, pressing her firmly against his body and trapping her arms at her sides.

She expected the bold thrust of his tongue, but he teased her instead.

Anchoring her head with his grip on her hair, he nipped and licked at her lips, leaving her no option but to stand there and let him.

His teeth caught her lower lip, biting just hard enough to make her gasp, then he went back to exploring her mouth.

She could feel his hard cock pressed against her belly, making it obvious what he wanted.

What she wanted too if she were honest with herself.

Desire washed over her in scalding waves.

He was right. This is what she came here for, what she lay awake at night imagining.

She panted softly and blinked her eyes open as he finally released her lips.

“You got wet as soon as you saw us, little liar.” His lips brushed over hers as he spoke and then he gave her bottom lip a final nip. “You want our hands all over you.”

“That’s not why I came here.” Maybe not in the beginning, but it was what she wanted now.

“I punish liars,” he warned. “Do not lie to me again.”

Tara licked her lips, heart thudding wildly.

Her core ached and she had no doubt her panties were soaked, but she wasn’t ready to admit how much she wanted them.

“I’m interested in you, but I didn’t come here hoping you would put your hands—” A startled gasp replaced her words as Jon suddenly sat back down.

He maneuvered her as if she weighed nothing, positioning her face down over his lap.

“I warned you.” With staggering efficiency, he unfastened her jeans and pulled them down to her knees. “I don’t tolerate lies. What happened this morning should have taught you that.”

“Stop it! You do not have permission to spank me.” She kicked and squirmed, but it

did no good. He was bigger and much stronger. She couldn't stop this even if she wanted to, which she didn't. Discipline was part of a Rydarian courtship. Everyone knew that.

“You came here of your own free will.” Jon slowly tugged her panties down, baring her upturned bottom. His fingertips stroked over her cheeks, his thumb teasing the valley between. “I will do anything I want with this lovely ass. Would you like to know why?”

She shook her head and glared at him over her shoulder.

“Because you're no longer in control.”

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Elias grasped the human's hips as he pounded into her wet and willing body.

She gasped and moaned, arching into each hard thrust. Her breasts swayed and she clawed at the bedding, clearly lost in passion.

He liked lusty females, but he preferred them with a little more fight.

This one—he couldn't remember her name, Meagan or Mary, something that started with M—had begged for cock from the start.

He slapped her ass, then reached beneath her and twisted her nipples.

She cried out and her pussy spasmed. She was close to orgasm, again.

Each time Babcock gave her an injection she became insatiable.

Tonight it had taken four males to keep up with her demands.

After the guards each fucked her twice, Elias sent them outside the cabin.

That left him with Juan, and they'd just started round three.

He glanced at the younger man, feeling a spark of resentment.

Juan was Armando's brother and Armando had been Elias' best friend and beta.

But the cats murdered Armando, so Juan took his brother's place.

Juan was intelligent and ambitious. Once he learned Elias' routines, he would be a good beta.

But Elias and Armando had known each other most of their lives, long before Nuevo Biotech captured them.

He'd met Juan a couple of times, but he was simply Armando's annoying little brother.

Shaking away the distractions, Elias slapped her ass again and fucked her even harder.

Her vocalizations became more guttural, more growls than groans.

She shook her head and shuddered violently.

Elias had positioned her on her hands and knees, hips right at the edge of the bed.

He stood on the floor, enabling him to move freely and possess her body more deeply.

She made another animalistic sound and Elias paused. "Are you alright, girl?"

Her pussy muscles clamped down hard on his cock, explaining her vocalizations. He smiled and shifted position as he resumed his fast, hard thrusting.

The female was still moaning like a lunatic, so Elias ordered, "Shut her up. I'm tired of listening to her."

Juan crawled onto the bed and drew her head up by her tangled hair. He took his cock in hand and brought it to her mouth. "Open up, sweetheart. You clearly need

something more constructive to do with your mouth.”

Elias chuckled and pulled out of her rippling cunt.

He positioned himself against her other opening and impaled her ass with one brutal thrust. The human’s startled cry was muffled by Juan’s cock, but she bucked and sucked noisily, assuring them that she was enjoying herself.

Elias rode her hard, reveling in the firm grip of her ass.

Juan matched Elias’ strokes and soon they both emptied their balls into the well-fucked human.

She collapsed onto her belly as they released her, and Elias cringed.

She reeked of sweat and cum and numerous bite marks marred her pale skin.

She was by far the most beautiful of the human females who had been captured during the last raid.

That’s why Elias had chosen her. But watching half his pack fuck her had severed any emotional connection he might have felt for her.

The only person any self-respecting alpha would share his mate with was his beta.

Once this human gave him a litter of pups, Elias would dispose of her and find a female worthy of—

A savage growl emanated from the female, interrupting Elias’ thoughts.

“What’s wrong with her?” Juan asked, staying well back from the bed.

She screamed and kicked, bucking as if someone were on top of her.

Carefully, Elias rolled her to her side and brushed the tousled hair back from her face.

Her features twisted and morphed. Her nose and mouth elongated into a distorted muzzle only to revert to a more human appearance.

“Go get Babcock,” Elias urged. “It’s much too soon. She shouldn’t be shifting yet.”

Pausing long enough to pull on a pair of pants, Juan sprinted from the bedroom.

The woman thrashed and moaned, arching and twisting as she continued to randomly transform. Elias watched in morbid fascination. Over and over the shift rolled across her features, resulting in grotesque creatures neither wolf nor human.

Suddenly, she lunged for him, fangs bared, long claws extending from her fingers.

Elias twisted sharply, barely missing the slash of her claws.

She lunged again and he responded instinctually, batting her aside with his muscular arm.

She hit the wall with a sickening thunk , then lay on the floor moaning.

He approached her hesitantly and knelt at her side. Her eyes were wide and filled with terror.

“Help me,” she pleaded as her thrashing began to ease.

Her strength was ebbing, he realized. But the transformations continued. Her final shift was truly monstrous, and she died with a pathetic whimper.

Elias threw a blanket over her body, making sure to cover her mutated face.

He grabbed his pants off the floor and dragged them on, then hurried into the living room.

Damn it. Babcock had warned him that there were significant risks when attempting this sort of conversion.

Still, Elias hadn't expected it to happen to his mate.

Babcock arrived a few minutes later looking blurry-eyed and annoyed. "This couldn't wait until morning?" he grumbled as Juan escorted him into the cabin.

"She's dead," Elias snapped. "Your fucking treatment killed her."

Without reacting to the news, Babcock walked into the bedroom and examined the female. "Transformation at this point is unexpected, but not unprecedented. However, her transformation was clearly abnormal."

"Transformations," Elias stressed. "She shifted continually for at least ten minutes before she finally died."

Babcock looked at him, eyes narrowed with suspicion. "That's not possible. Nothing in the injections should have resulted in multiple shifts."

"I don't give a shit. I only know what I saw," Elias snarled and walked back to the living room.

"I saw it too," Juan interjected as Babcock emerged. "She changed shape over and over."

Babcock scratched the side of his head and stared off into space. “I’ll reassess the formula, but this doesn’t make sense.”

“Have there been any other side effects?” Elias shuddered. Side effects didn’t get much more significant than what just happened in his bedroom.

Ignoring the question, Babcock continued to mutter. “There must have been something odd in her genome. I’ll need a tissue sample before you dispose of the body.”

“Take whatever you need now. She’s the third casualty,” Elias reminded. “At this rate we’ll run out of women.”

The doctor’s cold gaze snapped back to Elias’ face. “You’re right. We need more test subjects. A lot more.”

Elias scoffed, shocked by the utter indifference in Babcock’s tone. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Of course not, but it’s a fact nonetheless. The cats will never let you near their village, but the shelter outside their gates is less secure. Send a large party over there and collect?—”

“You do not command me!” Elias shouted. “I will not go collect more females for you to murder.”

“Then the project will fail.” Babcock’s features became as emotionless as his tone. “I’ll refine the formula, but you need to go get more women.” He quickly collected his samples then left the cabin, not bothering to shut the door.

“Unbelievable,” Elias snarled, walking over to slam the door. “Who the fuck does he

think he is?”

“The only being in this star system willing and able to save us from extinction,” Juan said calmly. “You knew he was an evil bastard when you agreed to work with him. That doesn’t change the fact that we need him.”

Juan was right, but facing the truth only added to Elias’ agitation. “I can’t think while she’s lying there.” He pulled the door open again and motioned toward the guards. “She had a bad reaction to the injections. Get rid of the body.”

The guards looked shocked for a moment then did as they were told.

Elias dropped into his favorite chair and stared into the smoldering remains of the fire he’d lit hours before.

“Would you like me to leave?” Juan asked as he pulled on his shirt.

Elias shook his head. “Pour us a drink and help me think this through.”

Juan went to the table near the kitchen and poured two glasses of village-made ale. He handed one to Elias then sat in a chair facing him.

“Babcock isn’t wrong. Even if every female in this village survives the transformation, which is unlikely, we don’t have enough to create a viable gene pool. We must capture more humans.”

Juan didn’t argue, but his features remained tense and wary. “You want to raid the shelter outside the feline village?”

“I don’t want to,” Elias stressed. “I think we need to. Once the women have been accepted into the village, they’re beyond our reach. And more of them give in to

Zion's demands every day. We have no choice but to attack, and it needs to be soon. We're running out of time."

"Then you need to meet with Curtis Stevenson."

Elias narrowed his gaze. He was annoyed by the suggestion, but couldn't say why. "Who the fuck is Curtis Stevenson?"

"A human male who found his way to our village when all the females joined the cats."

"Go on."

"He worked maintenance at Nuevo Biotech, but he was in the Space Force for eleven years. He was a tactical officer. He can help us plan and execute this raid if you're willing to take advice from a human."

"Is there any proof of his claims or do you only have his word on his expertise?"

Juan grinned at him. "I did a tour in the Space Force right after high school. Curtis knows what he's talking about."

Elias nodded. "I'm not committing to anything, but I'd like to meet your new friend. Set up a meeting first thing in the morning."

"Will do," Juan assured him and then left the room.

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An intoxicating combination of excitement and fear fueled Tara's struggles. She kicked wildly and tried to twist off Jon's lap. He splayed one hand against the small of her back and trapped her flailing legs between his. She punched and slapped, but he simply ignored her efforts.

"Settle down, or this will be much worse," Jon warned as his first slap landed against her bare bottom.

Instinctual defiance welled within her. "Screw you! I just stood there and took it this morning. I'm not doing it again." Resisting him would make him more aggressive. She knew that and yet she couldn't ignore her need to challenge him.

"That's not the way I remember it. How about you, Isaac?" Jon smacked one side and then the other, making her cheeks quiver and her core clench.

"I remember holding her down while she twisted and yelled. In fact, she screamed so loud that Zion came running to make sure she was all right."

Heat suffused her face at the memory. Having her potential mates humiliate her was bad enough, but knowing the pride leader saw her naked and out of control made her want to join a different village. "If you're determined to do this, just get it over with."

Jon chuckled, his warm fingers lightly stroking her bare skin. "Do you want our hands on your body?"

"Not anymore," she insisted angrily.

“Another lie,” Jon growled. “Apparently, I’m not making my expectations clear enough.” He suddenly stood, pulling her up with him.

Hobbled by the clothing bunched around her ankles, Tara stumbled and nearly fell.

Jon bent and lifted her to his shoulder, his arm banding the backs of her thighs.

One of the others, probably Isaac, pulled off her boots and finished taking off her pants and panties.

Then the Shadows walked into one of the bedrooms and Jon set her down at the foot of the bed.

Tara didn’t bother pulling her sweater down because she knew what came next.

They worked together to rid her of the rest of her clothes and Jon closed magnetic cuffs around her wrists.

She wasn’t even sure where he’d gotten them. They just seemed to appear.

Jon cupped her chin and raised her face until she looked into his eyes. “One last chance, hellion. Are you here because you want us to touch you?”

Something dark and primal stirred inside her, urging her to test his strength.

Rydaria was a brutal planet ruled by savage beings.

Only the strongest and fiercest survived.

If her mates couldn’t control her, they couldn’t protect her, and she desperately wanted to feel safe again.

“I came here to talk and only talk, and now I don’t even want to do that. ”

“Very well. We will do this the hard way.” Jon motioned to Isaac and Kyle.

Tara struggled frantically, but they soon had her bent over the bed with her arms stretched out in front of her.

Jon pulled open one of the drawers in the large dresser across the room and produced several lengths of rope.

He used the first to fasten the wrist cuffs to the bedframe above her head.

Then her legs were spread, and Jon secured her ankles to opposite corners.

The position left her open and utterly vulnerable to whatever they chose to do.

Trepidation tingled down her spine, but her pussy moistened despite her fear. “Is tying a woman up the only way you can get her to have sex with you?”

“What makes you think I want to have sex with you?” Jon countered.

Turning her head sharply, she tried to look back at him. She was bound too securely. All she could see was the corner of the bed. “The fact that I’m naked and on display is a pretty good indication.”

“There are many things that can happen to a female while she’s naked and on display.”

She turned her head back around and tried not to panic. Why had this seemed like a good idea?

“Did I tell you not to lie to us?” Jon’s cold tone indicated that he was no longer playing. If she lied to him now, there would be harsh consequences.

“Yes. You warned me not to lie.”

“And did you lie again despite my warnings?”

She licked her lips and took a deep breath. “There was truth in what I said, but there was also misinformation.”

Jon’s hand slapped her bottom fast and hard to illustrate his displeasure. “Try again,” he said after six resounding spans.

“Yes,” she snapped. “I lied to you.”

“Did you know what would happen if you came to our cabin?” Jon persisted.

“I knew you would try to seduce me,” she evaded. “I foolishly thought I could resist your efforts.”

“You’re still avoiding the truth.” He accented the declaration with more firm swats. After delivering a flurry of stinging slaps, he stopped and rubbed her burning bottom.

The caress fueled the smoldering heat and made the ache in her pussy more acute.

He slipped his hand between her thighs and teased her folds.

The empty ache flared, and her inner muscles clenched.

Tara moaned, helplessly lifting her hips, needing his fingers inside her.

Jon knew that discipline aroused her, and he was focusing her attention on the reaction.

Desire. He wanted her to admit that she needed them to fuck her. It was foolish to deny her body's demands when his fingers were covered in the proof.

He lowered his arm to his side and she exhaled, thinking he was finished. But he only paused, allowing the tension to build. Then his hand fell again and again, alternating firm spanks and teasing caresses with cruel pauses.

"Stop!" she cried after four rotations. "I knew that ending up in bed was a good possibility, but I really did want to learn more about you."

Slowly, his fingers parted her folds and circled her opening. Tara whimpered, needing fullness so badly it hurt.

"Why?" he taunted. "I thought you didn't like bossy males."

"I don't like you ." She threw the complaint over her shoulder as she tugged against her restraints. She could barely move, which only made her angrier.

He spanked her silently for several long moments. The punishing slaps covered her entire bottom and even the tops of her thighs.

"Let me up!" she yelled. "You do not have the right to discipline me. And you never will!"

His hand covered one side of her bottom and gave the cheek a painful squeeze. "Stop defying me or I'll have no choice but to escalate."

This would be a good time to abandon the battle of wills.

They both knew she couldn't win, but Tara wasn't quite ready to surrender.

The last few years had been filled with compromise and loss.

She'd been exiled from Earth and forced to accept rules that stripped away her independence.

Anger was all she had left. Once she gave in to this new paradigm, there would be nothing left of Earth's Tara Hughes.

"Fuck. You!" She made each word a separate curse, then braced for his reaction.

The room fell silent and tension gradually mounted.

Footsteps sounded as the males moved around behind her.

She caught glimpses of them in her peripheral vision, but mostly they were out of sight.

What was Jon doing? Would the others participate or just stand there and watch?

Lexie never spoke about the specifics of what went on between her and her mates.

She admitted that discipline was still a part of her life, but never explained what that entailed.

Tara's heart thudded and her breaths came in ragged pants. Fear and excitement were having a tug of war inside her and she couldn't decide who was winning. All she had to do was apologize, admit that she wanted them to fuck her, and this would end. Why the hell was she being so stubborn?

You want the pain , her inner voice clarified. You're angry and afraid, and you need them to overwhelm you.

"This is our first night together," Jon said solemnly. "We had planned to go slowly, to ease you into your new role. But Zion is right. You need to be mastered."

Tara heard a subtle whooshing a millisecond before fire exploded across her bottom. She cried out, shocked and alarmed by the intensity of the pain. "What the hell is that?" She tried to turn her head and see what he was using, but the restraints held her securely.

"Misbehavior results in consequences."

Jon swung the mystery implement again and Tara went wild.

It had to be some sort of strap because it delivered mild impact as well as a fiery sting.

Anger burned through anticipation, and she struggled with all her might.

She twisted and bucked, crying out and demanding that he stop.

None of it did any good. He continued to spank her, one biting swat after another.

Soon her entire bottom throbbed and heat sank deep into her abdomen.

Her core clenched painfully each time the strap landed, and she'd grown so wet that a humiliating rivulet trickled down the inside of her thigh.

She closed her eyes and tried to disappear into her mind.

The pain was harsher than she'd expected, but what frightened her most was the savage need now burning inside her.

"Please," she whimpered. "I need... I'll do anything, just stop."

Rather than delivering the next swat, Jon slid his fingers across her well-spanked bottom and eased them between her thighs. He brushed over her sodden folds, clearly avoiding her clit. "You beg sweetly, hellion. But you need to be more specific. Tell us what you need."

She sobbed, overwhelmed by her desperation. "I need you to stop spanking me."

He squeezed each of her cheeks in turn, dragging a soft cry from her throat. Then he traced a slow, tantalizing line from her clit to the hidden pucker of her bottom hole. "Why did you come here? No more lies and no evasions."

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She tensed. His fingertip rested against her opening, a silent warning that he expected an honest answer. “I don’t want to leave the village,” she finally admitted and then rushed on. “I nearly died out there. I was cold and hungry and afraid all the time. I can’t live like that again.”

His finger pushed against her stubborn opening, easing just inside. She shook her head and murmured protests, her hands clutching the bedding.

“Is that the only reason?” He kept his finger inside the ring of muscles, a silent reminder of how much worse the humiliation could get. “You want us to feed and protect you?”

“I’m attracted to you, to all of you.” She sobbed, hating how much she’d surrendered. “I haven’t felt connected to any of the other coalitions.”

“But you feel connected to us?” His finger drove steadily deeper.

“Yes,” she cried, wiggling to avoid the unwanted invasion.

He slid his finger in and out. The penetration was slight, but it was much too easy to imagine his cock stretching her, claiming her as she writhed and whimpered beneath him. “Not there,” she pleaded. “I’ll be good, I promise.”

He chuckled and removed his hand, stepping back from the bed. “She’s all yours, Isaac. How do you want her?”

They untied her ankles and then her hands.

Tara heaved herself up and turned over, carefully sitting on the edge of the bed.

It hurt to put pressure on her bottom, but lying down made her feel vulnerable.

And her legs shook too badly to support her weight.

The magnetic cuffs still encircled her wrists, but at least she could see them now.

Jon moved over by the wall and stood with his arms crossed over his brawny chest. His dark gaze gleamed with desire as he waited to see what the coalition leader would do with her. His turn would come, but Isaac had the right to fuck her first.

Isaac took off his shirt and then his boots. “What must happen for you to stay in our village?” Isaac took up where Jon left off.

She pressed her thighs together and covered her breasts with one arm. “I have to be claimed by a coalition.”

“We can fuck you without claiming you,” Isaac reminded. “A formal declaration of courtship will protect you from the other coalitions and we will provide for all your needs. However, it gives us the right to enjoy your body. You’re Lexie’s best friend. I presume she explained all of this to you.”

She nodded, nervously licking her lips.

“The proper response is, ‘Yes, Sir,’ or ‘She did, Sir.’”

Speech was impossible until she swallowed past the tension in her throat. “She told me, Sir.”

“Are you agreeing to be claimed, or just to being courted?”

“Courtied, Sir,” she stressed. Binding herself to these Shadows would be exciting and challenging, but she’d hoped for a little more balance, more tenderness to go along with the intensity. “We met this morning. I know things move faster on Rydaria, but I need more time.”

“We’re willing to give it to you as long as you understand our expectations.”

She lowered her gaze as heat crept over her cheeks. “I do, Sir. Jon made sure that I did.”

“You will refer to Jon as Master. You have not earned the privilege of calling him by name,” Isaac told her.

“What should I call,” she motioned toward Kyle, “him?”

“For the sake of clarity, you may call me Kyle.” He winked at her then smiled. “If you lose the privilege, I’ll let you know.”

Isaac moved closer to the bed as he unfastened his pants. “Bend your knees and open your legs.”

An unexpected rush of emotion surged through Tara, bathing her eyes in tears.

She frantically blinked them back. This was the crossroads she’d been dreading for the past six weeks.

She could willingly offer her body to these males or leave the village.

Who was she kidding. She wanted more than food and shelter from these three.

She wanted companionship and pleasure. She was lonely and afraid, and they offered

security and passion.

Grasping the backs of her legs, she bent her knees almost to her chest then spread her thighs, opening herself and presenting her pussy.

“I want to taste you again, but I need to be inside you more.” She started to lie back, but he shook his head. “Stay upright. I want you to watch as my cock enters you for the first time.”

Titillated, yet embarrassed, she nodded and looked down between her legs. He drew his cock out of his pants and angled it toward her wet opening. Then he scooped up her slickness and spread it over his shaft. “Who does this pussy belong to?”

“You and your coalition,” she whispered.

She expected a surge of resentment, but it never came.

On Earth many would have considered this scandalous.

She was willingly offering her body in exchange for food and protection.

Some would call her a whore. But this wasn't Earth, and her survival instincts would not be denied.

He pushed the broad head inside her and paused. “Fuck, you're tight. When was the last time you took a cock?”

“Years,” she hissed. The stretch stopped just short of pain, but most of his length had yet to enter her. “Before Nuevo.”

Grasping her hips, he lifted her bottom off the bed as he drove the rest of his length

into her snug passage. He threw back his head and groaned. "So fucking tight." He drew nearly out then thrust in a little faster. "I'd forgotten how good this feels."

She watched his long shaft slide in and out.

He took his time, clearly savoring the pleasure he found in her body.

Her juices gleamed on his skin and her folds stretched tight around his thickness.

She'd never watched her body surrender to the possession of a male.

In fact, she usually closed her eyes and concentrated on the sensations.

This was inescapably carnal, and it made her feel wild.

Helplessly, she lifted into his thrusts.

He was bigger than any male she'd been with before and the stretch did strange things to her pussy.

Her clit tingled and her inner walls came alive.

He draped her legs over his arms and grasped her sore butt cheeks.

She cried out at the discomfort, but the flash of pain intensified her other responses.

He moved faster now, thrusting deep with each urgent drive. She collapsed onto her back, breasts quivering as he sped his pace even more. Her arousal built in keeping with his obvious excitement. Her inner muscles rippled and her clit twitched needfully.

“May I come, Sir,” she panted, shocked at how close she was to orgasm.

He pulled out and crawled onto the bed, straddling her waist. “Tits,” he ordered harshly. “Squeeze those tits around me.”

Her pussy clenched in protest, but she did as she was told.

He rested his wet cock in the valley between her breasts and she pressed the warm flesh in around him.

He played with her nipples, pinching and twisting as he rocked his hips.

His cock slid back and forth, the tip poking out at the top of her cleavage.

Did this really feel better than her pussy?

His sudden desire for her breasts robbed her of her orgasm.

Which was why he’d done it. She sighed and squeezed her breasts harder, creating a firm pocket for his surging cock.

She would only know pleasure when they chose to give it to her, and they would likely be stingy as hell if she continued to defy them.

“Stick out your tongue,” he ordered, his gaze drilling into hers.

She opened her mouth and extended her tongue. He pulled his cock out from between her breasts and pumped it furiously. Ropes of creamy fluid jetted out and landed on her lips and tongue. He continued to pump and squeeze until he’d emptied every drop into her mouth.

“Swallow it all,” he directed sternly. Then he bent to her breasts and sucked on her abused nipples.

His taste spread over her tongue and then slid down her throat.

His cum tasted different than a human’s, slightly sweet and richer.

She’d never minded giving head, but this had been meant to humiliate her, to put her in her place.

She cleaned off her lips and lowered her arms to the bed.

Her pussy still ached, making her feel neglected and slightly abused.

“Good girls are allowed to come over and over,” Isaac told her with a wicked smile. Swinging one leg off her body, he knelt on the bed beside her. “Have you been a good girl?”

“I was a good girl for you. I just wasn’t good for J—Master.”

Isaac slipped his hand between her legs, his gaze locked with hers. “I agree. You were very good for me.” He rubbed her clit in firm, tight circles. “So come, for me. I want no distractions while I watch you come.”

She let her legs fall open and she canted her hips as he easily rekindled her desire. His fingers felt so damn good, and she needed release so badly, that it took less than a minute for her neglected body to explode. She cried out and pushed up with her heels as spasms of pleasure assailed her.

“Lovely.” He leaned down and gave each nipple a final suck then crawled off the bed.

“Kyle, you go next,” Jon urged. “Once I finish with her, she won’t want to be touched for a good long while.”

Trepidation shivered through Tara. It didn’t take a lot of imagination to figure out what he had in mind. The one detail Lexie had admitted was that her mates enjoyed anal sex. She sat up then scooted to the foot of the bed.

Before Tara could torture herself with speculation, Kyle sat down beside her and pulled her onto his lap. “Straddle my hips.” He helped her into position, then directed, “Now put me inside you.”

She reached down and guided his cock to her entrance. He didn’t feel as thick as Isaac, but he seemed even longer as she lowered herself onto his hardened length. “Jesus, are all of you guys huge like this?”

Kyle smiled. “It’s part of the transformation. More height, leaner body mass, and bigger cocks.”

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Holding her hips firmly, he bounced her up and down on his erection.

Tara wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her breasts against his face.

Kyle seemed content with the rhythmic slide of her body over his for a time, then his hands began to wander.

He squeezed her bottom, making her yelp, then slid his hands up her sides and stroked her breasts.

She arched her back and leaned away, giving him better access to the quivering mounds. He bent and caught one tender nipple between his lips as he squeezed the other. He moved back and forth, teasing one side and then the other. She rode him eagerly, running her fingers through his wavy hair.

This felt closer to ‘normal’ than what Jon or Isaac had done.

Pleasure washed over her in languid waves, making her wish she were alone with Kyle.

One of his hands descended, easing between her thighs.

A gasp escaped her as his long fingers covered her clit.

He stroked and her inner muscles clamped down around him.

“Oh, yeah,” he groaned and did it again and again.

He caressed her right to the edge of orgasm, then lay back across the bed and drew her with him.

She continued to move, riding his long cock more easily in the new position.

She braced her hands on his shoulders and rolled her hips, sliding her pussy up and down along his hard length.

The angle was perfect to rub her clit against his shaft and she was soon on the verge of orgasm again.

Someone pulled her bottom cheeks apart and Tara froze.

She shook her head, but fought back a protest. Kyle was being less aggressive, more like a human lover.

She wanted to finish with him before Jon claimed her bottom.

Something cool and slick drizzled into the crease between her cheeks.

It slid downward until it covered her untried hole.

She turned her head sharply and looked at Jon. "Please, not together. I'm not ready for that."

His gaze narrowed and his lips pressed into a disapproving line. "I decide what you're ready for and when. Now, look at Kyle and submit to your master."

She started to protest, but Kyle drew her head back around. "We will not harm you. You have my word, but you must start trusting us."

Licking her lips, she nodded and settled against Kyle's chest. His hands rested on her hips and the position made her bottom more accessible.

If Jon wanted to fuck her ass, he would.

She'd offered him the use of her body, which meant her entire body.

Jon smeared more lube around her puckered opening and then worked his finger inside.

"I will fuck you here, hellion," he warned, "but not tonight. You were already punished for lying to me. This is about surrender."

Eased by the lube, his finger slid in and out, in and out. It felt odd and intrusive, but not painful. She stroked Kyle's arm and inhaled his scent, taking comfort from the strength of his warm body.

Jon slowly withdrew his finger and positioned an object, likely a butt plug. It slid in easily, but the shaft tapered dramatically, forcing her body to open. She gasped, then groaned as the stretch began to burn. "It hurts," she whined. "Is it supposed to hurt?"

"Relax," Jon advised. "You tensed up as soon as it started stretching you."

Kyle stroked her back and whispered encouragements into her ear. She was so focused on the invasion that she didn't really hear his words, just knew he was trying to soothe her.

Jon drew the plug nearly out, only to drive it deep again.

The stinging gradually faded, but the alien fullness remained.

And this was just the beginning. According to Lexie, when her body could take this plug without pain, he'd use a bigger one.

And when she got used to that one, he'd force his massive cock into her tightest hole.

Tara sobbed and instinctively started to struggle. "I don't want you to take me there. I don't want?—"

Jon slapped her ass hard, reawakening the banked heat. "And I didn't want to be transformed into this savage creature. But here we are."

Kyle's arms came around her, anchoring her in place as Jon fucked her bottom with the plug. "You're just afraid of the unknown," Kyle insisted. "He is using plenty of lube. It shouldn't hurt anymore."

It wasn't painful. It was humiliating and demeaning and... oh, God, it was starting to feel good. The steady slide of the plug in and out of her bottom was simply too familiar. Her body understood the rhythm and hungered for the pleasure of being filled.

"That's better," Jon muttered as he thrust the plug deep over and over. "Close your eyes and imagine that all three of your mates are enjoying your amazing body."

As if on cue, Kyle slid two of his fingers into her mouth and started moving in her pussy.

"We'll fill you, stretch you— use you ." Jon growled the last phrase as he leaned down and nipped one of her ass cheeks. "We'll fuck you in every hole, and you'll revel in our possession. We're your mates, hellion. And you are ours."

A spontaneous orgasm tore through Tara, ripping a startled cry from her throat. She

shuddered violently as tingling pleasure pulsed through her entire body. Her inner muscles clamped down on Kyle's cock. The spasms made her bottom feel even tighter around the plug and she cried out again.

Kyle arched beneath her, driving his length deep into her pussy. His hot cum splashed her inner walls as he shuddered and moaned. "That's not how I intended to end," he muttered then laughed. "Not that I'm complaining."

Jon pulled her up and turned her face around. "You did not have permission to come."

"It just happened," she insisted, her body still tingling. "I wasn't even close when it struck."

The anger faded from his expression and a smile curved his lips. "I think you like the idea of fucking all three of us."

Unable to deny it without lying to him, she simply averted her gaze and said nothing.

Jon lifted her off Kyle and set her on the edge of the bed. "Open your legs."

She was beyond modesty and shame. Two males had already fucked her and the third had been fucking her ass with a plug moments before. Squirming until she found the least painful position, she slid her legs apart and waited to see what he'd do next.

His dark gaze focused on her pussy and a cruel smile twisted his lips. "Look how wet you are." He parted her folds and coated his fingers with the creamy fluid. "I don't think all of this is Kyle." Without warning, he slapped her vulnerable sex.

Tara cried out and tried to draw her legs together. "Why did you do that?"

“You came without permission.”

“I told you. I didn’t mean—” Another stinging slap interrupted her defense.

Isaac held one of her legs open while Kyle held the other.

Tara twisted and kicked as she tried to dislodge their hands.

Jon spanked her pussy again and again. Her clit twitched wildly and her core clenched.

How could something this painful arouse her?

Tears slid down her cheeks and an exasperated cry tore from her mouth.

Jon motioned to the others, and they quickly positioned her on her back with her head over the side of the bed. “You two can play with her pussy and breasts, but don’t remove the butt plug. Her orgasms are at your discretion.”

Kyle crawled onto the bed with obvious hunger. “If we don’t give her pleasure, she’ll have no reason to continue the courtship.”

“Good point.” Isaac skirted the bed and approached from the side.

Tara didn’t have time to react to their behavior.

Jon brought his cock to her mouth and shoved inside.

She gasped in a breath and reached for his hips, but the other two pulled her arms downward and pinned them to the bed.

Her legs were yanked apart, and hands slid everywhere.

They squeezed her breasts and twisted her nipples, fingered her pussy and flicked her clit.

All the while, Jon's cock slid in and out of her mouth.

She relaxed because she had no other option, and their touches rekindled her desire. Someone was sucking on her nipple, while someone else was sucking on her clit. She bucked and murmured. Was it all right to come? Kyle had indicated that he would let her, but no one had spoken the words.

"Come," Isaac commanded, his lips momentarily abandoning her nipple. "And keep right on coming for your mates."

Had he simply realized she was unsure, or had he read her mind? Kyle's mouth continued to work her clit, so she quickly lost interest in the question. Kyle let go of her wrist and pushed two fingers into her pussy. He fucked her vigorously while his lips drew on her clit.

Isaac bit her nipple and Tara cried out. "I told you to come."

Like the good little mate they were training her to be, she immediately obeyed.

Waves of pleasure crashed down upon her, momentarily paralyzing her thoughts.

She shivered and arched, rubbing her pussy against Kyle's mouth.

Jon chose that moment to thrust into her throat for the first time.

She was so lost in pleasure that she didn't even gag.

The sensations blurred after that. Isaac twisted her nipples while Kyle fucked her with his tongue.

An orgasm swelled and crested, the pleasure cascading through her body and pooling between her thighs.

Jon held her face between his hands and fucked her mouth with long, fast strokes.

Tara lay sprawled across the bed, completely overwhelmed by the contradictory sensations.

Kyle slipped his fingers into her pussy as Isaac bent to suck on her clit.

She moaned around Jon's cock. Her clit had grown so sensitive that even the lightest suction was painful, and Isaac was sucking really hard.

Someone pulled on the butt plug, drawing it nearly out then driving it deep again.

Mouth, pussy, and ass, they were fucking all three of her openings.

The thought sent a fresh surge of desire rushing through her body.

Jon's cock slid over her tongue and well into her throat with each stroke.

Kyle's fingers were more of a tease than a pleasure.

She needed the overwhelming stretch of their cocks, and she wanted it front and back, top and bottom.

A helpless whimper escaped her as her mind spiraled even deeper into her dark fantasies.

Another orgasm blasted through Tara, and then another, and another.

The last series of spasms were so forceful that she saw stars and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Jon shoved well into her throat and came in shuddering spurts.

She instinctually swallowed around him and licked as he drew out of her mouth.

Her mind was still muddled and she was too weak to move when she felt something warm splash against her belly and breasts. Curious and concerned, she lifted her head in time to see Isaac and Kyle squeezing the last few drops of cum out of their cocks.

They'd scent marked her, like animals. Her pussy spasmed and her nipples tingled as if her body approved of their savagery.

Kyle pulled her forward so her head rested more comfortably on the bed. She shivered and panted, stunned and—vanquished. She felt utterly vanquished by her mates.

After tucking his cock away, Jon carefully removed the butt plug and ducked into the bathroom to dispose of it.

Then he scooped her up in his arms and Isaac wrapped her in a blanket.

They all piled onto the bed, surrounding and supporting her.

She was cradled in Jon's arms, but her legs rested on Isaac's lap.

Kyle sat on her other side stroking her hair, back, and arms.

“Things got a little out of control there at the end,” Jon admitted. “Did we frighten you?”

“It was more intense than I expected, but I was never afraid.”

“Good.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

The gesture surprised her. It seemed out of character for Jon. Then his heated words echoed back to her, I didn’t want to be transformed into this savage creature. But here we are.

Who had Jon been before his transformation?

Some part of him was bothered by his new savagery.

If she could access that part of his personality, maybe there was hope for this courtship after all.

She turned her head and looked at Kyle. He smiled tentatively.

She liked Kyle, had no trouble picturing herself in a relationship with him.

She shifted her gaze to Isaac and tensed.

Like Jon, Isaac was too stern, too domineering for her peace of mind.

And yet she’d known more pleasure in this one day than in the rest of her life combined.

But there was more to life than sex. Without other pursuits, other challenges, life became shallow and meaningless. So, would she enjoy being with this coalition when

they weren't in bed? There was only one way to find out. She needed to spend more time with them.

"Do you want me to go back to my cabin or am I allowed to stay here?"

Jon seemed surprised by her question. "You are willing to stay?"

"If we're serious about this courtship, I think it's a good idea."

"We'd love to have you here," Isaac said, shooting Jon a warning look.

"My roommate just agreed to a courtship, so they'll be relieved to have me gone."

"Is that why you asked the question?" Jon pushed her back, his gaze assessing her face.

"This trust thing goes both ways," she pointed out. "I'm trying hard to trust you guys, but you have to start trusting me too."

Jon started to say something then closed his mouth and paused. "You're right. I can't expect something from you that I'm not offering myself. I'll strive to be more trusting."

She pressed a light kiss to his lips, then asked, "Can someone come shower with me?"

"The shower is too small for all of us. But as always, we're willing to share." Isaac flashed a bright smile and took her by the hand, leading her into the bathroom.

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Kyle knocked on the door to Diego's cabin the following morning, but he fervently wished he was still in bed.

Waking up with Tara pressed against his side, feeling her warmth and softness, filled him with wonder and appreciation.

She hadn't agreed to bond with his coalition, but he was relatively certain she would.

She'd been in the feline village for six weeks and numerous males had attempted to draw her attention.

She was wary about bonding, so she wouldn't have allowed them to fuck her if she wasn't seriously considering them as mates.

Leaving her side had taken all of Kyle's willpower and several persistent tugs from Isaac and Jon. Kyle was the strongest telepath in their coalition so this task fell to him. Malik, one of Diego's coalition mates, opened the door and greeted Kyle with a warm smile.

"Good morning. Diego told us that you'd stop by," Malik had wavy brown hair and dark eyes. Though not technically a doctor, his extensive education and medical background were invaluable. Malik had saved many lives since coming to Rydaria.

"I wish this were a social call, but we discovered something disturbing in the lupine village."

Malik nodded and motioned him inside.

Kane, the coalition leader, pushed back from the access terminal in the far corner of the room.

He stood and crossed to Kyle. Kane's dark hair was shaggy, and a short beard shadowed much of his face.

Still, his striking features and confident bearing commanded attention wherever he went.

"Diego and Zion headed up to the raptor village so you're stuck with us. "

"You and Malik are who I came to see," Kyle assured him.

"Would you like a cup of coffee or anything before we get started?" Malik offered, motioning toward the small kitchen.

Kyle shook his head. "I'm anxious to hear what you think about what we witnessed." They sat down around the dining table. Theirs was square rather than round, but the cabins' layouts were nearly identical. "We confirmed that Babcock is still alive and up to no good, as usual."

"We all hoped the rumors were false, but I don't think anyone will be surprised," Kane predicted. "Babcock is wily and ruthless, a very unpleasant combination."

"It would be fastest and most effective if you just show us what you saw," Malik advised.

Kyle held out his hands. "My memory transfers are more detailed with a physical connection." Malik took Kyle's right hand while Kane grasped his left.

Kyle started by showing them the documents Babcock had been studying before the

couple arrived.

Kyle paused over each graph and report, making sure Malik had a clear view of what Babcock had been analyzing.

“Damn it,” Malik muttered. “This can’t be good.”

Opening his eyes, Kyle paused the transfer and waited for Malik to elaborate.

“I’ll explain what it means after you’ve shown us the rest,” Malik told him. “Please continue.”

Frustrated, but suspecting that everything that had happened was related, Kyle showed his companions the couple’s arrival, the female’s distress and eventual capitulation. “I’m not sure I’m remembering the couple’s words verbatim, but it’s a close paraphrase.”

“Then she volunteered to continue?” Malik sounded suspicious. “Even after her reaction to the injections, she agreed to go on?”

Kyle nodded, forcing the lingering images out of his mind. “We wouldn’t have left her there if she were unwilling. She was human, not lupine.”

“Not anymore,” Kane stressed with a derisive shake of his head. “She’s well on her way to becoming a lupine hybrid.”

The possibility surprised Kyle. His coalition wasn’t sure what it all meant, but they were leaning toward sexual compatibility or maybe breeding. “You think this is about transformation?”

“A very specific type of transformation,” Malik said. “Babcock is tracking hormone

levels and other changes in the endocrine system. And there were twelve subjects listed on the reports, so the couple that interrupted him is one of six.”

“For those of us who didn’t go to medical school, what does that mean?” Kyle blew out a ragged breath. He couldn’t believe they were still dealing with Babcock’s maniacal ambition after all these years.

“He’s trying to enable the wolves to breed with human females,” Kane clarified, confirming Kyle’s suspicions. “I didn’t think it was possible without nanobots, but apparently that sonofabitch has found another way.”

In feline hybrids, clusters of nanobots entered the female during sex and triggered the needed mutations resulting in interspecies compatibility.

There were only a few dozen hybrids on Rydaria who were equipped with reproductive nanobots.

Kane just happened to be one of them. His nanobots could be extracted and then injected into other males.

The nanobots were also self-replicating, so theoretically he could keep making them as long as they were needed.

“Breeding was our top guess,” Kyle told them, “but Diego wanted confirmation.”

“Judging from the hormone levels reflected in the reports, none of the females have conceived yet. In fact, I think Babcock is still a way off from his goal.”

Kyle nodded. “He told the female there would be multiple injections, as many as ten.”

“Well, we need to make sure he isn’t alive to administer even one more.” Kane’s tone was cold, his features emotionless.

“I despise Babcock as much as you, but let me play devil’s advocate. If all the females are willing participants, as the woman we saw clearly was, do we have the right to interfere?”

“Babcock forfeited his life when he took us captive,” Kane countered, his tone even sharper than before.

“Then why has Zion taken so long to give the order? The humans arrived four months ago.”

Kane leaned forward, arms resting on the tabletop. “Why are you defending that sonofabitch? Babcock made all our lives a living hell.”

“I’m not defending Babcock,” Kyle insisted. “I thought he should have been taken out the day he set foot on Rydaria. The question is why is Zion willing to do so now when he wasn’t before? Is Zion lashing out at Babcock or Elias?”

“Both,” Malik said with a shrug. “I can’t explain why Zion has waited so long to end Babcock, but the wolves cannot be allowed to breed. Not while Elias commands them.”

Kyle didn’t understand the timing, but he agreed with the proposed outcome, so he allowed the subject to drop. “Did Diego give you any indication about when he’d return?”

Malik shook his head and pushed back from the table. “They’re working out the details of the alliance so it could take a few days.”

“We’ll update them as soon as they return,” Kane offered. “This is important, but not urgent. It has been going on for weeks.”

Kyle wasn’t sure he agreed with the assessment.

The longer the breeding program was allowed to progress, the greater the chances that the wolves would be able to continue without Babcock.

Still, he didn’t want to interrupt a diplomatic conference.

They’d been hoping for an alliance with the raptors since they went to war with the wolves.

The conversation was finished, and Kyle was anxious to return to his mate, so he nodded his farewell. “Thank you for your help.”

“Anytime,” Kane responded, and Kyle headed home.

Four frustrating days passed as Zion and his advisers debated the next move.

If it weren’t for the delightful distraction of their mate, Jon might have snuck into the lupine village and snuffed out Babcock’s worthless life with or without permission.

He hated waiting, he hated indecision, and he despised Eugene Babcock with a burning intensity.

To his way of thinking, the conflicts were not that complicated, so what the fuck was taking so long?

“Babcock deserves to die,” he stated firmly. “Is anyone still arguing about that?”

“I don’t think so,” Isaac said. “I think the issue is whether or not he possesses knowledge that we need before we end his life.”

“We survived for years without his ‘knowledge,’” Jon sneered. “He arrived on this planet four months ago. I say we’ve waited long enough.”

“What would have happened to us if the human females hadn’t been exiled to Rydaria?” Isaac asked, challenge clear in his expression.

Jon glared at him. He knew damn well what Isaac was getting at, but he was not in the mood for logic.

They sat at the kitchen table pretending to be civilized.

Tara sat sideways across the couch with a book in her lap, but she was listening intently to every word they said.

Kyle was running an errand for Diego and hadn’t returned yet.

“Well?” Isaac persisted. “What would have happened to us?”

“Extinction,” Jon admitted as he downed the rest of his ale. “Without the ability to reproduce, our species would end with us.”

“Thanks to Kane’s nanobots, we can transform females enabling them to bear our young,” Isaac reminded, not that the reminder was necessary. They all understood what it took to breed a female.

Jon’s gaze drifted toward Tara. She’d stopped resisting them in bed and the past couple of nights had been unbelievable. Still, she was far from agreeing to the transformation process, far from admitting she was their mate. “What’s your point,”

Jon growled out.

“What about the raptors and the wolves?” Tara set her book aside and stood up.

She’d allowed Isaac to direct the conversation, but thanks to her friendship with Lexie, Tara knew everything that was said at the council meetings.

And despite Jon’s anger, the conflicts were more complicated than he wanted to make them.

“Don’t they have the right to fight against extinction too? ”

Jon watched her as she walked across the room and felt much of his anger melting away. She frequently had this effect on him, and he found it annoying. He needed his anger right now. “The wolves don’t deserve to procreate, and we’ll share the nanobots with the raptors. They’re our allies now.”

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She sat down across from him before she responded.

“The nanobots are programmed for feline hybrids. They won’t work in raptors or wolves.

And not all the wolves are evil. According to Lexie, half of the packs have refused to participate in any of the raids.

Zion suspects that one of the packs will challenge Elias for control of the village. ”

“So he gets away with all the lives he’s taken. He tied Akari to a table and tortured her for six fucking days! Do we just forget about all that?” Too wound up to sit still any longer, Jon shoved back his chair and began to pace the living room. “Elias needs to die, and Babcock needs to die.”

“And you want to be the one who spills their blood.” Isaac’s brow arched and challenge filled his tone. “Why are you so anxious to end them?”

“You know why,” he snapped angrily. He glanced at Tara and sighed. She was clearly confused by his vehemence, but he wasn’t quite ready to explain.

“You were engineered to be an assassin,” she mused, more to herself than to him. “Does the aggression build up if you don’t use your skills?”

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath.

There were serious disadvantages to having such a sharp, perceptive mate.

“Yes,” he admitted tightly. “If I don’t release the aggression I can go into a blind rage.

It’s only happened a few times since coming here, but it’s nothing I want to experience again. ”

A sexy smile curved her lips as she asked, “Is there only one way to release the aggression?”

“I’d be willing to experiment with it once we’re bonded, but it’s too dangerous right now.”

The front door swung open, drawing everyone’s attention. Kyle stepped into the cabin and motioned to someone behind him. “Look who I found on my way home.”

Akari moved into the doorway as Kyle stepped aside. “May I speak with Tara for a moment? I won’t keep her long.” She kept her eyes downcast and made no move to fully enter the cabin.

Tara hurried over to Akari and they went out onto the porch. She was only gone for a few moments and then she returned alone.

“Is there a problem?” Isaac stood up and walked around the table. “Is Akari all right?”

“She just agreed to let you guys scan her memory.” Tara sounded surprised by the announcement. “She told me that she wouldn’t be able to live with herself if they hurt someone else because she refused to help you.”

“We can do it tonight while she’s sleeping,” Isaac reminded. “She will be completely unaware.”

Tara shook her head. “She doesn’t want to know exactly when you do it, but she wants to be awake. The thought of having someone sort through her memories while she’s sound asleep is disturbing. She wants me to contact her once it’s over, but she does not want to know when you’re about to begin.”

Isaac nodded. “We can work with that.”

Tara looked up at him, uncertainty shadowing her eyes. “How does it work? How do you keep her from feeling it when you enter her mind?”

“Jon and Kyle will shield the link while I perform the scan. We’ve done this sort of thing before. Akari will be completely unaware that anything is happening.”

“Okay,” Tara sighed. “I’m going to presume the people you did this to before deserved to be invaded and just move on. I think you should do it right away. She’s going to spend all day wondering if the scan has started. It will be a big relief when I can tell her it’s all over.”

“I agree,” Isaac assured her with a smile. “Give us a minute to prepare mentally.”

“Do you know Akari’s current location?” Jon asked as Isaac closed his eyes and slipped into a light trance. “Was she heading back to the cabin she shares with her mates?”

With another shake of her head, Tara explained, “One of her mates is the head baker. Zion wants fresh bread and finger cakes for the gathering tonight, so Akari is helping her mate fill the order.”

“Perfect. Busy work is the best distraction.” Jon walked over to Tara and gave her a kiss. “I’m not sure how you convinced Akari to cooperate, but thank you.”

“There was no convincing involved,” she insisted. “I just offered the information and let her choose.”

Jon nodded and turned to Isaac. “This is your show, brother. How should we proceed?”

Isaac motioned toward the center of the room. “Usual configuration. As soon as you and Jon create a densely shielded opening, I’ll get in and out as fast as possible.”

“Understood,” Jon responded.

They moved to the middle of the room and stood back to back.

Tara kept a good distance between them, clearly trying not to distract them.

Jon wanted to laugh. She could leave the planet and he would still be distracted by her.

Each time he closed his eyes, his nose filled with her scent, and her taste rolled across his tongue.

He could feel her pressed against him and wrapped around him.

And he hoped it would be like that for the rest of his life.

“Ready?” Isaac prompted sharply.

Jon gave himself a firm mental shake. They hadn’t even begun to create the opening.

He glanced at Kyle, who smiled knowingly and then closed his eyes.

They shifted their focus inward and channeled energy into their psychic abilities.

Jon immediately took the lead. It was impossible for him to behave any other way.

His basic personality had been assertive before his transformation.

He was intensely dominant now. Kyle considered himself a leader also, but unlike Jon and Isaac, he was able to play a supporting role when necessary.

Easily locating Akari, Jon sank into her mind a millimeter at a time.

Jon constructed a basic shield first. Not only did they need to prevent her from sensing what they were doing, they also needed others with paranormal abilities to remain unaware of the invasion.

Once the perimeter shield was in place, Jon carefully created a small opening for Isaac.

Kyle protected the opening with additional shielding, creating a barrier so dense that no one would sense what was going on inside.

The procedure was familiar. Each Shadow had been created with a specific purpose in mind.

Kyle was a psychic scout, Jon was an assassin, and Isaac was an interrogator.

For the last three years of their captivity, Nuevo had leased them out to various governments and military forces.

They were controlled with powerful drugs and explosive implants that ensured they remain within a designated area.

Having freedom over their skills made life tolerable.

However, this sort of task always dredged up unwanted memories.

Kyle signaled to Isaac that the pathway was ready, and Isaac slipped into Akari's mind.

Moving stealthily, Isaac rapidly located the memories of her attackers.

The first two images were vivid. The villains were easily identified, but the rest was just shadowy impressions.

Akari had been so traumatized by the brutality and the pain of her beatings that her mind shut down, drawing her into a protective haze separate from physical reality.

Kyle was relieved that she remembered a small fraction of what had been done to her, but the reaction compromised their goals.

As soon as Isaac and Jon had withdrawn, Kyle sent a cleansing pulse through the shields, restoring Akari's mind to the way they had found it.

Isaac blinked repeatedly as he refocused on the present. His expression was thunderous.

"Did it work?" Tara asked, moving closer to where Isaac stood. "Were you able to see her attackers?"

"Yes and no," Isaac admitted with a sigh. "The first two images were undeniable, but they are also surprisingly unhelpful."

"What does that mean?" she cried, crossing her arms over her breasts. "If you saw

them, that can't be 'unhelpful.'”

“I clearly saw Elias and Armando,” Isaac told her.

“Elias is the wolf leader.” She sounded as if she were reminding herself. “Who is Armando?”

“Armando was his second in command,” Jon told her. “He shot one of Diego’s coalition mates, so Diego killed him.”

“And everyone presumed that Elias was one of her attackers all along, so you didn’t learn anything new,” Tara deduced with a sigh. “What the hell am I going to tell Akari?”

“You’ll tell her the truth,” Isaac stressed. “I was able to see some of their faces, while others were distorted. However, we have enough information now to move on with the investigation. As far as she knows, her cooperation was invaluable.”

Tara nodded. “That sounds good. I’ll go talk to her in a little while.” She indulged in one final sigh before asking, “What does this really mean? Is there nothing more we can do?”

“There are all sorts of things we can do,” Jon said bitterly. “The question is what will the council approve us to do.”

Isaac shook his head, looking nearly as frustrated as Jon felt. “Kyle, escort Tara to the bakery. Jon and I are going to drop in on Zion and his advisors.”

Kyle tensed, but all he said was, “Is that wise?”

“Probably not, but we’re going,” Isaac said. “We’ve been patient long enough.”

Thrilled to have Isaac join his side, Jon grinned. “Let’s go cause some trouble.”

Kyle and Tara headed off in one direction while Isaac and Jon went in the other. The afternoon was bright and cool without being cold. That would change rapidly as soon as the sun went down. They walked quickly, more than ready for the conversation.

“Stick to the new information,” Isaac advised. “We’re there because of what we just learned, not because they all need a firm kick in the ass.”

Jon laughed. “I’ll let you do the talking. We both know I’m spoiling for a fight.”

When they reached the lodge, they found the council congregating in front of the massive fireplace drinking ale and discussing repairs that needed to be made on a section of the perimeter wall.

Are you fucking kidding me? Jon flared. We’ve been waiting for days and they’re talking about wall repairs?

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They clearly took a break. Try to calm down.

Jon tried and failed. He needed to hit something, anything, and it needed to be soon.

Diego walked over to them as soon as he saw them enter. “What’s going on? You two look ready to brawl.”

Despite his promise to let Isaac talk, Jon replied, “We would love to go brawl, but no one will give us the order.”

“If you had waited twenty more minutes, I would have been at your front door. We decided on a two-team mission. Your team will finally take out Elias, while the other team captures Babcock.” Diego held up his hand to halt their response.

“Before you insist that Babcock needs to die too, let me assure you that we all agree. However, he must be interrogated before we end his life.”

They finally got the kill order, and they were just about to dismantle it themselves. Talk about irony.

“There is a complication,” Isaac admitted with a sigh. “Akari finally let us scan her and the only person she saw clearly was Elias. If we want to find out who else was involved, we have to interrogate him too.”

“Goddamn it,” Diego muttered. “I really wanted to go to sleep tonight knowing that Elias had breathed his last.”

“I guess it’s a double catch and carry mission,” Isaac concluded. “Who else is going?”

“Team Three. Darrell from Two twisted his ankle yesterday,” Diego explained. “I think it will work best if we keep everything separate. No cross communication. Just focus on your objectives. Sneak in, secure Elias, and drag him back here.”

“He might be slightly bloody and bruised by the time he arrives,” Jon warned.

Diego chuckled. “I understand entirely. Just make sure he’s still alive.”

Night had just fallen when Shadow Team One reached the lupine village.

The sun sometimes caused odd distortions in their covert energy fields, so they tended to operate at night.

Jon paused before climbing the tree that allowed them to bypass village security.

The Shadows had been using the tree for three years now.

The wolves were foolish and reckless, more concerned with petty pack conflicts than the safety of the entire village.

Any security weakness in the feline village would have been searched out and rectified after the first raid.

Jon couldn’t believe that the tree was still there, its thick branches spanning the perimeter wall.

Are you coming? Isaac urged from inside the village.

Rather than respond telepathically, Jon scrambled up the tree, over the wall, and dropped down close enough to his coalition mates so they would feel his arrival. He was one of two Shadows that could sense the others even while they were shielded.

This has to be fast and accurate , Isaac stressed. If Elias gets off any sort of alarm, we won't make it out alive.

Understood , Jon and Kyle responded in unison.

They all knew what was at stake. Elias was vicious and wily.

He wasn't technically psychic, but his instincts were known to be more accurate than the average wolf.

Unlike the last time Jon crept through the village, they knew exactly where they were going this time.

Elias occupied a cabin adjacent to the large meeting hall.

Locating Elias and securing him for transport shouldn't be that difficult.

The challenge was going to come when they carried the unconscious wolf all the way through the village and hoisted him up the tree.

They'd prepared as well as possible, bringing magnetic restraints and plenty of sedative mist. Still, Jon had been more comfortable with the mission when it was a fast, clean strike.

There were too many opportunities for things to go wrong with this capture and carry nonsense.

Interrogating Elias was crucial. Still, he wished there was an easy way to make that happen.

As they made their way along the perimeter of the village, tension banded Jon's chest. They passed no one, and most of the cabins appeared abandoned.

It was not late enough for the entire village to be asleep, so what the hell was going on?

There were no patrolling guards, no inebriated party attendees, no one too restless to sleep.

Why is it so quiet? Jon finally asked. It's never this quiet here.

Isaac paused and reached out with his mind. Jon could feel the surge of psychic energy, but Isaac didn't speak for a long, unsettling moment. Then anxiety rushed across their link and Isaac explained, At least half of the wolves are gone. We need to get back, now!

The Shadows bolted toward the front of the village. The gates were secured, but the customary guards were not at their posts. A smaller door, meant for pedestrian traffic, rested beside the gates. Isaac opened the door and the Shadows ran out into the forest.

Jon's heart thudded wildly in his chest. Needing to run as fast as possible, he released his lion and welcomed the shift.

His clothing was shredded in the process, but he didn't care.

Nothing was more important than the safety of his mate and his village.

A muffled growl told him that Isaac and Kyle had done the same.

Tara was spending the evening with Lexie and her mates. Jon trusted the guardians to keep her safe, unless the village was under attack. The guardians responded immediately whenever there was a threat. If they were off defending the village, that meant Tara was in danger.

The most likely target is the shelter , Kyle pointed out as they sprinted through the trees.

Jon zigzagged through the darkness, darting around trees and jumping over boulders. In that moment, he would have traded all his gifts for the ability to teleport.

Is Tara okay? Jon asked, knowing that Isaac would be scanning.

She's fine , Isaac assured. In fact, she was unaware that there was a raid until I checked on her.

What about Team Three? Kyle wondered. Did they get Babcock?

Isaac shook his head, but kept running. Their mission failed too. He wasn't in his cabin. They're on their way back.

As he crested the final hill, Jon sucked in a shuddering breath.

Chaos surrounded the shelter. Fires had broken out—or more likely been set—along the front of the simple structure.

Feline hybrids crouched behind whatever cover they could find as they fired energy weapons at the lupine hybrids.

Wolves, in animal form, blocked each entrance discouraging the cats from entering the building.

Were more wolves inside with the human females?

It was likely, but they'd have to get closer to know for sure.

Isaac released his shift. His naked form was only visible for a moment before he manifested his energy shield.

Kyle followed Isaac's example, shifting back to human then disappearing from view. "Where can we do the most good?" Every syllable was tense and guarded.

As Isaac assessed the situation, Jon shifted back to his human form and camouflaged his presence with his Shadow shield.

"The back of the building," Isaac concluded. "The wolves will try to escape with the women there. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Jon agreed, and so did Zion. Armed soldiers were hiding in the trees, and a group of lions had assembled in a line, waiting for the wolves to attempt an escape. "That area is covered," Jon pointed out. "I say we take a look inside."

Isaac hesitated, but ultimately agreed. "We still need an entry point, even though we're invisible."

"That door looks as good as any," Jon suggested, pushing the image across their psychic link.

The three Shadows hustled down the hill and approached the shelter as stealthily as possible.

Let me look around , Isaac urged.

Kyle and Jon paused, waiting for their leader to assess the scene.

Isaac flowed through the wall just far enough to see what waited inside. One guard, but he's well-armed. I'll go first and take him out. Wait for my signal.

Understood , Jon said.

The fighting seemed to intensify at the front of the building, so Kyle said, Hurry.

Isaac smoothly passed through the wall.

Using their mental link, Jon followed Isaac's movements, confirming that he had the situation under control.

Isaac jerked the guard's weapon out of his hands, then used the rifle like a bludgeon to render the hybrid unconscious with one solid whack.

Isaac supported the hybrid as he fell, ensuring that he made as little noise as possible.

After pulling the door open, Isaac waited for his teammates to enter and then took the lead. Isaac could sense danger sooner than Kyle or Jon. It was one of the reasons he had been selected as team leader.

There wasn't much to the shelter. A row of storerooms and the door through which the Shadows had entered ran across the back wall.

The rest of the space was a large open room.

The women, twenty-six of them, were huddled in the center of the area.

Wolves prowled around them, snarling and snapping at the terrified females.

A group of lupine hybrids stood off to one side speaking in hushed tones or shouting an occasional order.

“We need to draw the cats to the back so we can take the women out the side,” Elias was saying. He stood back from the circling soldiers speaking with a younger male.

“Knife a couple and shove them out the back door,” the younger wolf suggested.

Jon didn’t know his name, but he was frequently seen with Armando.

Or he had been before Diego killed Armando.

Was this Elias’ new beta? “The cats will smell human blood and come running. They can’t help being protective fools. ”

“We need every female,” Elias argued. “I’m not risking another attack this close to their village.”

“Then we have no other choice. It’s better to sacrifice a few than retreat empty-handed.”

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Anger surged through Jon and it was all he could do not to charge across the room and rip out the young one's throat.

Each female was precious. Even Zion, who had more reason than anyone else to resent humans, had come to understand their value.

Only a fucking coward would intentionally harm a woman.

But the way they'd treated Akari proved that the wolves were beneath contempt.

Quickly searching for Zion's mind, Jon urged, Move in, sir. Move in now! We're inside the shelter and they are about to make things much worse.

Are the women in a safe position? Zion replied.

They're huddled in the center of the room, Isaac told him. Give us thirty seconds and we'll get them flat on the floor.

Let Isaac and Kyle wrangle the women. Jon was going after Elias. There was no way that bastard was escaping, again. Then he realized all his equipment was in the forest with his shredded clothes. Looking around the room, he hurriedly assessed his options.

He spotted one of the feline guards and hustled over to where he crouched. I need your restraints and a choke collar. Jon slipped the thought into the guard's mind as he took the items off his utility belt. The guard gasped, but made no move to prevent Jon's theft.

The rest happened in a dizzying blur. Kyle and Isaac dropped their shields and shouted at the women to get down. Zion and a group of soldiers burst in through the front door.

The wolves growled at the women, snapping their jaws threateningly.

Lions bounded in behind Zion's soldiers, attacking the wolves.

Lupine hybrids ran in through a side door and joined the battle.

They shot at the feline soldiers as the wolves attempted to herd the terrified females toward the side door.

Lions roared, savaging the wolves as they fought their way toward the females.

Tuning out the chaos, Jon focused on his task.

He flew across the room and tackled Elias, slamming him down onto his belly.

After snapping the choke collar around his throat, Jon dragged the wolf's arms behind his back and secured them with the restraints.

Sedative mist would have been nice, but the choke collar would keep him from shifting.

That's the best Jon could do until the fight was over.

Zion and the soldiers focused on the wolves, meticulously separating them from the women without injuring the females. About half the wolves had shifted back to their human forms. They overturned beds and stacked up tables, creating a makeshift barricade.

The younger wolf, likely Elias' new beta, shouted orders and the wolves rushed to obey. Two thirds, animals and hybrids, intensified their aggression toward the cats. With alarming speed, the other third, led by the beta, assembled the women and hurried them across the room.

The wolves leapt over and charged around the barricade, attacking Zion and his soldiers. The attack was savage, bloody, ensuring that the cats remained focused on them and them alone. Lions rushed in to help, but it was all a distraction.

The beta and his followers reached the side door with the women.

"Stop them!" Jon yelled, but everyone was engaged in their own battles.

He automatically reached for his pulse pistol, but it too was in the forest with his shredded clothes.

"Shit," he muttered and lowered his arm.

Were the feline soldiers in position? Surely, they'd surrounded the building by now.

Flinging open the door, the beta hurried the wolves and the women out into the night.

The familiar sound of energy weapons echoed through the forest followed by women screaming.

As Jon thought, feline soldiers were scattered through the trees, but had they been able to stop the wolves from escaping?

The wolves were shielding themselves with females, so it was nearly impossible to shoot them.

Jon stood and dragged Elias to his knees. “Who was the other wolf?”

“Which one?” The bastard smirked, clearly not comprehending his peril. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

Not wanting Elias to hear what he was about to say, Jon reached out to Zion telepathically. Did the perimeter guards prevent the escape?

Unclear. Give me a minute to find out.

Elias laughed. “Juan got away, didn’t he? I can see it in your eyes. If my count is right, we just captured twenty-two more mates.”

Jon looked around and cursed under his breath. The fucker was right. There were only four females left inside the structure, but had the beta managed to elude the guards?

Zion hurried over to where Jon stood and motioned toward Elias. “I’ll take care of this piece of shit. You and your team go join the hunters.”

Jon nodded, then paused. “Elias must be interrogated before we kill him. Isaac’s memory scan was only partially successful.”

“I know. Diego told me.” Zion motioned toward the open door on the far side of the building. “Go!”

Jon bolted into the forest, releasing his lion as he ran. Isaac and Kyle were half a step behind him.

Claire hurried along in the line of sobbing women, stumbling over rocks and fighting for footing against the uneven ground.

Wolf hybrids surrounded them, urging them on with weapons and threats.

They'd been running through a forest and suddenly the leader triggered...

Claire wasn't sure what he had triggered.

She'd never seen anything like it before.

One moment they were surrounded by trees and the next they were in a tunnel.

They hadn't been transported. They'd passed through some sort of disguised opening.

The passage was dank and dark with roughhewn walls and a sloping floor.

Timbers supported the ceiling in places and the tunnel was at least twenty degrees cooler than the forest had been.

Lights were inset in the timbers, but the long distance between each support created areas of darkness or dense shadows.

The wolves carried flashlights as well as their weapons, so the escape had been well planned.

Was this a mine or underground shelter, and who had constructed it?

Rydaria was supposed to have been uninhabited before the hybrids arrived.

"Where are they taking us?" Dawn whispered, moving closer to Claire.

"I don't know, hon," Claire responded. "Probably their village."

Dawn was one of six women who had been assigned to the same tent as Claire when they first arrived on Rydaria.

Dawn was painfully shy and introverted, making her seem younger than her twenty years.

Claire felt protective of her and tried to help her adjust to life on this unforgiving planet.

She'd nearly succeeded in drawing Dawn out of her protective shell and then the wolves attacked.

The violent slaughter had shocked and terrified everyone, but the savagery had been particularly hard on Dawn.

She'd barely spoken since, and she refused to let any of the hybrids near her.

Claire's brother had been one of the many victims that night, so she understood Dawn's reaction.

Still, Dawn's refusal to cooperate landed her in the shelter, and Claire was concerned that the cold and subpar food would result in a serious illness.

That's why Claire risked punishment and sneaked fresh food and supplies to Dawn on a regular basis.

Tonight had been one of those visits. That's why Claire had been in the shelter when the wolves attacked.

Looking around, Claire shuddered. Interacting with feline hybrids was hard enough, but lupine hybrids were vicious and unreasonable. Being at their mercy was

terrifying.

“Are they going to kill us?” Dawn whispered, emotion quivering through her voice.

“If they’d wanted us dead, we’d be dead.

This is something different.” Something worse .

She didn’t speak the last phrase, but couldn’t prevent the thought from forming.

It had taken weeks to convince herself that submitting to a coalition of lion hybrids was a better fate than death.

No power in the universe could make her willingly submit to her brother’s murderers.

Dawn’s feet started dragging. Claire tried to hurry her along, but Dawn simply wouldn’t move.

“Keep up,” one of the wolves behind them snapped.

“She’s terrified,” Claire responded in the same impatient tone. “We all are.”

“I hope they give you to me.” The wolf leered at her, his gaze moving lewdly over her body. “I like mouthy females.”

“And I like a female who knows how to use her mouth,” the wolf beside him added, and they both laughed.

Dawn sobbed, covering her mouth with her hand. She wasn’t moving at all now. She just stood there trembling.

Claire wrapped her arm around Dawn's waist and dragged her forward a few steps. "Dawn, you have to walk or they'll hurt you. Start walking right now."

Dawn let out a plaintive cry and covered her face with both hands.

"What's the problem, Richardson?" a large, shaggy-haired wolf demanded as he reached their group. His shimmering gaze assessed the scene even as he demanded answers.

"We have a straggler, alpha. She's refusing to walk."

Alpha? Wasn't Elias the pack alpha? Claire was confused by the title. This wasn't even the male who'd been shouting orders after the Shadow subdued Elias.

"What's the problem, female?" the new alpha asked. "Is there a reason you stopped walking?"

Claire moved in front of Dawn, shielding her from the alpha. "She's hysterical," Claire stressed. "She's so scared her body won't cooperate."

"Can you calm her down?" Despite his stern expression, a hint of compassion warmed his tone. A dark beard concealed his features, but his eyes were well shaped and jewel bright. The exact color, however, was lost in the shadows.

"I'm trying," Claire insisted, "but they're not helping. Their comments are making it worse."

"Go on." The alpha motioned for Richardson and his friend to continue down the passageway. "I've got this."

"Yes, alpha," Richardson said and walked off with long, brisk steps.

The line of captives flowed around them for a tense moment. The women looked at Claire curiously, but no one stopped to ask what was going on.

“What’s your name?” the alpha asked.

There was no logical reason to refuse, so she said, “I’m Claire.

That’s Dawn. Why did he call you alpha? Isn’t Elias the pack alpha?

” The newcomer smiled and a strange warmth spread through Claire’s abdomen.

He was the first wolf who had shown any concern at all, the first who had treated them with respect.

The exact shape of his features was distorted by his beard. Still, he seemed young and vital.

“There are eleven packs, and each has its own alpha. The strongest pack rules the village. The ruling pack has been Elias’ for the past couple of years.

Obviously, that’s about to change.” He nodded toward Dawn.

“No one will speak to her for the next ten minutes. Calm her down and get her moving again.”

“I’ll try, but she’s fragile. Always has been.”

“If she won’t walk on her own, I’ll send someone to carry her. No more excuses. Figure out a way to get her moving again.”

He walked off and Claire clutched her hands into fists. So much for a compassionate

wolf. She should have known better.

His casual explanation surprised her. He'd made his village sound a lot more structured and civilized than she'd expected. All she knew about wolves was that they hated cats, they killed for pleasure, and they were willing to torture females.

Shaking away the discouraging thoughts with a heavy sigh, Claire focused on Dawn. "Look at me, Dawn." Dawn didn't react so Claire placed her hands on Dawn's upper arms. "Look at me," she said firmly.

Still shaking visibly, Dawn raised her gaze until it connected with Claire's.

"If you don't start walking, a large wolf hybrid is going to pick you up and carry you. Do you want a wolf to put his hands on you?"

"No," Dawn cried, shaking her head as fresh tears flowed from her eyes. "I don't want them to touch me."

"Then walk and keep on walking. I will stay right by your side."

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“ You promised you would protect them!” The only thing that kept Tara from pummeling Zion was Isaac’s restraining arms. She swung at the pride leader, but he easily dodged her attempts.

“If those fucking wolves hurt my friends, I will never forgive you!” Using her mate as leverage, she tried to kangaroo-kick Zion, but he was standing just out of range.

“Control your mate, or take her out of here,” Zion ordered, but he looked depressed, not angry.

Lexie, Tara, and a dozen other females had made their way to the lodge hoping to learn what was going on outside the gates.

They knew the shelter was under attack because most of their mates were involved in the battle.

But beyond that simple fact, no one knew the details.

When the males returned with just a few of the shelter’s occupants, Tara rushed forward and demanded answers.

“Their attack was fast and focused,” Kane, one of Lexie’s mates, admitted. “They utilized diversions and misdirection. They were much more strategic than they have ever been before.”

“We captured Elias,” Kyle told her. “The wolves are without a leader right now.”

“That didn’t stop them from kidnapping more females,” she shot back.

“We can’t explain what happened in the forest,” Jon told her. “They just disappeared. With twenty-two struggling captives they disappeared.”

“I don’t care how they got away. We know where they’re going,” Tara countered angrily. “Go after them!”

Isaac spun her around and tilted her head back until she met his gaze. “You’re being disrespectful. Calm down or this conversation is over.”

She gritted her teeth and sneered, “Claire and Dawn were in the shelter. They won’t survive with the wolves.”

He had the decency to cringe. “Why was Claire in the shelter? She has been attending the gatherings.”

“Does it matter?” She shoved against his chest, but he refused to release her.

“Why are you guys still here? Go get them back!” Anger gave way to grief and a harsh sob threatened her composure.

“They killed Claire’s brother right in front of her.

And Dawn...” Words failed, and Tara dissolved into tears.

Isaac pulled her against him, pressing her face into the warmth of his neck. “We’ll get them back, but we can’t rush in without a plan. We’re not even sure they went back to their village.”

Anger flared again, burning through the helplessness that had momentarily gripped

Tara. “Where else would they have gone? And here’s the only plan you need, run to the lupine village, break down the gates, and kill as many wolves as needed until you get the women back!”

“I’ll return shortly,” Isaac said as his long fingers closed around her upper arm. He pulled her across the room and out the front door.

“Oh, my God,” she cried. “If you spank me right now I’ll end our courtship. I have every right to be angry.” She tugged against his hold and dug in her heels.

He ignored her struggles and dragged her along as if she weren’t fighting him every step of the way. “We’re all angry. We’re shocked and confused. But lashing out at Zion serves no purpose.”

“Fine. Then I’ll lash out at you!” She swung her free arm, hand tightly fisted.

Isaac easily caught her wrist, preventing the blow from landing. They faced each other, both glaring. “I’m taking you to our cabin so you can calm down. Keep it up and I will punish you.”

She fought even harder as he resumed walking. She didn’t want to be locked in their cabin. The leaders weren’t taking this seriously enough. She needed to be in the lodge to make sure they did something to get the women back. “I’ll calm down, I promise. Just take me back to the lodge.”

“I can sense your emotions, mate,” he reminded. “You’re anything but calm.”

“This happened before,” she yelled. “The wolves carried off women during the massacre and Zion just shrugged it off.”

Isaac’s fingers tightened for a moment then relaxed without letting go.

They'd reached their cabin before he composed himself enough to speak.

"We never shrugged off anything the wolves did. The women you're referring to were immediately claimed by wolves.

Diego's spy insisted that they were not being forced, and we saw evidence to support his claim.

Would it have been better to tear them from their mates and drag them to our village so they could be claimed all over again?

" He scanned open the door and urged her inside.

Tara spun to face him, but realized too late that Isaac hadn't followed.

The door slid shut between them and Tara lunged for the release.

The simple device didn't respond. Isaac had locked her out, or actually locked her in.

She beat on the door with both fists. "Let me out! I need to talk to Zion!"

You need to calm down , Isaac countered. Stay inside the cabin until I return, or the punishment will be severe .

Tense and panting from the recent tug-of-war, Tara walked over to the couch and sat down.

Her emotions were still seething, but Isaac was right.

She needed to calm down. Venting her temper might feel wonderful, but it wasn't helping Claire and Dawn.

She could go after them herself. She discarded the impulse a millisecond after it formed.

All that would accomplish is giving the wolves twenty-three captives instead of twenty-two.

She was not a soldier, certainly not a spy.

In fact, she wasn't even sure she could find the lupine village without help.

So she reluctantly waited for her mates to return, praying that they would have better news.

She took off her boots and lay down on the couch, then paced restlessly around the cabin.

One hour turned into two. She read for a while, pausing to light a fire as the living room grew chilly.

Three hours stretched into four. Had her mates participated in the rescue?

Was that what was taking so long? She hoped that was the case.

If this had been a marathon planning session, she would lose her freaking mind!

She was dozing on the couch when her mates finally returned. The only light in the room was the fire. How long had she been asleep? "What time is it?"

"Almost nine," Kyle told her. "You looked so peaceful. We were going to cover you with a couple of blankets and let you sleep."

She sat up and stretched out her back. “Where are Claire and Dawn? Can I go talk to them?”

A sigh escaped Kyle, and he glanced at Isaac and Jon. “The women were not in the lupine village. We don’t know where the wolves took them.”

Tara shook her head, refusing to believe what she’d just heard. “I don’t understand. They have to be in the village.”

“We were part of the recon team,” Jon said, his voice tense and low. “We searched the village ourselves. They’re not there.”

Set in motion by disappointment and frustration, Tara came up off the couch. “You three know the planet better than anyone. Where else could they be?”

“We’ve sent for a raptor scout,” Isaac told her. “They can search from the air, so they can cover a lot more ground than we can.”

Tara nodded. “It’s a good idea.” She’d seen one of the raptor leaders transform into an oversized eagle. The surreal sight was still vivid within her mind. Maybe someday she’d get used to all the shapeshifting.

“Let’s go to bed,” Isaac suggested. “It’s not late, but we’re all tired.”

“I’m not in the mood to cuddle,” she muttered. “I’ll sleep on the couch.” She knew her resentment wasn’t fair, but that didn’t make the emotion any less real.

“You’re acting like a child,” Jon warned. “Isaac allowed your temper tantrum earlier. Adjust your attitude right now or we’ll revisit the way you behaved in the lodge.”

Tara felt her jaw drop as resentment flared into anger.

“Fine. Let’s review the way I reacted.” She placed her hands on her hips and advanced.

“The wolves attacked our camp, so Lexie and I came and asked Zion for help. He manipulated the situation and forced us to mate with coalitions or starve. We were starting to adjust to the idea of being mates when the fucking wolves attacked again. They slaughtered more than half of our camp, leaving us traumatized and helpless. The benevolent Zion in all his mercy grudgingly allowed us inside his precious village.”

“This is about your behavior, not Zion’s,” Jon stressed.

“I’m getting there,” she sneered. “We were allowed to stay here for a few short weeks when Zion gave us another ultimatum. Bend over and start getting fucked or move out to the shelter. A shelter with no electricity, no running water, and little food!” She was shouting, chest heaving with her anger.

“Most of us gave in, but a few held out, and the wolves struck again .”

“Listen to your own review. You should be angry at the wolves, not Zion,” Isaac said firmly.

“You should also be angry at your friends for needlessly putting themselves in danger,” Jon asserted. “All they had to do was?—”

Provoked beyond reason, Tara lunged for Jon and slapped him hard across the face. His head snapped to the side and a livid handprint formed on his cheek. “Don’t you dare blame the victims for this!” She blindly hit and kicked as a red haze settled over her vision.

Jon grabbed her and pulled her to the couch, turning her around and bending her over

his legs as he sat down. He held her arms and upper body while Isaac and Kyle stripped off her jeans. “Are you allowed to be disrespectful to your mates and the village leaders?”

“You don’t give a shit how I feel, so I’m not answering your stupid questions!” she yelled, kicking wildly.

Jon smacked her ass several times, then paused while someone removed her panties.

Tara continued to kick and twist, but Jon easily restrained her. “I don’t regret my outburst!”

His hand fell fast and hard, spreading the stinging slaps evenly across her squirming bottom.

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“All the spanking in the universe won’t change my mind!” She bucked and twisted, but Jon held her firmly in place.

Heat blossomed within the sting, each slap adding to the intensity. Jon had spanked her before. So had Isaac, but this was different. Harsher, more punitive. She fought against the stimulation, refusing to give in to her body’s darkest needs.

Jon paused, stroking her burning cheeks. “Are you ready to admit your wrongdoing?”

“You can spank me until your arm falls off. It won’t do any good. The only thing I did wrong was agreeing to be courted by you.” She twisted her neck and glared up at him.

Another flurry of stinging spanks followed, but Tara was determined to resist them this time. Zion was an arrogant pig. If he hadn’t insisted that the unmated females move to the shelter, Clare and Dawn would be safe right now.

“I think she’s right, brothers,” Jon said after several minutes of rapid spanking. “This lesson is going to take something more impactful than my hand.”

“Belt?” Isaac suggested.

“Her hairbrush makes a nice paddle,” Kyle pointed out cheerfully.

They were enjoying this. The realization added fuel to Tara’s smoldering temper. “Fuck you! Fuck all three of you!”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jon responded, his voice low and growly. “Harsh, hard fucking, with no orgasms. That might help her remember her place.”

“Works for me,” Isaac said without hesitation.

It took Kyle a moment longer to respond, but his answer infuriated Tara even more. “I want to fuck her mouth, but she’d likely bite me.”

“I’ll print a spider gag,” Isaac said and walked toward the shared bathroom.

Spider gag? What the hell was that? “You guys are disgusting,” she sneered. “I’m not playing this sick game.”

Kyle moved in front of her and Jon shifted his hands. Before she realized what they were doing, Kyle tugged her shirt off over her head and unfastened her bra. They worked together to rid her of the undergarment, leaving her completely bare.

Scooting to the edge of the seat, Jon eased her off his lap and urged her to her feet. When she tried to bolt, he wrapped his legs around her calves and pulled her arms behind her. “Did you agree to this courtship?”

“Yes, but I rescind my agreement,” she cried as Jon roughly squeezed one breast and then the other. “You guys are assholes, just like your pride leader.”

Kyle chuckled as he pushed his hand between her legs and curved two fingers just inside her. “Courtships last thirty days.” He drove his fingers deeper. “There’s no changing your mind.”

Jon shifted his legs to the inside of hers and forced her thighs apart. Kyle took advantage of the additional space and began fucking her with his fingers. “You’re so damn soft,” he murmured, his gaze boring into hers. “And wet. If you hate us so

vehemently, why are you so wet?”

Standing up, Jon released her hands and collared her throat. He boldly stroked her breasts. “These soft tits are ours to touch.” He squeezed the generous mounds and pinched the sensitive nipples while Kyle’s hand continued to shuttle between her thighs.

“Stop it!” She slapped at them, twisting and arching as she tried to avoid their hands.

“Your mouth is ours to enjoy,” Jon moved one of his hands to her face, grasping her jaw as his thumb slid over her lips. “Kyle is going to fuck you fast and hard, while you open wide like a good girl.”

She shook her head, dislodging his hand. “If he sticks his cock anywhere near my mouth, I’ll bite it off.”

Jon chuckled, giving each nipple a vicious twist. “Isaac is taking care of that right now, but your attitude is why it won’t end with Kyle.

Once Kyle has finished with you, Isaac will fuck your pussy.

This won’t be the sort of fucking you’ve been receiving.

This will be hard and fast, and you’ll not be allowed to come. ”

“Yeah, this will convince me to mate with you.” She threw the comment over her shoulder, but his taunts were starting to get to her. A strange tension was gathering low in her belly. She couldn’t say if it was anticipation or dread.

Jon ran his hands down her body, over her belly, then across her sides.

Finally, he pulled her tender cheeks apart and held them open.

“Isaac’s cum will be dripping from your pussy when I push my cock into this puckered little hole.

” He released one side and worked a finger just inside the tight ring of muscles.

“You’ll cry and beg me to stop, but I’m going to fuck you nice and hard. Would you like to know why?”

“Because you’re a sadistic pig.” She held perfectly still, refusing to give in to his bullying.

“Because this ass belongs to me. It belongs to us, because we are your mates, and your body was designed to give us pleasure.” His finger slid in and out, hinting at the sensations she would soon feel.

“You’ll try to hate it, but you won’t. You’ll fight against the sensations, but it won’t matter.

If you’re a very good girl for Kyle and Isaac—if you submit willingly while they punish you—I will make you come harder than you ever dreamed possible while I fuck this tight little ass. ”

Tara shuddered, fighting off the sensual haze his words had wrapped around her.

“Take what you will, I can’t stop you. But I will never give in to you.”

Jon laughed and withdrew his finger. “Now you’re going to scream and beg before I let you come.”

“This should work,” Isaac said cheerfully as he returned to the living room. He held

up a ring-shaped gag with long 'legs' angling out from the ring. She could see why it was called a spider gag, but how would it keep her from biting Kyle?

"Let's find out." Jon and Kyle quickly positioned her on her knees and pulled her arms behind her back.

Magnetic restraints were closed around her wrists and then Jon fisted the back of her hair.

Kyle pried her mouth open, and Isaac positioned the gag just behind her teeth.

The slender legs rested against her cheeks and a synth-leather strap wrapped around the back of her head, securing the gag in place.

She pushed at the unwanted device, trying to dislodge it.

The ring wouldn't budge as it held her mouth wide open.

Kyle moved in front of her and paused to stroke her face. She resented the tenderness and tried to turn her head. Jon simply tightened his fingers in her hair, drawing a cry from her throat.

"Bad girls get used roughly," Jon reminded. "Isn't that right, naughty mate?"

"-uck -ou!" The curse was garbled because of the bite guard, but she was relatively sure he understood her.

"When you use your mouth to be rude and disrespectful," Kyle said as he opened the front of his pants, "you'll get a hard cock shoved down your throat." He took her face between his hands and pulled her onto his shaft, not stopping until her nose pressed into his belly.

She gagged and whimpered, but couldn't scream because he was partially blocking her airway. She closed her eyes as tears escaped the corners. Heat cascaded through her body and her clit tingled. Kyle, her sweetest mate, was treating her cruelly, so why the fuck was her body responding?

He pulled back slowly, and she sucked in a deep breath, having no doubt his cock was going right back down her throat. "Do you regret your outburst?" He paused, clearly hoping she'd relent.

Tara growled instead. It would take more than a blowjob to break her spirit.

He shoved in deep again, holding her face against his belly for several seconds before he let her breathe. Someone was stroking her breasts and cruelly pinching her nipples. The little sparks of pain kept her clit twitching and made her pussy ache.

Harsh, hard fucking, with no orgasms . Wasn't that what Jon had said? She smiled inwardly. If this was their idea of punishment, she might become a very bad girl. She could wait for her pleasure. Anticipation always made her orgasms more intense.

But what if they didn't let her come at all?

Kyle pushed his cock down her throat over and over.

She inhaled each time he drew out and held her breath as he went deep.

His hands were warm against her face and his gaze bore into hers each time she looked up.

Spit escaped the corners of her mouth as the fucking went on and on.

She was utterly helpless, completely under their control.

He meant this to humiliate her, but she felt liberated.

She closed her eyes and rode the wave of endorphins, no longer caring about anything but his cock sliding in and out of her mouth.

“Get on with it,” Jon urged. “My balls are turning blue.”

Kyle chuckled, but moved a bit faster, not going quite as deep.

Rather than pumping his hips, he bobbed her head, controlling her movements and making her body do the work.

“Oh, yeah,” Kyle groaned, and his pace sped even more.

After three particularly brutal thrusts, he drew back until the head of his cock rested just inside the ring.

His cum spurted out, splashing the inside of her mouth and coating her tongue.

He tilted her head back and ordered, “Swallow every drop.”

His taste exploded across her senses and her core clenched painfully. God, she needed to come. She swallowed twice then awkwardly licked her lower lip.

“Be nice,” Kyle cautioned then reached into her mouth and quickly pulled out the bite guard.

Just to piss him off, she snapped her teeth closed, knowing his fingers would be long gone.

“Looks like she’s ready for phase two of the lesson,” Jon said as he pulled her to her

feet.

She licked the rest of Kyle's cum off her lips, still feeling feisty and annoyed. Her core ached and her clit tingled, determined to keep her senses simmering. She might be restless, but she was far from broken.

"You're next, Isaac," Jon urged. "How do you want her?"

"I'll show you." He swept her up in his arms and carried her into his bedroom.

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She wiggled, but didn't want to fall with her hands secured behind her back.

When they reached his room, he sat her down on the foot of the bed and unfastened one side of the restraints.

He urged her onto her back, drew her arms above her head, then refastened the magnetic cuff.

Jon handed Isaac a length of rope. Was that the same rope they'd used the first time they punished her?

No, this one had to be longer. She was farther down the bed.

Jon crammed a thick pillow under her hips as Isaac and Kyle pulled her legs apart. They tied her ankles to the bottom corners of the bed, leaving her entire body open and on display.

"Very nice." Isaac ran his fingertips from her throat to her navel. "Did you like having Kyle's cock shoved down your throat?" He traced her slit with his index finger. "This makes me think you did." His finger came away wet with her slickness.

"I'm naked and at your mercy," she whispered. "You know that turns me on."

"I think it's more than that." He lightly slapped her pussy, his gaze fixed on her face. "I think you enjoy being humiliated."

As if to prove his point, her nipples tightened, and her pussy fluttered.

He spanked her a little harder. And she restlessly shifted her hips.

Isaac parted her folds and bent to suck on her clit.

Tara cried out as pleasure rushed through her body. "I'm going to come. Please, please, may I come?"

He immediately stopped and swatted her slit. "Bad girls don't get orgasms. Are you ready to be a good girl?"

"I'm already a good girl," she argued. "It's your leader who needs a beating!"

Without responding to her claim, Isaac unzipped his pants and drew out his cock. "Good thing you're nice and wet because this is going to be rough."

True to his word, Isaac slammed his entire length into her pussy and rode her fast and hard.

His pelvis pounded against hers, providing just enough stimulation to keep her on the edge of orgasm without tipping her over.

She tightened her inner muscles and rolled her hips, trying to find the angle that would finally let her come.

Isaac slapped one of her breasts and then the other. "Lie still. This is for my pleasure, not yours. Bad girls are taught hard lessons."

The only lesson she was learning was that her mates were selfish assholes!

"I did nothing wrong," she cried, and Isaac twisted her nipples so hard she saw stars.

The scream that followed was filled with exasperation rather than pain.

They would never convince her that defending her friends was wrong.

He drove deep then stopped. “Did you try to hit the pride leader?”

She glared up at him for a moment then asserted, “He deserved it.”

“Did you criticize him in front of his advisors as well as human females?”

“Everything I said was true,” she shot back. Having an in-depth conversation in the middle of sex was definitely different, but at least he was allowing her to defend herself.

“What gives you authority over Zion?” Isaac challenged. “Did you treat your supervisors at Nuevo that way?”

She paused, scrambling for a logical response. That was the first valid point they’d made. It wasn’t her place to correct the pride leader’s behavior. “Zion promised the women in the shelter that they would be safe, yet he failed to protect them. Who holds him accountable for his failures?”

“The Council of Guardians, his advisors,” Kyle told her as he moved closer to the bed.

The situation was so strange. She was tied to a bed, not only naked but impaled on a cock. How the hell was she supposed to focus enough to debate these issues?

“As with any society, there is a hierarchy here,” Isaac expounded.

He drew nearly out and drove in slowly as he continued his explanation.

“Females are the responsibility of their mates.” His long cock slid in and out before he spoke again.

“If you had a problem, you should have brought it to us.” Another stroke, faster this time.

“We would have reported it to Diego. He commands the Shadows, but he is also a guardian.”

Her senses came alive and reason scattered. She lifted into his next thrust, taking his cock even deeper into her wet and willing body.

Jon moved beside the bed, on the opposite side from Kyle. His expression was fierce, his voice stern. “Do you honestly think Zion doesn’t know he failed? Did you look at him while you were railing? He was devastated by his failure, truly devastated.”

Isaac grasped her hips and started fucking her hard again. “Instead of trusting us to address your concerns, you made us look like fools.” He accented the statement with a brutal thrust.

Tara gasped. Hovering on the brink of orgasm made her achy and restless. “I’m sorry,” she blurted.

“I think you’re starting to mean it, but we need to make sure it never happens again.”

His fingers dug into her hips as he rocked between her thighs.

Fast and hard, he pounded into her pussy, jarring her body with each forceful thrust. Her breasts bounced, drawing her tormentor’s attention.

He slapped one and then the other, making them wiggle and sway.

Isaac loved to play with her breasts. He loved to clamp the nipples and spank them until her flesh was bright red.

He held her waist with one hand and slapped her with the other.

Soon her breasts felt swollen, the skin tight and hot.

Tara felt used, taken, punished . She wanted to struggle, to shove his hurtful hand away and rub her clit until her body exploded with the long-delayed orgasm.

She clenched her fists and tightened her inner muscles, but the angle wasn't right.

Denying her pleasure while they took theirs was the cruelest punishment of all.

"Please, Sir," she whispered. "I really need to come."

"I bet you do." He sounded cold and uncaring, and he fucked into her even harder.

"Think about that next time you unleash your temper." He slammed into her three more times, then his back arched and his features tensed.

She felt his seed pulsing deep inside her.

Cum was still dripping from his tip when he pulled out and brought his wet cock to her mouth.

"Lick me clean, naughty mate. You said you were sorry. Prove it."

Tears blurred her vision as she parted her lips and took him into her mouth. Her breasts ached, nipples oversensitive. Her pussy felt bruised, her clit still pulsing. They were using her body, brutally taking what they wanted while they left her in desperate

need. It was cruel—and effective.

Regret burned through her soul. Instead of trusting her mates, and trusting the guardians, she had thrown a fit like an undisciplined child.

She sucked and licked until Isaac's cock began to harden again.

She'd never minded going down on her lovers, but their exotic taste and the instantaneous response of her body made the act even more exciting.

Her clit tingled and she moaned. Would they ever let her come?

Isaac pulled out of her mouth and righted his pants. "One more mate and one more lesson. But this one will be the hardest yet."

Dreading what she'd see, Tara looked at Jon. His angular features appeared harsh and aggressive. His dark eyes burned into hers.

"My turn, bad girl."

"I said I was sorry, and I meant it. I handled the situation badly." Even as the words left her mouth, she knew they would do no good.

This night had been coming ever since she agreed to the courtship, and she always knew it would be Jon who took her bottom first. He'd made no secret about his desire to do so.

"Kyle and Isaac disciplined you for being disrespectful to Zion. This is for verbally attacking your mates and hitting your master when we had already shown you mercy."

She licked her lips and averted her gaze. “How badly is this going to hurt?”

“It will hurt. There’s no avoiding that, but you control how much and for how long. If you relax and accept the punishment, the pain will fade much faster.”

Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes as she forced herself to nod.

She’d screwed up and now she was paying the price for her flagrant misbehavior.

The magnetic restraints released and she lifted her hands from the cuffs.

She sat up and rubbed her wrists as Kyle and Isaac untied her legs.

They rubbed her ankles and feet for a moment while Jon retrieved the bottle of lube from the nightstand.

“Over here, mate,” Jon beckoned. “There will be no restraints this time. Your submission must be voluntary.”

Tara’s heart leapt and her belly tensed. He expected her to willingly accept this punishment, to offer her final untried opening to her cruelest mate. Jon wouldn’t be gentle. He wouldn’t ease in carefully. Fear paralyzed her for a moment and she shook her head. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“You can and you will. I gave you a command. Now obey me.”

Her pussy clenched hard and a helpless moan escaped her throat. That deep, rumbling tone never failed to arouse her. On trembling legs, Tara stood and walked around to the side of the bed.

“Lock your hands behind your head and spread your legs wide,” he directed.

After a moment of reluctance, Tara assumed the position he described.

This was even worse than being tied down to the bed.

She just stood there with her entire body open and accessible to him.

He squeezed her breasts and plucked her nipples.

She gasped and tensed, struggling to process the pleasure/pain.

Her nipples had been sensitized from all of Isaac's twisting.

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“Your body is lush and soft,” Jon muttered.

“Perfect for fucking.” As if to prove his claim, he slipped his hand between her thighs and pushed several fingers into her wet pussy.

“Isaac obviously enjoyed himself.” He fucked into her a few times then slid his slick fingers up to her clit and rubbed the neglected nub.

“Would you like to come, naughty mate? Have you earned an orgasm?”

“Yes, please,” she cried. “I’ll do anything you ask, Master.”

A wicked chuckle rumbled through Jon’s chest. “That offer is unwise given the mood I’m in.

” He pinched her clit, increasing the pressure slowly until she cried out.

He moved his hand away and motioned to the bed.

“Turn around and bend over. Keep your legs straight and brace on your forearms. I want access to those lovely tits.”

As Tara turned around, she found herself staring into her own reflection.

Someone had transformed the opposite wall into a massive mirror.

She was naked, her hair tousled. Her eyes were wide and luminous, lips swollen,

cheeks deeply flushed.

Faint slap marks marred the skin on her breasts and her nipples were tightly beaded and berry red. She barely recognized herself.

“Bend over,” Jon urged, “and spread those legs.”

Tara licked her lips and bent from the waist. She rested her forearms on the bed, which left her breasts accessible. Moving her legs apart, she cringed as a rivulet of cum trickled down her inner thigh. They’d already punished her mouth and her pussy. Now it was time to punish her ass.

“Your skin is so smooth and perfect.” Jon stroked her bottom as he spoke, his gaze fixed on his target. “It simply begs to be marked.”

She tensed. He’d already spanked her. Why was he doing this again? Fucking her ass was supposed to be the punishment. She stared at him in the mirror, willing him to look at her face.

Jon finally lifted his gaze and met hers. “Your entire body just tensed. What’s the matter, mate?”

“You already spanked me, Master.”

“I thought you wanted to come.” His lips twisted into a sardonic smirk. “You said you’d do anything.”

Dread washed over her and she closed her eyes. “I do want to come. Very much. What do you want me to do?”

“Why, beg me, of course. Say, ‘Master, please spank my pussy until I come.’”

“My p-pussy? You want to spank my pussy until I come?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “If you want an orgasm before we begin, that’s the only way you’ll get it.”

Something dark and carnal stirred inside her. A couple of nights ago, she’d gotten so turned on while they spanked her bottom that she had an orgasm. Could she really come while Jon slapped her pussy? “Please, Master...” Uncertainty overshadowed her curiosity and the rest of her words trailed away.

“Please, Master, what? Finish the sentence, Tara. You started this.”

She nervously licked her lips again and braced emotionally for what she was about to endure. “Please spank my pussy until I come.”

“Gladly.” He started with her bottom, warming her cheeks with firm spansks until the flesh began to burn.

Then he slapped her inner thighs, urging her legs even farther apart.

“So wet and ready for a cock.” He brought his hand up between her legs and slapped her well-fucked pussy.

“Very soon, we won’t need to take turns.

You’ll take all three of us at the same time.

” He spanked her again, a little harder this time.

Tara cried out as her imagination happily produced the scene.

She straddled Isaac's lap bouncing up and down on his cock.

Jon stood behind them, moving in and out of her ass.

Kyle held her face and aggressively fucked her mouth.

Another stinging slap drew her back into the present, but the explicit image fueled the harsh hunger his cruel spanking had ignited.

"Come for me, mate. Come hard for your master."

His next spank was centered over her clit and Tara screamed. A harsh, nearly painful orgasm tore through her body. Her inner muscles clenched and her toes curled as wave upon wave of sensation pulsed through her. She panted and shook. Jon rubbed her clit, prolonging her pleasure.

"Good girl," he praised. "Now spread those cheeks. Offer me your virgin asshole."

Drunk on endorphins and ready for her punishment to be over, Tara reached back and parted her bottom cheeks. They'd entered her with their fingers and used butt plugs, so her body should be ready for this final step. Even so, uncertainty made her arms shake and her belly flutter.

The lube felt cool and slick as it rolled down over her pucker. Jon pushed some of the gel inside her then liberally coated his cock. He tossed the bottle aside and moved behind her. She couldn't see his cock in the mirror, but it felt warm and imposing as he rubbed the tip against her opening.

"Look at me, mate."

Tara met his gaze in the mirror and sucked in a breath. His dark eyes glowed with

heat and hunger.

“Who does your ass belong to?” Jon prompted.

“My mates.”

“And who am I?” he persisted. His expression was unrelenting.

“You’re my master, my mate.”

“Then beg me for what we both want so badly.”

She took a deep breath and whispered, “Please, Master, fuck my ass. Push inside me and take what’s yours.”

His fingers dug into her hips as he drove the head of his cock inside her tightest passage. Her opening stretched, burning and pinching as she reluctantly accepted his girth. “Relax. Let your body open around me.”

She released her cheeks and clawed at the bedding, fighting off the need to clench. It felt incredibly intrusive, but the pain was starting to fade. He slid in a bit deeper, intensifying the fullness inside her.

“Good girl.” He rubbed her back, then reached beneath her and squeezed her breasts. “Now take some more.”

He advanced slowly, but made her take more this time. “Jesus,” she hissed. “Are you almost in?”

He chuckled. “That’s about half.”

She shook her head, starting to doubt herself again. “You’re too big. I can’t take it all.”

His hands moved back to her hips, and he thrust deep with one sustained stroke. She cried out as the fullness became overwhelming and the sting reignited. “The easiest way to combat fear is head on. My entire cock is inside you. Now relax and let your body adjust.”

She looked into the mirror, hoping to distract herself from the sensation, but the scene was so graphic that she whimpered.

Her breasts hung down and her hair was wild about her face.

Jon stood behind her, fully dressed, of course.

Isaac and Kyle stood to each side of Jon, clearly watching as her body submitted to this final domination.

Jon’s hand slid down from her hip and skimmed across her belly.

He found her clit with his long middle finger and began to stroke her in lazy circles.

Slowly he drew his hips back, dragging his cock nearly out of her bottom.

She groaned, then shivered as sensations spiraled from her ass to her clit.

“Oh, God, that’s...” She couldn’t finish the thought. Too many adjectives fit. It felt good yet bad. It felt arousing yet humiliating. She wanted him to stop, and yet she wanted him to fuck her faster, to claim her more deeply while she came over and over around his thrusting cock.

“Like that?” A hint of mockery hardened his tone.

She ignored it and admitted, “It hurts, but it feels good.”

He pushed all the way in, then drew all the way out. She gasped and looked over her shoulder, but he thrust back in before she could ask if he’d decided not to finish inside her bottom. His finger pressed harder on her clit. “Come around my cock.” He thrust steadily as he continued to rub her.

Tara locked her knees and braced her arms. He was fucking her hard now, jarring her body with each forceful thrust. The sting finally faded, but she felt invaded and used.

She was so distracted by the unfamiliar sensations that she forgot about his order.

His hand pulled back and slapped her pussy, dragging a sharp cry from her throat.

“I said come.” Instead of rubbing her clit, he caught the sensitive nub between his fingers and carefully pulled on it. Over and over, he plucked the nub much as Isaac did with her nipples.

Her orgasm struck harsh and heavy, buckling her knees. The hard, rippling spasms of her pussy tightened her ass around his cock. He fucked into her faster, spreading her cheeks so he could reach deeper. She sprawled on the bed as the sensations washed over her, wave after scalding wave.

Jon moved his hand to her hips and pounded into her bottom.

Tara found herself lifting into each of his nearly violent thrusts.

There was no pain now, just inescapable dominance and unexpected pleasure.

Tingling aftershocks kept her relaxed and still.

Her mate was using her willing body, enjoying what was his.

She smiled into the bedding, glad that he couldn't hear her thoughts.

It would make him even more arrogant than he was already.

“Come with me, mate. I want to hear your cries of pleasure while I fill you with my seed.”

He wasn't stroking her clit anymore, but it didn't seem to matter.

Tension gathered inside her, a tingling ball of sensation just waiting to break free.

Each thrust of his hips and the steady slide of his big cock compressed the ball tighter and tighter.

She lifted her hips, giving him a better angle for his demanding thrusts.

He grunted and moaned, then shuddered against her. The hot spurting of his seed triggered her orgasm, and she cried out his name, “Master,” then “mate,” and finally, “Jon.”

Jon sagged against her, pressing her down into the bed without crushing her. “Did you just admit that I'm your mate?”

“Nothing I say during sex counts.” She hid her smile in the bedding.

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“I don’t believe you.” He gently separated their bodies and righted his clothing. Rolling her over, he brushed the hair back from her face. He lay on his side staring down at her. “Why is it so hard for you to admit what you’re feeling?”

She chuckled, feeling satisfied and sleepy. “I’m the therapist. That should be my line.”

“As soon as you let us claim you, you can take on new clients.” Isaac handed Jon a wet washcloth as he continued. “I know you enjoy counseling people, but you can’t build a practice until you’re protected by our claim.”

She started to sit up, but Jon placed one of his hands on the center of her chest. With the other, he cleaned her pussy and ass.

She squirmed and complained, but he ignored her and completed the task with humiliating thoroughness.

“I could have just gone and taken a shower,” she concluded when he went into the bathroom to recycle the washcloth.

“I wanted to make sure I didn’t hurt you,” Jon admitted. “I was rougher than I intended to be.”

“You could have simply asked,” she pointed out.

“I will always take care of you, even when you’ve been very bad.” Then Jon motioned toward the bathroom. “I’m going to go clean up.”

Isaac and Kyle undressed and crawled into bed with her. Surrounded by warm bodies and naked limbs, Tara was content and sleepy. Still, Isaac's comment wouldn't leave her mind. "What else would change if you claimed me?"

"You'd have complete freedom within the village," Isaac told her. "Outside the walls, you still need an escort, but inside you could go wherever you want."

She knew that was true because Lexie no longer required an escort when she went places inside the village walls. "Which bedroom would be mine? You each have your own space, but I've always just imposed on one of you."

They looked at her impatiently, and Kyle insisted, "You're not an imposition. If you want your own bedroom, I'll bunk with Jon."

"Like hell you will," Jon called from the bathroom. He appeared in the doorway, a towel wrapped around his lean hips. "I need my alone time."

"I'm the coalition leader," Isaac reminded. "I also have the biggest bedroom. I think you should keep your clothes in my bedroom and the rest can remain fluid."

Tara thought about the arrangement for a moment, then nodded. "I'm okay with that, as long as it won't feel like I belong to you and the others just borrow me."

Jon and Kyle laughed. "No borrowing," Jon promised. "You belong to us, and we belong to you." He smiled and moved deeper into the bathroom to continue with his shower.

"I should probably join him," Tara said. "I'm not sure a sponge bath is adequate."

"Relax," Isaac urged. "We love it when you smell like us."

She was exhausted and feeling lazy, so she didn't argue.

She snuggled back into the warmth of their arms and released the tension in her muscles.

"Lexie told me about the psychic link she shares with her mates. Can you claim me without a soul bond? I'm not sure I'd like having all three of you in my mind all the time."

"A true claiming requires a psychic link," Isaac told her. "But there are several kinds."

"There's the basic transfer link," Kyle explained.

"That simply allows us to pass thoughts and emotions to each other. It must be accessed intentionally. The next level is called an empathic link. Thoughts and images must be passed across the link, but emotions flow continually. If you were ever threatened or afraid, we would know and come running."

She smiled sleepily. "That sounds nice, and a little less invasive than the soul bond."

"We can start with a transfer link," Isaac offered. "That would give you a chance to see what it's like to have direct access to our minds."

"But you would have direct access to mine too, wouldn't you?"

Jon sauntered out of the bathroom, hair wet from the shower. "We can access your mind now, but we choose not to. We told you that the day we met."

She nodded as everyone rearranged a bit, making room for Jon on the bed. "I'd like to try the transfer link, but not tonight. I'm still processing all the things you guys made

me feel. I need some sleep.”

“Fair enough.” Isaac leaned in and kissed her lightly on the lips. “Sleep well, my love.”

The following morning, Isaac circled Elias, continually scanning his mind.

The wolf leader was secured to a chair in one of the unused cabins.

His wrists were bound in magnetic cuffs and his throat was encircled by a choke collar.

If he attempted to shift, the collar would strangle him.

It was a simple but effective deterrent.

The wolf’s hostile gaze followed Isaac for as much of the orbit as possible.

Elias yanked against the restraints, but Isaac had never seen anyone break free from the magnetic cuffs.

Even so, the cabin was surrounded by armed guards.

The precaution was probably overkill, but Zion wasn’t taking any chances with this sonofabitch.

Jon and Kyle had gone to meet with the raptor scout and continue the search for the human females. Isaac was hoping to provide them with detailed information that would assist with the search. Which meant Elias needed to start talking.

“Your only hope of surviving your captivity is if you cooperate with me right now,”

Isaac told him.

Elias scoffed. “You’ll kill me either way, so go fuck yourself.”

He was right. Elias was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of lives.

He’d also beaten, cut, and burnt Akari, and then left her for dead.

Elias would breathe his last the moment Isaac finished this interrogation.

“Where did your beta take the women?” Isaac knew Elias would never speak the words, but he waited for the answer to appear within his mind.

“Their location is irrelevant,” Elias insisted. “Every one of those females is now a wolf’s mate.”

Isaac scanned more aggressively. “That’s impossible and we both know it.

Wolves require genetic compatibility to breed just like we do.

The women will need to be tested and then matched with compatible males.

That takes time.” Babcock’s craggy face flashed through Elias’ mind.

Isaac focused on the image and probed deeper.

“Unlike cats, wolves can sense their mates,” Elias muttered. “My entire pack will sniff the females until they find the combinations that work. That takes minutes, not days.”

He was full of shit and they both knew it, but arguing with him was a waste of time.

“Show me where they are,” Isaac commanded.

Elias’ gaze flew toward Isaac and then he squeezed his eyes shut. A litany of information flooded his mind, random locations, faces and names, even the lyrics to old Earth songs.

Isaac had encountered the technique before, and it was effective, for a minute or two.

Inevitably, the person ran out of filler and their mind focused on whatever they were attempting to hide.

“They disappeared in the forest. How did they do it and where did they go?” As he expected, an image flickered and then disappeared.

Isaac had seen enough to delve deeper. “How is the opening disguised? Is there only one entrance to the tunnels?”

Elias’ eyes widened and fear helped clarify his mind. “You’re a fucking Shadow, aren’t you? I should have realized.”

“Tell me what I need to know, or I’ll start digging. One way or the other I will get to the information I need.”

Elias hissed. “It’s too late. Every one of those women spent the night with a wolf buried deep inside them.”

Years of discipline allowed Isaac to suppress the surge of emotions triggered by Elias’ claim.

Remaining calm was crucial for a successful interrogation, and Isaac was determined to learn what they needed to know before the guards ended Elias’ miserable life.

“Did you discover an abandoned mine or a series of connected caverns?” This planet was supposed to have been uninhabited. Why would there have been either?

Elias glared at him. “What makes you think we discovered the tunnels? Who’s to say we didn’t dig them?”

Isaac chuckled. Elias had just confirmed that the tunnels existed. His tendency to run his mouth was making this easier. “The timbers were milled. And there’s the holographic entrance. Even the raptors couldn’t have programmed something like that.”

“You should see what else is down there,” Elias bragged. “It’s unbelievable.”

“Tell me where it is. I’ll be happy to look around.”

Elias just made a rude noise and averted his face.

“If all the females have been claimed, there’s no reason to hide their location.

Show me where they are.” For a millisecond Isaac saw a massive room beyond the winding tunnels, but the image blinked off before he could discern any of the details.

Elias wasn’t succeeding in keeping the thoughts from his mind, but he snuffed them out as quickly as they formed.

“Show me the entrance. How does your pack find it?”

“Fuck. You!” A song played loudly within Elias’ mind. He was basically screaming the lyrics to keep himself from picturing anything.

Often surprise questions would trigger a reaction, so Isaac switched subjects.

“Who tortured Akari?” Another widening of Elias’ eyes indicated that he was struggling to keep the information out of his mind.

Not giving him time to refocus, Isaac pressed onward, “We know it was you and Armando, but who else was there? Show me their faces.”

The younger wolf Elias had been talking to in the shelter flashed through the wolf’s mind and then a burly male with long auburn hair and a tattoo that wound around his neck.

If Diego didn’t know their names, Travis the wolf spy certainly would.

“She was your captive for six days. Was it just the four of you?”

Elias glared at him and started silently screaming the song again.

Despite Elias’ efforts, a flash of memory provided more information. Elias stood at the edge of a large room. The room was filled with ruckus wolves, and Elias shouted, “Juan, get your ass over here.” The young wolf looked up and waved at him and then made his way across the room.

So the new beta’s name was Juan. That just left the wolf with the neck tattoo.

The sudden topic shift had worked before, so Isaac used it again. “How can you tolerate working with Babcock after all that fucker did to you?”

The singing stopped and hate ignited within Elias’ hazel-green eyes. “Zion left us no choice,” he snarled. “We have just as much right to survive this as you do. Babcock will ensure that there’s a next generation and then I’ll slit his throat.”

Despite Elias’ claim, a scene surged into his mind.

He was fucking a human female from behind while Juan roughly used her mouth.

The image suddenly shifted, racing forward.

The female thrashed on the bed, snarling and screaming while her features twisted and her body contorted, transitioning from one mutated shift to another.

“How many women has Babcock killed? Is that why you raided the shelter? Does Babcock need more test subjects?”

Elias squeezed his eyes shut and shouted, “You goddamn freak, get out of my head! Get out!”

Without explaining his actions, Isaac stepped out onto the small porch and telepathically pinged Zion.

Any luck? Zion responded.

There’s some sort of mine or a series of tunnels situated under our forest , Isaac told the pride leader. The entrance is concealed by a holographic image, but Elias won’t explain how they find it.

Where the fuck did the wolves get a holographic projector?

Damn good question , Isaac agreed. He’s resisting, but I’ll keep at him.

After a thoughtful pause, Zion asked, What else were you able to learn?

His new beta’s name is Juan, and he was one of Akari’s attackers.

Juan is Armando’s younger brother, so that makes perfect sense , Zion told him. Was

there anyone else?

There was a fourth wolf. I didn't get a name, but his appearance is unique. I'm hoping Diego will know his name.

Good work , Zion praised. You've made remarkable progress.

There's one more thing, and it's seriously disturbing . Isaac sighed. He wasn't even sure how to explain this. The injections Babcock is giving the women are causing fatal side effects. Elias stood there and watched while his lover transformed to death.

Transformed to death? Zion sounded aghast . What the hell does that mean?

Just what it sounds like. She shifted and shifted, over and over until it drained the life from her body.

Fuck , Zion muttered. Sounds like we need to go get Babcock sooner than later. We can't let him get his hands on the new captives.

Agreed. Which meant he needed to find out where the wolves had the women stashed. I better get back in there.

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Tara and her mates had just finished dinner when Diego knocked on their cabin door. The day had been bright and sunny, but a storm rolled in with dusk. Kyle motioned Diego inside and quickly closed the door.

Diego shook off the snow that had accumulated on his shoulders and said, "I hate to drag you guys out on this miserable night, but Zion wants this dealt with now."

Isaac skirted the dining table and crossed the living room. "Until we locate the entrance to the tunnels, there's not a lot we can do."

Kyle cringed. That had been the topic of much of their dinner conversation and Tara was depressed and sulky because of it. He looked at her and smiled, but her expression didn't change.

"We can make sure Babcock isn't around to inject any more of the females," Diego pointed out. "He only escaped Team Three because of the latest attack on the females. It must end, and now is the time."

Kyle's heart lurched and he sucked in a breath. "Do we finally have a kill order?"

Diego shook his head. "He needs to be interrogated. The order is capture and we've confirmed that he's in the lupine village right now."

"Our covert shields are less effective in the snow," Jon reminded as he joined them by the door. "And even if we're invisible, our footprints are not."

"It's a risk either way," Diego countered. "The wolves are more active when it's

warm. Tonight, they'll be in their cabins huddled around their fires. Besides, half the village guards are in the tunnels protecting the females."

"What about Juan and the man with the neck tattoo?" Isaac wanted to know. "Can we take care of them while we're in the village?"

"Zion okayed a hit on the tattooed wolf, but Juan is to be taken alive. I split the objectives into two separate missions. Shadow Team Three is going to take out Mr. Tattoos and capture Juan. You guys are to secure Babcock and bring him back here. It might seem like the easier mission, but Babcock is more important."

"If we're all going hunting, Tara needs a security detail," Jon insisted.

"Already arranged," Diego assured him. "A team of four is stationed around this cabin. I didn't figure you'd want them inside."

"Damn right," Jon responded, his expression fierce. "No one touches Tara but us."

Diego acknowledged the statement with a nod, then asked, "Are there any other questions or concerns?"

"Is anyone still searching for the women?" Tara pushed back from the table and stood. Her tone was respectful, but unshed tears shimmered in her eyes. "The last time the wolves kidnapped women, Zion gave up without a fight."

"Our best hunters have been searching the forest for the entrance to the tunnels," Diego told her. "They've lost the light for today, but they'll be back out there as soon as the sun rises again."

She nodded then pleaded, "Please don't give up on them. If Claire is claimed by a wolf, I don't think she'll survive. And Dawn's situation is even worse. She's terrified

of everything.”

“We understand their history. We’ll keep searching.”

“Thank you,” she said softly and then slipped into the nearest bedroom.

Kyle wanted to go after her, to make sure she was alright. But Diego didn’t leave, so the briefing wasn’t over. With a subtle sigh of frustration, he turned back to his commander. “Was there something else we needed to know?”

Diego nodded. “Zion wants the opportunity to question Babcock. However, if the choice is allowing him to escape or taking him out, then take him out.”

“Gladly,” Jon said with a bit too much enthusiasm.

“We need to know exactly what he’s doing to those females and if the process can be reversed,” Diego stressed. “What Isaac saw in Elias’ mind makes no sense if all Babcock is doing is increasing compatibility.”

“I agree,” Isaac said. “That woman was trying to shift. And shapeshifting has nothing to do with creating offspring.”

Jon’s upper lip curled into a sneer, but he said, “We’ll do our best to bring him back alive.”

Diego left a few minutes later and Kyle made a beeline for the bedroom.

Tara stood by the window, staring out into the darkening yard.

Snow was falling steadily now, coating the tree branches and blanketing the ground.

He doubted that she saw any of it. He was only mildly empathic, and he could sense the emotions radiating off her.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked without turning around.

Kyle placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her back into the warmth of his body. “A couple of hours, maybe a little more.”

“Do you think Babcock can tell us how to find the entrance?” She met his gaze in the windowpane. Her eyes were wide and luminous. “He’s not a hybrid. Maybe his mind will be easier to scan.”

“There are a lot of things he needs to tell us before we end his life. That’s why it’s so important that we bring him back alive.

” She didn’t respond, so Kyle ran his hand down the back of her hair.

They’d intended to form the transfer link tonight.

It would have allowed him to calm and comfort her before they left.

He hated seeing her this unhappy. “Would you like me to send for Lexie or Bianca? I’m not sure you should be alone right now. ”

One corner of her mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Send for Claire and Dawn. My mood will recover completely as soon as I know they’re safe.” She turned around and looked up into his eyes. “I’m grumpy, but fine. Be careful. I’ll completely lose my shit if anything happens to any of you guys.”

Kyle leaned down and kissed her lips. “We’ll be careful. I promise.”

Twenty minutes later Kyle, Isaac, and Jon were bundled up and tromping through the forest. Their ability to regulate their body temperature wasn't enough to combat this cold.

They risked bringing a hover cart along, so they didn't have to carry an unconscious Babcock all the way through the forest. They intended to hide the cart a short distance from the village.

The disadvantage was that they had to make it in and out of the village cleanly.

If Babcock, or anyone else, set off an alarm, their entire plan fell apart.

After concealing the hover cart in a small cave, Kyle and his teammates activated their covert shields and hiked down the hill toward the lupine village.

The vantage point allowed Kyle to see over the perimeter walls.

There were lights in many of the cabins, and plenty of chimney smoke, but no one was walking around.

The wind picked up as they neared their destination, so their tracks were less noticeable.

Even so, they hurried along, wanting the mission to be finished as quickly as possible.

They followed the curve of the wall, heading toward the back side of the village. Isaac jogged right past their entry point without realizing what he'd done. Kyle paused and Jon swore, "Fuckers figured it out." A thick stump was all that remained of their favorite tree.

Isaac must have turned around because his voice came from right beside Kyle. “Someone is advising them. They have never been this strategic before.”

Kyle agreed, but now was not the time to puzzle through the development. “How do we get inside?”

“Let’s walk around to the main gate,” Isaac suggested. “I’ll have to let you in.”

“That will only work if the guards are hiding from the cold,” Jon pointed out. “You’ll be weak as a kitten after flowing through something that thick. There is no way you’ll be able to take them on.”

“What choice do we have?” Isaac flared. “Zion wants this done tonight.”

“To hell with what Zion wants,” Jon grumped. “We need to fall back and regroup. Maybe try again tomorrow night with a larger team. Stealth is our primary weapon. I’m not sure we can pull this off alone.”

Isaac paused, likely debating the options. Zion’s approval was important to all of them, but they could better assess the scene. “Let’s walk around and see what we’re dealing with. We’re here already. What do we have to lose?”

Pouring energy into his shields, Kyle fell in line between his teammates.

They hiked around to the front of the village and reassessed the situation.

There were three guards on duty, but they were huddled around a fire on the far side of the main gate.

It would have been better if they were inside the guard tower.

Still, the Shadows could work with this.

“I’ll flow through the small door and quietly let you in,” Isaac explained. “Once all three of us are inside, we’ll attack the guards together. It must be fast and silent. They cannot be allowed to set off an alarm.”

“Understood.” Jon still sounded grumpy.

“Take your time letting us in,” Kyle urged. “This will all go to hell if you pass out.”

“You sound like Tara,” Isaac teased and slugged him on the arm.

Kyle and Jon waited quietly while Isaac flowed through the door. He became visible for just a moment as his body transitioned from matter to energy. On the other side of the door, Isaac would need to be even more cautious. An odd flicker of light could catch the guard’s attention.

It took longer than usual, but the door finally opened, and Kyle watched Jon’s footsteps rush through the opening. He followed and Isaac closed the door.

Have you recovered enough to help us? Jon persisted.

Give me a minute. I’m still lightheaded.

Kyle smiled. After working together for most of a decade, they knew each other well. Isaac continually pushed himself too hard. It was his teammates’ job to pull him back.

They waited until Isaac signaled that he was ready and then they rushed toward the guards.

Jon’s shield slipped for a moment as he dragged his guard into the rustic tower beside

the gate. His arm was wrapped around the wolf's neck and the guard's eyes bugged nearly out of his head.

“They’re Shadows,” one guard warned, but Isaac slit his throat a second later.

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As Isaac dragged his guard into the tower enclosure with Jon, Kyle choked out the final guard.

The male was burly and strong, and it took forever to incapacitate him.

The wolf spun in a tight circle with Kyle riding his back.

Kyle's arm was wrapped around his neck, and he squeezed with all his might, but the fucker just wouldn't go out.

An energy pulse arced through the air, singeing the top of Kyle's leg.

He bit back a yelp then let out a sigh as the guard's knees finally buckled.

Jon stood near the doorway to the tower with a pistol in his hand.

Isaac, also visible, rushed over and helped Kyle drag the brute into the tower.

They were all conserving energy, but being visible made Kyle nervous.

"You better bind and gag that one, if you're going to leave him alive." The surliness in Jon's tone made it obvious that leaving him alive wouldn't have been his choice.

Choosing a different option, Kyle held a mister in front of the guard's face and administered a strong sedative.

"You've still got plenty of that for Babcock?" Jon asked impatiently.

“Of course,” Kyle returned just as impatiently. “This isn’t my first mission.”

Why were they snapping at each other? They usually operated seamlessly. Tara’s image appeared in Kyle’s mind and heat cascaded through his body. They needed to claim their mate. Her indecision made them tense and combative. Their coalition was incomplete, and it would be until she joined with them.

“Shields up,” Isaac urged. “Let’s get this done.”

Taking a deep breath, Kyle gathered energy and reactivated his covert shield. When they left the tower, the only thing visible was their subtle tracks in the snow.

Isaac led them directly to Babcock’s cabin. The entire village is inside. I’m going to knock on the door. Have the mister ready.

Uncomfortable with the idea, Kyle looked around. But Isaac was right. No one was around. Even the lights inside the cabins were filtered through shutters or thick curtains.

A firm knock sounded and then Babcock called out, “Who’s there?”

Isaac responded, but intentionally muffled his voice.

Babcock opened the door a few seconds later and Kyle ejected a thick cloud of mist directly into his face. He stumbled back, gasping, arms flailing. The Shadows rushed inside and closed the door.

“What... did you...” Babcock’s eyes rolled up and his body crumpled to the floor.

Isaac went to the window and peeked out. “Let’s wait a few minutes before we head out. I want to make sure this capture was clean.”

They'd loitered in the cabin for almost ten minutes when Jon snapped, "Enough. Let's get out of here." He heaved Babcock onto his shoulder and reactivated his shields. It took a moment for Jon's shield to expand enough to conceal Babcock's unconscious form, and then they were ready to depart.

They made it out of the village without incident, but they were hiking up the hill toward the cave where they'd stashed the hover cart when they heard a commotion below.

"Shit," Isaac snarled, hurrying his pace.

"It might not have anything to do with us," Kyle cautioned.

"Doubtful," Jon grumbled. "See if you can spot whatever made the noise."

Kyle crept toward the mouth of the cave and peered out into the night. Moonlight glistened off the snow, making escape even more difficult. Four wolves tromped through the forest below the rise, flashlight beams swishing this way and that.

"I'll create a diversion," Kyle said firmly. "Get him out of here."

His teammates didn't look pleased, but they didn't argue.

They dragged the cart out of its hiding place and Jon lowered Babcock onto the conveyance.

Kyle quickly shed his clothes, ignoring the cold as he tossed the garments to Isaac.

They tucked Kyle's clothes around Babcock and then fastened the straps to ensure their captive stayed where they put him.

Kyle positioned himself at the mouth of the cave and then released his lion.

Energy surged, stinging and burning for just a moment before the agonizing heat swept over him from head to foot.

He let out a mighty roar as his body finished transforming.

Then he bounded down the hill, drawing the attention of the search party.

The wolves called out and fired their rifles, but Kyle was out of range. He ran off through the trees, drawing the wolves away from the path Isaac and Jon needed to take. Kyle darted through the trees, turning sharply and circling around.

A mournful howl told him that at least one of the wolves had shifted, hoping to catch his scent. It didn't matter. He could run much faster than they could, especially in the snow. The sounds of their pursuit grew distant and then faded entirely, and Kyle was alone with the snow.

It had been weeks since he'd shifted for pleasure, so he allowed himself a few minutes to play before he turned on the speed and headed for home.

Kyle caught up to Jon and Isaac as the feline village came into view.

"Any trouble?" Isaac asked.

Kyle shook his head, snow flying off his thick tawny mane.

Babcock moaned and stirred restlessly, so Isaac quickly administered another puff of sedative mist.

"Contact Diego and find out how the other team did," Jon suggested.

Isaac nodded and his features went lax. He continued walking, but he was obviously distracted. A few minutes later he shook away the psychic haze and said, “Team Three took out the tattooed man, but they were unable to locate Juan.”

“Damn it,” Jon muttered. “I really wanted to question that prick.”

We’ve still got Elias , Kyle reminded. He doubtlessly knows more than his beta.

“But alphas are always harder to break.” Jon heaved a sigh of frustration. “I’ll focus on that piece of shit.” He nodded toward Babcock. “You guys can play with the wolf.”

“Works for me,” Isaac responded as they tromped on through the trees.

Me too , Kyle added, secretly enjoying the snow.

The next two weeks were a bittersweet combination of hope and disappointment.

Tara had explored using a transfer link for five days when she decided she wanted an empathic link with her mates.

If she was going to spend the rest of her life with this coalition, she wanted to know everything about them.

The link would allow them to know everything about her too, but that was a risk she was willing to take.

The expanded connection opened an entirely new level of intimacy between Tara and her mates.

They explored each other physically, but it went deeper now.

Their emotions were honest and raw. The psychic link prevented them from deceiving each other or hiding anything from each other.

Tara found the openness intimidating at first, but the longer they shared thoughts and feelings, the more comfort and security she found in the exchange.

“My sister’s death wasn’t the only reason I joined Nuevo Biotech,” she admitted softly one night.

She was lying on Isaac’s bed in a tangle of strong bodies and naked limbs.

All three of her mates had been hungry for pleasure, so their lovemaking had gone on for hours.

Her body was tired and well satisfied, but her mind was still restless.

Isaac wrapped his arm around her and pulled her snugly against his side. “I’ve seen a man’s face in your memories, but you never speak his name.”

“I’ve spent the last five years trying not to think about him,” she explained. “He’s a waste of energy.”

“What happened?” Kyle asked, his warm hand lightly stroking her hip and thigh. “You brought it up, so you must need to talk about it.”

“You guys have access to my mind now. I thought it best if you had the context for some of my feelings.”

“I’ve started to ask you about him more than once.” Isaac smiled and brushed her hair back from her face. “I figured you would tell us about him when you were ready.”

“His name was Ethan, and we met at a grief support group. He claimed that his best friend died in his arms a few years before and he was still dealing with the loss.”

“He claimed that his friend died?” Jon challenged. “Was his story bullshit?”

Tara nodded as unwanted memories threatened to overwhelm her. Maybe talking about this wasn’t such a good idea. “I didn’t find out until much later, but almost everything he said was bullshit.”

Isaac pulled her onto his chest and pressed his hand against the side of her face. “The past can’t hurt you now. You’re safe here with us.”

She tried to smile, but the memories were still too painful.

“Tell us what happened,” Kyle coaxed. “And then we’ll help you let go.”

Focusing on the sequence of events, Tara stubbornly distanced herself from the past. “Ethan was physically attractive, charming, and well spoken. People were just drawn to him.”

“You became lovers?” Jon’s features were carefully guarded, but his tone was tight.

“Eventually.” Jealousy flashed across their link, but Jon quickly controlled the emotion.

Tara indulged in an inward smile. It was refreshing to have someone care about her enough to feel jealousy.

“We went out for drinks with others from the group, then started to date a few weeks later. Ethan seemed perfect at first, caring, and genuine.”

“He took advantage of your vulnerability,” Jon growled out the conclusion as he gently rubbed her back.

They were shielding their emotions. She could sense their minds, but they felt distant, muted. Did they already blame her for the disaster that followed?

“We don’t want our emotions to influence what you’re explaining,” Kyle told her. “But I’ve already heard enough to know for sure that you were not responsible.”

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Her smile was a bit broader this time, but it still felt odd to have someone respond to something she'd thought rather than said.

She hadn't intentionally passed the thought to him, but the link was basically automatic when she was upset.

"Ethan was everything I wanted in a life partner. Strong, dependable, with just enough bad boy mixed in to keep things interesting. He moved in with me three months after we met and I honestly expected to spend the rest of my life with him." She lapsed into silence as scenes from the past washed over her.

"He moved in with you?" Isaac asked suspiciously. "Didn't this deadbeat have a place of his own?"

"He claimed that his roommate fell hopelessly in love and wanted to live with his girlfriend. The girlfriend would only do it if they could have the apartment to themselves."

Kyle studied her, eyes slightly narrowed. "The story is plausible. Did he lie about that too?"

She sighed and lowered her gaze. "Looking back, there were all sorts of red flags, but I was too infatuated to see them."

"Go on," Jon urged. "How did you find out who he really was?"

Tara cleared her throat and raised her gaze, but still found it hard to admit how

foolish she'd been while looking at her mates.

“Dr. Korstan, the woman who ran the crisis center, asked me to attend a meeting across town. The support group was run by one of her colleagues and he'd asked for Dr. Korstan's help.

The group was struggling, and he wasn't sure why.

Dr. Korstan thought an objective perspective might give them some ideas on how to make the program more successful. ”

“Did Ethan go with you?” Isaac sat up, drawing her with him. It was obvious this wasn't going to be a quick discussion, so they all shifted to a more conversational arrangement.

Tara drew the sheet up and covered her nudity.

She wasn't ashamed of her body. She just felt less vulnerable with her lady parts covered.

“I went with a female friend, and we were chatting with one of the participants after the meeting. I mentioned Ethan's name and she freaked out.

Apparently, the asshole targeted women like me.

He traveled around from city to city joining support groups,; grief, rape, addiction, he exploited them all.

He'd find people who were struggling and in pain and...

” Emotion thickened her voice, and she had to pause for a deep breath.

“He talked them out of money and affection. He convinced one woman to take out a second mortgage on her house, claimed he needed financing for a business venture. And it wasn’t just money.

He got off on people’s pain. He was the worst sort of?—”

“Parasite,” Jon finished for her. “Anyone who targets victims is a waste of oxygen.”

“Their group had sent out warnings and plastered his picture all over social media, but the bastard always managed to find a group that didn’t know who he was. Our group was a perfect example. The organizers knew each other, but Dr. Korstan never saw the messages.”

“Did you go to the police?” Isaac wanted to know.

She made a helpless gesture as frustration surged.

“I spoke with a detective, but Ethan hadn’t broken any laws.

Even the mortgage had been taken out voluntarily and new business ventures fail all the time.

Being a selfish, twisted asshole isn’t illegal.

” She felt a faint ripple of emotions too conflicted to decipher.

The worst of the story was out, but there was one final hurt.

“When I told my parents about Ethan and that I’d applied to Nuevo Biotech, they accused me of running away. ”

“You had no choice,” Kyle defended, but he didn’t really understand her motivation.

“I didn’t run away,” she insisted. “I wanted to make damn sure he didn’t victimize anyone else.

I kicked him out of my apartment, then personally contacted the leaders of every support group in our state.

Ethan retaliated with a social media blitz the likes of which you’ve never seen before.

He accused me of harassing and stalking him.

He insisted that I was mentally unstable and warned people to steer clear of me. ”

“Did the detective react to any of this?” Isaac’s tense expression told her that he already knew what she’d say.

“Of course he did. He investigated both our claims and found Ethan more credible. The courts issued a restraining order against me . The situation got really ugly after that. Ethan would catch people in the parking lot or contact them on social media and warn them about the psychotic counselor. We saw participation drop significantly and I was spending more time battling Ethan than counseling the few clients we had left. I was an employee, but Dr. Korstan’s professional reputation was tied up in the crisis center.

I was harming her, and I couldn’t allow that to continue. ”

“So you applied to Nuevo Biotech,” Kyle concluded. “You weren’t running away. You were protecting your friend and mentor.”

She nodded. “Distancing myself from the situation allowed everyone to calm down

so Dr. Korstan could rebuild.”

“Did your parents apologize?” Kyle asked hopefully.

“In a way.” Tara sighed. She hadn’t spoken to either of her parents since she was arrested, and now it was unlikely that she ever would.

“They were polite, even friendly when I left for the outpost. But when all hell broke loose at Nuevo, they were quick to point out that I wouldn’t have ended up in jail if I hadn’t ‘run away’ from my problems.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Isaac snarled, shaking his head.

“What happened to the asshole?” Jon wanted to know.

“He was robbed at knifepoint. The mugger stabbed him repeatedly and left him to bleed to death in an alley. I don’t know if one of his victims arranged the crime or if karma just caught up to him.

” She shrugged and released the past with a shuddering sigh.

“It was not my place to punish him, but I’m glad he can’t hurt anyone else. ”

Isaac scooped her up and placed her on his lap. “Little wonder you’ve had a hard time trusting us.”

She looked into his soulful eyes and smiled. “The empathic link is wonderful. It reassures me like words never could.”

Jon scooted up and pulled her feet onto his lap. “The link makes things easier, but we’re willing to earn your trust. You are the most important person in the universe to

us and we are going to prove it.” He picked up one of her feet and began rubbing.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “That feels so good, I’ll trust you with anything if you keep doing that.”

“We’ll explore that offer tomorrow,” Jon countered, kissing the top of her foot. “We all need to get some sleep.”

Things were developing nicely with her mates, but Tara was still horribly worried about her friends.

The hunters continued to search for the elusive entrance to the tunnels, but no one found anything.

Shadow Teams routinely checked the lupine village, hoping that the captives would be transported there.

Day after day they found no indication of the captives’ current location.

The ongoing interrogations of Elias and Babcock revealed nothing useful.

If Isaac dug the information out by force, it would cause irreversible brain damage or possibly death.

And there was still no guarantee that Isaac would be able to locate the facts they needed.

So Jon and Kyle utilized traditional interrogation techniques while Isaac lightly scanned the resulting emotions.

Tara tried not to let the lack of progress upset her, but she couldn’t keep herself from

worrying about Claire and Dawn.

Isaac and Kyle came home for lunch one afternoon. Jon wasn't with them. He'd accompanied Diego to the raptor village, and it was likely they'd be gone for a couple of days. Tara wasn't sure what they were doing, but it had something to do with salvaging parts from an old transport ship.

Isaac and Kyle were unusually friendly, and it quickly became apparent that they were attempting to cheer her up. She found their efforts endearing, but futile. What she needed was a purpose, something to fill her time so she didn't obsess about her friends.

"Can I take a shot at questioning Elias?" she asked as they finished their meal. Snow had been falling for days and Tara was going stir crazy in their cabin. "All the usual strategies haven't worked. Maybe I can sweet-talk some answers out of him."

Isaac and Kyle looked at each other and then back at her. "Have you ever interrogated someone before?" Isaac asked.

"The point is to keep him from realizing that he's being interrogated," she stressed. "Has he had lunch yet? If I take him some food, I could casually stick around to chat afterward."

Kyle's gaze shifted back to Isaac then he shrugged. "It's not a bad idea."

"Wolves can't identify specific cats by scent, but he'll know you have mates," Isaac muttered thoughtfully. "Besides, we'd never let an unclaimed female near him." After another thoughtful pause, he stressed, "Make damn sure he doesn't realize who you are, or who we are."

"My mates are no one important. Just three random members of the pride," Tara

insisted with a conspirator's smile.

"I'm sure he's putting on a brave front, but he's got to be feeling hopeless by now.

I'll show him compassion and see if he opens up.

"She mimicked Kyle's shrug as she asked, "What do we have to lose?"

"Hold on," Isaac said. "Let me see what Zion thinks."

Zion. Always Zion. None of the lion hybrids did anything without consulting the pride leader.

It might not have bothered her so much if she didn't dislike him so intensely.

She had to admit that Zion seemed to have the good of the pride front and center in every decision he made. Still, he was so abrasive.

A few minutes passed while Isaac conferred with Zion.

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Tara fidgeted in her seat, then pushed back from the table and cleared the dishes. Anxious energy made it impossible to sit still. She really wanted to do this. She needed to feel useful, like she was doing something to get her friends back.

Isaac's expression refocused and he looked at Tara. "Zion has given you a reluctant approval, so you'll need to make the most of the opportunity. I'm not sure how long he'll allow it."

"I can do that." Her pulse kicked up a notch and she fought back a smile. She was going to interrogate a prisoner. It wasn't an appropriate occasion for levity.

"I'll be nearby scanning while you talk to him," Isaac went on. "Even if he won't tell you his secrets, you might be able to draw them closer to the surface."

Tara nodded. "Have his keepers fed him yet? That's the most believable excuse for why I'd be allowed near him."

"We're in luck," Isaac said as they moved toward the door. "He hasn't had anything to eat since last night."

How often were the prisoners fed? Elias was a murderous piece of shit, but no one deserved to starve to death. She didn't bother asking. Care of the prisoners wasn't her mates' responsibility. They were interrogators and spies.

Responding to her expression or a surge in her emotions, Kyle explained, "Screwing with a prisoner's schedule is a common technique for wearing them down. They're often fed at odd intervals and not allowed to sleep until they lose track of time."

Tara's only response was a nod as she moved to the door and started putting her outerwear on.

Her mates helped her bundle up as they prepared to brave the cold.

Winter had officially arrived on Rydaria, and it was promising to be a miserable one.

They tromped through knee-deep snow as they zigzagged up the hill toward the lodge.

Tara's breath puffed out in visible clouds as she struggled for footing.

Life in the village was challenging enough. She couldn't even imagine what her life would have been like if the humans hadn't worked out an alliance with the lion hybrids. No, that wasn't true. Life would have been short and tragic, because there was no way they would have survived.

They reached the lodge and Tara shook off the snow, then stomped her feet to dislodge even more. She unwrapped her scarf and dragged the stocking cap off her head. There was no one in the main room, but someone had to be about. A fire burned in the massive fireplace.

"Detention cells are in the basement," Kyle explained as Isaac ducked into the kitchen to retrieve a tray of food.

She hung her coat up on the large rack by the door then walked over to the fireplace. The warmth was welcome even after their short hike up the hill.

Isaac returned a few minutes later with a tray filled with simple food. There were chunks of crusty bread and slices of meat. Plump pinotta fruits still on the vine and a large mug filled with an unfamiliar liquid.

“That’s ienter juice,” Kyle provided when he noticed the direction of her stare. “It’s a little tart for my taste, but it’s good at preventing dehydration.”

“We’ll come downstairs with you,” Isaac explained, motioning toward the door across the room. “But we’ll go to the security booth. If Elias sees us together, he’ll know you’re our mate.”

They started across the room as Kyle went on, “We’ll be able to see and hear everything that’s happening. If things go south for any reason, we can be inside that room in about three seconds.”

She just nodded as they made their way down the stairs. She was glad Isaac was still carrying the tray. The stairs were steep, the stairwell dim.

When they reached the bottom, Isaac nodded toward the three doors across from them.

Each of the doors was flanked by guards.

“The two outer rooms contain a row of cells. The middle room is the security booth. Elias is on the right side, Babcock on the left. We didn’t want one to hear what the other said. ”

“Makes sense.” She took a deep breath and accepted the tray as Isaac handed it to her.

“Set the tray on the floor and slide it into the cell with your foot. There’s a small break in the bars near the floor designed for that purpose. You’ll see what I’m talking about when you get in there. It’s obvious.”

She straightened her shoulders and did her best to smile. “Wish me luck.”

Isaac leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. “You don’t need luck. It will work or it won’t. I’m sure you’ll be amazing.”

Kyle blew her a kiss as she turned and headed toward the room on the right. One of the guards quickly opened the door for her and she shivered as she stepped inside. The entire basement was cool compared to upstairs, but this room was downright cold.

“I should have left my coat on,” she grumbled as she moved toward the middle cell. “It’s freezing in here.”

“You won’t be here long enough to worry about it,” Elias growled out. He’d been lounging on the cot, but sat up as she moved closer. “They can’t tempt me with one of their fuck toys.”

“Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” She arched her brow. “I guess you’ve never heard the adage.”

His eyes narrowed, the golden flecks in his irises gleaming. “Who are you?”

“The woman they asked to bring you a lunch tray.” She indicated her burden as she bent and set it on the floor just out of reach. “Now apologize for the rude comment or I’ll walk out and leave it right there.”

Elias stood and ambled closer to the front of his cage.

She hadn’t been sure what to expect. The containment cells could have been anything from solar-powered force fields to literal cages.

The three identical spaces were somewhere in the middle.

The outer walls were solid wood, but the dividers were made of stout wooden poles.

The front wall had poles also, but the subtle hiss and wavering distortion warned of some sort of energy barrier.

“I wasn’t expecting a woman, and a damn attractive one at that.”

Tara smiled. “Better, but it wasn’t an apology.”

“I’m sorry I called you a fuck toy. Starvation makes me cranky.”

Using the toe of her boot, she slid the tray halfway through the barrier. “When’s the last time they fed you?”

He yanked the tray toward him and sat cross-legged on the floor as he quickly devoured the food. “Two days.”

That’s not what her mates had been told. Was Elias lying or had the guards lied to Isaac? “No one listens to me,” she told him, “but I’ll let the Shadow Master know that you’re not being fed on a regular basis.”

His strange gold/green eyes shifted to her face. “Who are you?” he asked again. “Why’d they send you down here?”

She shrugged. “I work in the kitchen, and I know better than to ask questions. Women are little better than slaves in this delightful village or hadn’t you heard.”

He paused with the mug halfway to his mouth. “Were you claimed by a coalition?”

“Of course. Being mated is mandatory. If we want to eat, we have to agree to share our bodies with three hybrid males.” She let bitterness fill her voice, making it sound

brittle and cold.

He scoffed just loud enough for her to hear. “In our village it’s only two.”

She glared at him. “We weren’t invited into your village.

You were too busy stealing our supplies.

” She put her hands on her hips and moved closer to the bars.

“If it weren’t for your raids, we would have been able to take care of ourselves.

If it weren’t for the brutality of your pack, I wouldn’t have to...

” She made an angry gesture and pivoted toward the door.

She took one angry step, and he said, “Please, stay. I’m sorry I upset you.”

Pausing with her back to him, Tara took a moment to compose herself.

She was already developing intense feelings for her mates, but everything else she’d said was true.

Elias was partially responsible for the plight of the human females.

Even if the wolves hadn’t stolen their supplies and massacred their men, they would have frozen to death.

The leaders back on Earth set them up to fail.

They wanted the scientists to be left at the mercy of their victims so they dumped

them on the planet without the tools needed to survive such a harsh environment.

Tara slowly turned around, looking at Elias warily. She wasn't here to flirt with the wolf. This was an interrogation. "I can't stay long or my boss will tell my mates and they will punish me."

"Who are your mates?" Cunning flashed in his eyes as he casually asked the question.

She shrugged. "No one important, if that's what you're hoping. One's a perimeter guard. Another is a carpenter. Our coalition leader works in the lumber mill."

"Then how did they end up with someone as beautiful as you?"

He was the one flirting now. She had never been uncomfortable with her appearance, but she wasn't the sort of woman who turned heads when she walked into a room.

She dropped her lashes and fought back a smile.

"They had to fight off my other suitors and Carl is huge." The lie sounded believable, but she had no way of knowing if he accepted what she said or if he was trying to manipulate her.

"The females are awarded through combat? That's just stupid. Why not let the women choose?"

She licked her lips and slowly raised her gaze. "The wolves would have let me choose?"

He shook his head as he stood up. "Why do you think none of the females we've captured have tried to run away? We treat women a whole lot better than the fucking cats."

“I don’t believe you,” She made her voice soft and tremulous. “I saw what you did to Claire’s brother. He was only twenty-four years old, and your wolves literally ripped him apart.”

Elias crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her. “Have you ever watched one of those nature shows that study a pride of lions, or a pack of wolves?”

The question surprised her. Was he simply avoiding the massacre by changing the subject? “What does that have to do with anything?”

“If a male lion wants to take over a pride, what’s the first thing he does?”

She tensed, suddenly seeing where his questions led. “He kills anyone who might become competition.”

“Even adorable little lion cubs,” he persisted, challenge sharpening his tone.

She shuddered. “I hate those shows.”

“You hate them because they reveal how brutal nature truly is. Anyone who wants to survive must be willing to kill.”

“We are not animals living in the wild,” she objected.

“Aren’t we?” He paused, waiting for the implication to sink in. “We’re predators fighting for territory and fighting over mates. How do we differ from any apex predator on Earth’s game reserves?”

He’d set her up perfectly for an emotional outburst, a strategic outburst. “Your beta took my best friend. She’s been gone for two weeks now.

Is she still alive? The hunters can't find her.

Where did your beta take her? What's happening to her?

"She infused her words with emotion and let tears gather in her eyes.

His eyes narrowed and his lips pressed together. For a moment she thought he wouldn't respond, and then he asked, "What's her name?"

"Claire." She blinked and tears spilled onto her cheeks. She hadn't done it intentionally, but the timing was perfect.

Elias sighed and stared past her, his expression going lax. Holy shit. Was he contacting his beta? Did Zion know Elias was capable of this?

"Claire is unharmed, as are the others. My beta is not giving anyone access to the women while the situation is so volatile." His expression hardened, growing fierce again. "Despite what the cats love to claim, we do not abuse women."

Explain that to Akari. It was all Tara could do not to throw the comeback in his face.

End the conversation, Isaac urged. I've got what I need.

"I've been down here too long," she told the wolf, even managing to sound regretful. "I have to go."

"Will you come tomorrow, or the next time they allow me food?"

Again, the question surprised her. Was he really that desperate for conversation? Of course he was. Isolation wore down anyone. "I will if they'll let me." She started to leave then looked back at him. "You're not what I expected."

His gaze bore into hers for a moment, but the wolf said nothing more.

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Isaac closed his eyes and let the images wash over him. He stood beside Kyle in the security booth. They were both too anxious to sit. An energy barrier separated Tara from Elias, but the wolf was a vicious murderer. Isaac hated having his mate close to someone with that much blood on their hands.

Tara engaged the wolf's conscious mind with friendly banter and casual questions. They'd tried distractions before, but her lovely face and vulnerability were surprisingly effective. The wolf leader was usually gruff and argumentative. With Tara, Elias flirted and teased.

Isaac scanned ever deeper, reaching areas that he'd not had access to before.

There was no resistance, so he caused no damage.

At least, no damage yet. Images scrolled through his mind, dizzying flickers of countless scenes.

Tear-streaked faces, women huddled together for warmth and comfort.

Isaac tried to slow down the transfer, to absorb more than a frustrating glimpse.

Stone walls and echoing footfalls, endless twisting tunnels, and light reflected off water.

The women were still in those cursed caves.

Pouring energy into his psychic receptors, he attempted to expand the image, to trace

one of the tunnels back to its entrance.

Suddenly, Elias' mind shifted, his energy intensifying and changing. Kyle surrounded Isaac, shielding his presence while allowing him to maintain his link with the wolf. No one had indicated that Elias was telepathic, but he was clearly attempting to contact someone, likely his beta.

Isaac felt the connection activate, but he couldn't hear the exchange.

Can you tag the beta? Isaac pushed the thought into Kyle's mind. Kyle frequently left a small psychic signal inside a person's mind. It allowed him to locate the target later. It was a tracker skill and Kyle was the best tracker on Rydaria.

I'll try.

Isaac poured energy into Kyle's shields while he shifted his focus.

Got it , Kyle informed with a surge of excitement. Let's disengage. The rest has been a waste of time.

Isaac agreed, so they both eased out of the wolf's mind.

Pausing to roll his shoulders and clear his mind, Isaac turned and looked at Kyle. "This could be the break we've needed. I'm so glad our mate got bored."

"Claire is unharmed, as are the others," Elias was saying to Tara.

Isaac hadn't been able to hear the conversation, so he had no idea if the statement was true or if Elias was simply telling Tara what she wanted to hear.

"My beta is not giving anyone access to the women while the situation is so volatile.

Despite what the cats love to claim, we do not abuse women.”

Isaac and Kyle scoffed at the same time.

“What utter bullshit,” Kyle muttered. “What about Akari, or the woman he fucked to death?”

A memory of the human’s continual shifting barged back into Isaac’s mind. He shuddered then said, “Technically Babcock murdered the human, but Elias is still full of shit.”

“Get Tara out of there.” Kyle motioned toward the surveillance display.

Isaac nodded then sent a telepathic message to Tara directing her to end the session.

Tara stepped into the security booth a few moments later looking pensive and unsure. “Do you believe what he said? Is Juan keeping the others away from the captive females?”

Her emotions poured across their empathic link, tearing at Isaac’s heart.

“I don’t know, love.” He didn’t want to give her false hope, yet the need to comfort his mate was impossible to ignore.

He pulled her into his arms as he continued, “He was trying to impress you, but the interaction seemed honest.”

She lingered in his embrace for a moment, her arms wrapped around his back. Then she eased away just far enough to look at his face. “What did you see? Why did you want me to leave?”

“I didn’t see much more than we knew already,” Isaac admitted. “But we used the telepathic connection to tag Juan’s mind. It’s one of Kyle’s tracker tricks.”

She turned her head sharply and looked at Kyle. “You tagged him? Does that mean you can locate him?”

There was that hope again. Isaac sighed. She clearly wanted her friends to escape unscathed, but the longer the wolves had them, the slimmer the chances became that they would.

“Psychic abilities are unpredictable,” Kyle told her. “This increases the chances that we can locate Juan, but all sorts of things can interfere with the connection.”

Isaac stroked the back of her hair, encouraging her to relax. Instead, she eased out of his arms and moved so she could see both Kyle and him.

“Were you scanning too?” she asked Kyle. “Did you see anything helpful?”

Kyle shook his head. “Just longer flashes of what we’ve seen before.

They’re in some sort of cave. I couldn’t see where the cave was or how to get down there, but the emotions I sensed substantiated what Elias said.

It felt like they were waiting for something, dreading whatever that something was, but it hadn’t happened yet. ”

“That’s wonderful, but Juan can’t hold them off forever,” Tara stressed. “We have to find that cave before it’s too late.”

“We know.” Kyle sounded slightly impatient, so he paused to smooth out his tone. “Our best chance of finding him is to use Juan as a conduit.”

Her brow furrowed and her tone grew sharp. “Just follow the tracker signal to wherever the hell he is. This doesn’t need to be complicated.”

Isaac moved forward and put his hands on her shoulders. “We know you’re worried about your friends, but you’re starting to take it out on us.”

She took a deep breath then sighed. “I’m sorry. Please, explain how you’re going to find Juan.”

“The tracker signal is simply a telepathic anchor,” Kyle resumed.

“In a perfect world, we would simply follow the signal to wherever he is. However, an underground location complicates everything. The signal would likely lead us to the ground above where he is without revealing how to get down there.”

“I didn’t think of that,” she admitted. “So, what’s the alternative?”

Kyle moved closer, his expression softening.

He was clearly trying to put her at ease.

“One of the reasons we’re Shadow Team One is because we can network with the senses of others.

It takes all three of us, but we should be able to see through Juan’s eyes, to hear what he says, and even hear some of his thoughts.

If we’re patient, Juan will show us how he’s getting in and out of the underground. ”

“But that could take days, maybe weeks,” she objected. “I’m sure you can’t keep the connection active all the time, so you’d have to keep checking until you’re lucky

enough to do it while he's walking down there or walking out." She threw up her hands and shook her head. "This is a horrible idea."

"Do you have a better one?" Isaac snapped. He was exhausted and hungry and the last thing he needed was one of Tara's tantrums. "We are doing everything possible to find this elusive cave, and we will continue to do so. Your fits of temper are not helping anyone."

She glared at him, but said nothing.

"It might take a while," Kyle agreed. "But the strategy could work. It's the best chance we've got right now."

"That's not comforting," she muttered. "Can I go back to our cabin? I'm surrounded by enemies."

She motioned to the displays of Elias and Babcock, but Isaac was pretty sure he was included in her statement. "Go ahead and escort her," he told Kyle. "I'm going to take another shot at Babcock and then I'll join you at home."

Isaac walked them to the stairs and was about to question Babcock when the door at the top of the stairwell opened again. Zion descended, his movements surprisingly agile considering his size. "Any progress?"

"Maybe." He explained what had transpired and what they intended to try. "Unfortunately, we need Jon for this and he's up at the raptor village."

"Summon him back," Zion advised. "This is more important."

"I will."

“What about Babcock?” Zion nodded toward the door to the left of the security booth.

“He just glares or laughs. He honestly thinks his knowledge will protect him. With the wolves he would have been right. But we don’t need him to reproduce, so I’m about ready to go digging.”

“Do it. Malik looked over his notes and analyzed the injections. Obviously, Malik’s understanding of genetics is not equal to Babcock’s, but his medical background is sufficient to say that we want nothing to do with any of it.

Babcock might have told the wolves that he was helping them reproduce, but the formula was triggering a full metamorphosis. ”

“He was trying to create a female shapeshifter?” Isaac had seen the result in Elias’ mind.

This didn’t really surprise him. Of the sixteen female hybrids, only two of them could shift.

He’d always presumed the Griffin Project was simply more interested in creating male shapeshifters than female.

Apparently, there was more to the anomaly than he knew.

“Malik says that unleashing the ability in females is the only thing that makes sense,” Zion concluded. “Take what you can from his mind and then end him. We’ve wasted resources on that bastard long enough.”

“Understood.” Isaac just stood there for a moment after Zion left.

He'd been waiting for this order since they found out that Babcock was still alive.

There was no doubt that the amoral piece of shit deserved to die.

He was responsible for the altered existence of every hybrid on this planet.

And worse, Babcock had learned nothing from the downfall of Nuevo Biotech.

The first opportunity he got, he was right back to his old tricks, engineering DNA and costing unsuspecting victims their lives.

The suffering ended tonight, but before it did Isaac needed to collect every scrap of pertinent information from Babcock's mind.

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Determination restored, Isaac walked over to the left cell block and the guard pulled open the door. Babcock occupied the center cell. The other two were empty. He was lying on his back, arm bent under his head, but he sat up as soon as Isaac entered.

“About damn time,” Babcock muttered. “You would do better to move me to appropriate accommodations and treat me with the respect I deserve. Starving me isn’t going to get you what you want.”

“And what is it you think I want?” Isaac returned. Babcock’s arrogance made what Isaac had to do that much easier.

Babcock narrowed his eyes and pushed to his feet. “I know more about the hybrids on this planet than anyone else. I should. I created you. I know all the secrets locked away in your genetics. Longevity, procreation, boundaries , I can control them all.”

Boundaries? Isaac tensed. Why had the vile fucker added that to his list?

A cold, humorless laugh escaped Babcock. “You don’t know, do you? You’re a Shadow, for God’s sake. How could you not realize?”

“What are you talking about?” Isaac snapped. Head games were a favorite of Babcock’s. It would be foolish to believe anything he said at this point. Babcock was desperate to save his life.

“How did your handlers prevent you from running away during off-world missions?”

Refusing to take the bait, Isaac just glared at his nemesis.

“What happened if a Shadow deviated from their mission parameters?” Babcock arched his brows, eyes gleaming with sadistic amusement.

The answer was brutally effective. The explosive implant would rupture his heart, killing him instantly.

The physical boundary was programmable, but the implant could also be triggered manually.

If his handler disapproved of anything he witnessed during the mission, he was within his rights to trigger the implant.

“Our nanobots were removed long before we left Earth,” Isaac stated, unsure why he was engaging at all.

“Right before departure, every hybrid was given a physical examination. Correct?”

The smug twist to Babcock’s lips sent a chill racing down Isaac’s spine. “What are you getting at?”

“Get me something to eat and I’ll tell you,” Babcock snapped, all playfulness gone in an instant.

Tired of sparring verbally, Isaac shoved into Babcock’s mind, easily locating the information.

Babcock screamed, grasping his head between his hands. “Stop it! You’ll damage me.”

“Undoubtedly,” Isaac countered. He silenced his emotions and focused on his task. Not pausing to analyze what he was learning, Isaac stripped away information layer

by layer. Facts and figures, images and emotions. Isaac assimilated it all without allowing himself to be affected by it.

“You’re killing me!” Babcock tried again, charging blindly toward the front wall of the cell. He hit the energy barrier and bounced off, landing hard on his ass. He screamed again and collapsed onto his side, thrashing wildly.

Isaac showed as much compassion to Babcock as the ruthless scientist had shown his victims. Isaac meticulously stripped information from the human’s mind until there was nothing left. Panting harshly, Isaac sent a disruptive pulse into Babcock’s chest and stopped his heart.

His only regret was that Babcock’s suffering hadn’t lasted long enough. “Burn in hell, you worthless piece of shit,” he snarled as he pivoted on the ball of his foot and left the room.

Tara watched Isaac move his food around his plate, but his fork never made it to his mouth.

He’d returned to their cabin about an hour ago and he’d barely spoken a word since.

Jon had assured them that he was on his way back from the raptor village, but he wouldn’t make it in time for the evening meal.

Reluctantly, the other three decided to eat without him.

Or Kyle and Tara ate while Isaac stared off into space.

He didn’t participate in or even react to the conversation, which wasn’t like him at all.

“Are you alright?” Tara asked as she began to clear the table.

“Not even close.” He pushed his chair back from the table and stood.

Tara wasn’t sure if she should go to him or not.

His emotions were seething in the distance, but it was obvious that he was trying to shield his mind.

It had been two weeks since Tara allowed her mates to form an empathic link.

The connection was still temporary, but emotions and thoughts flowed smoothly between them unless one of the participants was shielding themselves like Isaac was doing right now.

“What happened after Kyle and I left?” she persisted, not willing to let him hide.

“Zion finally gave the order to harvest Babcock’s mind.” Without elaborating, Isaac went over to the couch and sat down.

Stripping information from an uncooperative prisoner was a task Isaac hated, but he’d done it before. Besides, there had never been a person who deserved to have a procedure forced on him more than Babcock. So why was Isaac so upset?

Kyle followed Isaac into the living room and sat facing him. “Did you learn anything useful?”

Coming out of the contemplative stupor enough to interact, Isaac said, “I didn’t spend a lot of time analyzing each thought, but one thing became unavoidable. Every person on this planet has been injected with boundary nanobots.”

Kyle's jaw dropped and anger shot across the empathic link. "That sonofabitch!"

"My thoughts exactly," Isaac muttered, his expression thunderous. "I'd kill him again if that were possible."

"What are you talking about?" Too anxious to sit, Tara stood where she could see both of her mates. Her pulse accelerated. She didn't yet understand what it all meant, but their heightened emotions were enough to upset her. "What's a boundary nanobot?"

"A microscopic computer that tracks our location and ensures that we stay within a designated area, in this case Rydaria," Kyle explained.

"If we leave the planet for any reason, an explosive implant will rupture something vital, usually our hearts," Isaac added. "Nuevo Biotech developed the technology so they could control the Shadow Teams during their off-world missions."

"Can the implants be removed?" Tara asked hopefully.

Voluntarily choosing to build a life on a primitive planet and being imprisoned there were two very different things.

And why hadn't the hybrids been warned about the nanobots?

Were the people back on Earth hoping the hybrids would die trying to leave the planet?

She understood the animosity toward the scientists, but the hybrids were victims of Nuevo Biotech.

It wasn't right to treat them like criminals.

“I don’t think any of the scanners on Rydaria are sensitive enough to locate the nanobots,” Isaac told her. “They move around inside the body. And we can’t travel to a more technologically advanced planet without setting off the implants.”

Trepidation tingled down Tara’s spine as a disturbing thought occurred to her. “Was this done to the humans too? Do I have a nanobot?” She’d been thinking in terms of another injustice perpetrated against the hybrids, but Isaac had said every person on the planet, not every hybrid.

Isaac nodded. “It was part of the departure physical that everyone underwent.”

“Did you tell Zion?” Kyle asked before Tara had time to react. His murderous expression perfectly matched the destructive emotions churning inside him.

With another nod, Isaac said, “He’s furious, but not surprised. The human leaders made it clear from the start that we would never be allowed to leave this planet.”

Tara and the other humans had been told the same thing.

Still, a secret part of her always hoped that somehow, some day, she would find a way to escape.

She didn’t deserve to be trapped here any more than her mates did.

She hadn’t been involved in the experiments.

All her tasks had been clerical. Her only fault was working for the wrong company.

Isaac stood up and walked across the room. He didn’t appear to have a purpose. He was simply too upset to sit still. “Even dead, that fucker is torturing us.”

“It’s just another problem to solve,” Kyle concluded with a sigh. “Fixating on it isn’t going to make it go away.”

The main door to the cabin opened and Jon walked in. He nodded to his teammates, gave Tara a lingering kiss, and then hung up his coat by the door. “It’s bitterly cold out there. I couldn’t alter my body’s temperature enough to fight off the chill.”

“We wouldn’t have asked you to return unless it was important,” Isaac stressed.

“I know.” Jon went to the molecular conversion unit and printed a mug of some steaming beverage, likely kidolen . Everyone was obsessed with the spicy/tart cider. “Let me warm up for a minute and then we’ll see if we can network with Juan.”

A tense pause followed as Isaac and Kyle attempted to give Jon a moment to catch his breath. “You guys look like you just came from a funeral. What the hell happened?”

“Babcock is dead, but the scan revealed that every person on Rydaria was injected with boundary nanobots before leaving Earth,” Kyle blurted without his usual tact. “They wanted to make damn sure we never leave this planet.”

“It’s about fucking time Babcock paid for what he did to us, and are you really surprised by the nanobots? Nuevo used them to control us for years. It would be more surprising if they hadn’t chipped us.”

Kyle nodded and silence descended again.

Jon allowed the gloom for only a moment before he asked, “Let’s think about this logically.

Has anything really changed? We have no way of leaving the planet.

The fuckers back on Earth made sure of that.

The nanobots can be removed. We don't have equipment sophisticated enough to remove them right now, but any spaceship capable of leaving the planet will have sensors powerful enough to detect nanobots.

Our objective is the same. Reconstruct, borrow, or steal a spaceship. ”

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The tension finally eased from Isaac's features. "You're right. It's just one more indignity to add to the list."

"The human leaders claimed we're not prisoners, that they've given us everything we need to thrive," Kyle muttered gloomily. "The nanobots are proof positive that they're all full of shit."

"Again, not news," Jon insisted as he finished his drink.

"We have two options. One, put all our time and energy into contacting someone off-world and convincing them to come get us. The complications with that plan are endless so I won't get into them.

Option two, make our lives here as pleasant as possible while we work toward achieving the other goal.

That way if it takes years, and it probably will, we're not all a bunch of miserable assholes the entire time. "

Isaac started laughing and Tara couldn't figure out why. Nothing Jon said was funny.

"Were the eagle brothers fighting again?" Isaac guessed. "You suddenly sound like Raphael."

Jon smiled and tension flowed out of the entire room.

"Gabriel was in one of his moods and not even Raph could talk him out of it. They

have a team of their best engineers working to build a communications system from the components we've salvaged from the abandoned ships.

There isn't much more any of us can do in the meantime.

Obsessing about leaving the planet is only going to make the person unhappy and hard to be around. Why do it?"

"You're right." Isaac looked at Tara and one corner of his mouth tipped up. "Besides, our life improved drastically a couple of weeks ago."

Tara offered him a soft smile, but didn't speak.

She hadn't known about the nanobots, but it mattered even less to her.

Rydaria had been her prison from the start.

She'd been exiled here as a punishment because she was an employee of Nuevo Biotech.

Earth's leaders didn't expect anyone in her party to survive, much less escape the planet.

"Enough about nanobots and injustice," Jon insisted. "Let's see if we can locate the missing females."

The three males moved to the center of the room and grasped arms. They paused and closed their eyes, then their breathing evened out.

Tara could feel energy swirling around them, gradually building in strength and intensity.

They were shielding the link, protecting it from outside interference.

The protective barrier kept her from sensing their thoughts and emotions.

She understood the precaution, but it made her feel excluded and useless.

Not wanting to distract them, she moved to the couch and sat down.

Lexie and her mates originally formed their soul bond to save the life of one of the males.

Lexie insisted that she didn't regret it and that being completely connected to her mates was amazing.

Would a soul bond allow Tara to participate in these missions?

Even if all she did was feed them energy, at least she would have a purpose.

Was being included enough of a reason to link herself permanently with three males she'd only known for a couple of weeks?

She sighed. Life on Rydaria was so confusing. She wasn't sure what she wanted.

She had pictured herself as a counselor, offering emotional support to those traumatized by abuse.

Unfortunately, no one seemed interested.

She had asked around, spoken with dozens of people, and everyone insisted that they didn't need a therapist. Most of the males wouldn't come near her.

She was being courted by three powerful Shadows and they had no interest in upsetting them.

The other part of the hesitation was cultural.

Most of the feline hybrids were soldiers, badass warriors who took out their emotions on sparring partners and exercise equipment.

Some of the women had shown mild interest, but insisted that now was not the time.

“Damn it,” Jon muttered as the males came out of the trance.

“What did you see?” Tara asked. It was obvious they hadn’t been successful, but had they learned anything helpful?

Jon glanced at her then shook his head. “We found Juan, but he’d already left the cave. We’ll have to try again in the morning.”

Tara nodded, disappointed but accepting. They were doing everything possible to find the captives. Complaining about the time it was taking wasn’t helpful to anyone.

“Do you know who Alex and Nate are?” Kyle asked. “Juan was not happy with those two.”

Tara started to say that she had no idea when she realized that Kyle wasn’t asking her.

“I don’t know which pack he leads, but Alex is one of the other alphas,” Jon explained.

“The ‘other alphas’?” Tara asked, confused by the phrase. “I didn’t know there was

more than one.”

Jon moved to the couch and sat down beside her before he went on.

“There are eleven wolf packs living in the lupine village. Each pack has its own alpha and the strongest alpha rules the village. For the past year or so, Elias has been the village alpha, but our spy has indicated that several of the others are ready to challenge his leadership.”

“Or lack thereof,” Isaac grumbled.

“Exactly,” Jon responded. “It sounds like Alex and Nate are ready to make their move.”

“It makes sense,” Kyle interjected as he moved closer to the couch. “Juan isn’t even an alpha. Elias’ pack is vulnerable as long as he is out of commission.”

“Is this good or bad for the captives?” Tara wanted to know.

Jon lifted one shoulder and shook his head. “I have no idea. I know little more than Alex’s name.”

“Even if Alex is a huge improvement, we don’t want the captives caught in the middle of a pack war,” Isaac pointed out. “We have to get them out of there.”

Kyle’s penetrating gaze suddenly shifted to Tara. “How well do you know Claire?”

Tara tensed, unsure of his motivation for asking the question. “I didn’t know her before we came here, but she was in my tent while we were starving and struggling to stay warm. That sort of trauma creates closeness. I feel a certain bond with all six of the women that were assigned to my tent.”

Isaac nodded thoughtfully. “The same thing happens to fire teams or military squads. They create bonds that last the rest of their lives.” He looked at Kyle and asked, “What are you thinking?”

“What if...” Kyle hesitated, clearly uncomfortable with what he was about to suggest. “What if there was a way to contact Claire directly? Juan might eventually lead us to the cave, but Claire is there right now.”

“Tara isn’t ready,” Isaac said firmly.

“Not ready for what?” Tara countered. “What’s Kyle talking about? How can we contact Claire?”

Jon slipped his arm around her and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “If we had full access to your mind, we might be able to use your emotional connection with Claire to contact her telepathically.”

“Even with a soul bond there is a series of mights,” Isaac countered.

He stood behind one of the chairs that faced the couch.

His hands rested on the back, his fingers squeezing and releasing.

“We might be able to find her, and we might be able to form a connection allowing us to communicate, and even if all that falls into place, Claire might have been blindfolded or unconscious when they took her down there. We’re not locking Tara into a soul bond for a might. ”

“If a long shot for Claire were the only reason we were doing this, I would agree with you,” Tara said. “But I’ve spent the last few days wondering why I’m waiting. I know this is the coalition I want to join and I’m relatively certain you want me as your

mate.”

Jon scoffed and pulled her tighter against his side. “We’ve known you were our mate since the first day we saw you.”

“Your scent told us everything we needed to know,” Isaac added.

“It’s only been two weeks,” Kyle reminded. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I’ve been with you continually for two weeks and our minds have been linked for much of that time.

” She took a deep breath and made her final decision.

“I know how you guys think and what you honestly feel about me. I’ve shared your memories.

I know who you were before Nuevo, and I know who you are now.

You each appeal to me in a different way.

You fulfill a different portion of my desire, which means I’m completely satisfied.

I’m ready.” She paused and looked each one of them in the eyes before she concluded, “I want to be your soul bonded mate.”

Kyle’s brows drew together and his expression tensed. “Is desire all you feel for us?”

“You know it’s not.” She lowered her gaze, feeling vulnerable for reasons she didn’t understand. Why was sharing her body with three males easier than sharing her emotions?

Kneeling in front of her, Kyle gathered her hands into his. “You can feel our emotions, mate. Don’t you realize how deeply we love you?”

She glanced up at him, but said nothing.

“I won’t speak for the others,” Kyle began, “but I love you more deeply than I ever thought possible. You’re bright and compassionate. Your determination to rescue the captives reflects your character. You’re one of the most selfless people I’ve ever known.”

Jon cupped her chin and drew her face around until their gazes locked. “I know I’m hard on you, in and out of bed. But I can’t help myself. I’m obsessed with you. I’ve never cared for anyone or anything as intensely as I care for you.”

Tears blurred her vision, and she furiously blinked them away. They were soldiers, Shadow warriors; she hadn’t expected this sort of tenderness from them.

“I wasn’t looking for a mate,” Isaac told her as he sat down on her other side. “I didn’t think I was ready. Wasn’t sure I’d ever be. But you’re wonderful. You fill in our missing pieces and make the puzzle fit together. Without you, we’re incomplete.”

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She blinked and tears trailed down her cheeks.

“I felt bullied into this courtship, so I resented you at first. I didn’t want to feel anything for you guys, but the mind link made that impossible.

I was overwhelmed by your passion and shocked by the depth of your desire for me.

You don’t just want my body. You want me, all of me. ”

As usual, Jon pushed her harder than the other two. “You just described how we feel about you. How do you feel about us ?”

“I think about you all the time,” she confessed.

“I worry when you’re out on missions, and I’m proud of how often Zion depends on you.

Kyle makes me smile and Isaac challenges me intellectually.

” She looked at Jon and smiled as he wiped away her tears.

“You make me furious one minute and then my heart aches the next. I love all three of you desperately, and I’m not even sure how that’s possible. ”

Jon kissed her first, a slow, deep kiss that communicated even more than their words. Isaac captured her mouth next, his kiss surprisingly urgent. Kyle often had to wait for the other two, so he always took his time once her attention was fixed on him.

“When you accept our claim, there will be no going back,” he reminded in between lingering kisses. “You will belong to us completely and we will belong to you.”

She returned his kiss and sent her thoughts into his mind. I am yours, and you are mine.

Kyle stood up and then lifted Tara into his arms. Joy bubbled up inside her and she laughed happily, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Isaac pulled her boots off as Kyle carried her into the largest bedroom.

Kyle set her down beside the bed and the males worked together to rid her of her clothing.

Isaac urged her onto the bed, but Tara shook her head and darted away.

“If this is my wedding night, I want all three of you naked too,” she insisted.

Boots and garments went flying as her mates hurriedly obliged her.

While they undressed, Tara crossed to the wardrobe and opened one side.

Jon kept his implements hanging in the back, concealed by Isaac’s clothes.

She found Jon’s favorite crop and returned to the males.

Kneeling in front of them, she balanced the crop across her open palms and offered it to them with her eyes downcast. “I know I haven’t done anything wrong, but I need your discipline. ”

The admission sent a wave of heat cascading through her body.

Jon and Isaac consistently aroused her using a careful balance of pleasure and pain, but this was the first time she'd sought it out.

She liked to convince herself that the spankings and other forms of domination were something she reluctantly endured because her mates were aggressive hybrids.

Until this moment, she'd not been willing to admit that she wanted these things as much as her mates.

It took them so long to answer that Tara looked up. Desire burned in their eyes, consuming and demanding.

Jon snatched the crop off her hands and pulled her into his arms. His mouth crashed down on hers, the kiss nearly frantic.

Isaac pulled her from Jon's embrace and kissed her just as intensely.

Kyle wasn't waiting around this time. He pressed in beside her and pulled her face toward him.

His mouth moved over hers and then Isaac claimed her again.

They guided her face back and forth, taking turns kissing her, until she was dizzy and out of breath.

"Bend over the bed," Jon instructed. "Legs straight and wide apart."

Tara approached the bed on wobbly legs and assumed the familiar position.

It displayed her body lewdly, giving them access to her bottom, pussy, and breasts.

They enjoyed having her bound, but this demonstrated her willing submission.

Her mates went right to work. Isaac and Kyle sat on the bed to either side of her while Jon stood behind.

Isaac and Kyle squeezed her breasts, pinching and pulling on her nipples to awaken her senses.

Tara tossed her head and arched her back, pressing her breasts into their warm hands.

Jon caressed her upturned bottom, squeezing one side and then the other.

He pulled her cheeks apart and let currents of air tease her pucker.

Tara shivered. She'd been taken there and enjoyed the intense pleasure that followed, but tonight would be different, harsher, yet more intimate than anything they'd done so far.

Tonight her mates would take her together, filling her mouth, pussy, and ass all at the same time.

A light slap warned her that Jon was ready to begin. She planted her feet and rolled her hips, offering her bottom more brazenly. Jon spanked her with his hand, rubbing the cheeks in between each swat to spread the heat. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, feeling restless and needy.

"Ready, mate?" Jon asked, his voice deep and rumbling. "Are you eager to wear my marks?"

"Yes, Master," she whispered. "I am eager for all sorts of things."

He chuckled and lightly traced her slit with the tip of one finger. “So I see.”

The first stinging slap of the crop caught Tara by surprise. He hadn’t given her time to recover from his careless caress before he switched from pleasure to pain. She yelped and rocked to the balls of her feet.

“Hold the position,” he ordered, then brought the crop down on the other side.

Another soft cry escaped her, but she managed not to move. The sting was sharper than she remembered, more biting. She breathed through the pain and absorbed the tingling heat that followed. The crop slapped down over and over, covering her bottom with the bright red marks Jon treasured.

Tara squirmed as her body began to react to the harsh stimulation. Her clit twitched and her nipples felt tender and hot. One of Isaac’s hands swept down along her body and eased between her thighs.

“So wet,” Isaac muttered. “Is Jon’s discipline making you ache?”

“Yes, so badly.”

He covered her clit and rubbed in a tight circle. She threw back her head and groaned.

“Please, Sir, may I come? I really need to come.”

“Not yet.” Isaac parted her folds, holding her open, while depriving her of the stimulation that would have sent her over the edge.

An especially hard swat from the crop seemed to accent the denial. Tara cried out in frustration and tightened her inner muscles. If they wouldn’t get me off, I’ll do it myself.

“I heard that,” Isaac warned and removed his hand completely. “Our mate is trying to make herself come when I told her no. What should we do about that?”

Without warning, Jon brought the crop up between her thighs.

Tara screamed, shocked and angered by the harsh sting against her most sensitive flesh.

Jon swatted her pussy again, but the sting wasn’t as sharp.

Her inner muscles contracted spontaneously, and she moaned, wondering why in the world she had started this.

The third swat sent heat spiraling through her pussy and left her teetering on the brink of orgasm.

“Fight it off,” Jon ordered and waited for her to obey. Once she regained control of her senses, he rubbed the crop against her folds. “Who controls this lovely body?”

“You do,” she said reluctantly. “You and my other two mates.”

He slapped the insides of her thighs several times, then went back to cropping her bottom. Tara let out a ragged sigh. It still stung like fire, but these sensations were more easily processed.

Isaac played with her breasts for a few moments then slipped his hand back between her thighs. “You don’t have permission to come,” he warned and then resumed the teasing circles around her clit.

Sensations built inside her, swelling and receding, but never bursting into blissful orgasm. She was soaking wet and ached inside and out. How long did they intend to

torment her?

“Do you accept our claim?” Isaac asked, his tone ringing with authority. “Are you willing to mate with us and only us forever?”

Jon hadn’t stopped spanking her, so Isaac’s questions were confusing.

Were they really going to exchange vows right now?

“Yes,” she cried as the crop found an especially tender spot on her left butt cheek.

Energy flowed into her mind and understanding unfurled inside her.

Isaac wanted to use the cropping to distract her while he anchored the soul bond.

Creating the empathic link had been painful. This might be a clever strategy.

“I accept your claim,” she continued. “I’m more than willing to be your mate. I crave the completeness and welcome the soul bond.”

The crop snapped against the lower curve of her bottom and Tara cried out.

Pain sliced through her body while fire erupted in her head.

Kyle fisted the back of her hair and turned her head so he could kiss her.

His lips were warm and demanding, his tongue boldly exploring her mouth.

Warm hands stroked her breasts while the spanking continued.

Isaac gradually expanded the psychic connection.

Heat and discomfort assailed her in waves, driving rational thought from her mind.

Nothing existed but pulsing energy and overwhelming sensations.

The world spun and Tara's legs buckled. Jon wrapped his arm around her waist then caught the bend of her knees.

He lifted her trembling body off the floor.

Rather than sitting down with her, he passed her into Kyle's waiting arms. She moaned as her freshly cropped bottom connected with Kyle's thighs.

Her mind was starting to clear, but there was still so much pain.

Kyle's lips returned to hers and she relaxed in his embrace. Her mates caressed and comforted her as the link slowly solidified. Concern and control, they were holding back their needs until they were sure she was all right. She eased away from Kyle and forced her eyes to open.

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“That was intense,” she admitted. “Can we move on to the pleasure now?” Their emotions surged into her mind, but their thoughts were muted.

They were clearly desperate to claim her, but even more determined to protect her.

It was sweet, really. And it helped her adjust to the clarity with which she was sensing them.

Isaac smiled, but his eyes still reflected concern. “There’s no hurry. Take a minute and catch your breath.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “Look into my mind if you don’t believe me. If you can sense me half as well as I’m sensing you guys, you’ll see that there’s nothing to worry about.”

“If our mate is ready for pleasure,” Jon growled out with a sexy smile, “I say we give it to her.”

Kyle shifted her to the bed beside him and Isaac pulled her hips to the edge of the mattress. Jon urged her over onto her back as Isaac knelt on the floor. Kyle took one of her legs and Jon took the other. They drew them up and back, bending her knees and spreading her thighs for Isaac.

“Look how red you are,” Isaac murmured. “Does it still sting?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “But I ache.”

He bent and traced her slit with the tip of his tongue. “So wet.” He pushed his tongue inside her. “And hot.” Then his caresses settled over her clit and Tara was lost.

Her banked desire rapidly built until she lifted, rubbing her pussy against his mouth. “May I come? Oh, please let me come!”

Come, love. You’ve more than earned it. Isaac pushed the thoughts into her mind as his mouth continued to caress her.

The tension built inside her and Tara tossed her head.

It felt so damn good. She didn’t want it to end.

Then his lips closed around her clit and one careful suck was all it took to detonate her orgasm.

She cried out and arched, shaking violently as pleasure pulsed through her entire body.

Isaac prolonged her release, licking and sucking until every spasm had faded.

“Good girl,” Isaac murmured as he lifted his head. His mouth and the lower portion of his face shone with her juices. He licked his lips then wiped his face with the back of his hand. “Now we come together.”

Tara shivered. All four of them together .

“I want her mouth,” Isaac informed the others.

“Well, I know where Jon is going, so I’ll happily fill her pussy,” Kyle said with a good-natured grin. He pulled Tara up and onto his lap, positioning her astride his

hips. Then he looked deep into her eyes and said, “All right, mate, put me in.”

Tara paused for a brief kiss then reached between them and found his cock.

She stroked the long, hard length then guided it to her entrance and slowly lowered her body.

All three of her mates were large, both thick and long.

It didn't seem to matter how often they fucked her.

Being filled by them never failed to take her breath away.

Kyle bent and sucked on her nipples while she rocked up and down on his cock.

Isaac and Jon touched her, kissing and caressing her while she enjoyed the first joining.

After a few moments, Kyle lay back. Tara braced her hands on his chest and looked at Isaac.

He stood beside the bed, slowly stroking his hardened length.

“Offer me your mouth, mate.”

She licked her lips and said, “My mouth is yours.”

He angled his cock toward her with one hand and tangled his other in the back of her hair.

Expecting one brutal thrust, Tara was surprised when Isaac entered slowly. His cock

slid over her tongue, spreading his taste and speeding her heart rate. Just as slowly, he pulled back. "Tilt your head."

She angled her head and relaxed her throat, knowing what he needed and more than willing to give it to him.

His gaze locked with hers as he pushed deeper and deeper into her mouth.

Tara fought the need to gag for only a moment before the overwhelming fullness eclipsed all other sensations.

Her pussy was full. Her mouth was full. Now all she needed was Jon in her ass.

Kyle and Isaac began to move, sliding in and out.

She whimpered, sucking and tightening her inner muscles as they used her willing body.

Jon parted her cheeks and coated her last opening with cool gel. "Do you want your sweet little ass stuffed full of cock?" He pushed one of his fingers inside her as he waited for her response.

Only if the cock belongs to one of my mates , she countered.

"Good answer." He positioned himself against her back entrance and grasped her hips. "Offer me your ass, mate. Welcome your master deep inside you."

My ass is yours, Master. Fuck me, please.

Like Isaac, Jon entered her with more care than usual.

Her body opened for him, stretching around his thickness until a cry tore from her throat.

It wasn't pain, exactly. Just fullness so intense that it made her want to struggle.

Instead, she sank deeper into submission.

She was theirs and they were hers. Her body was theirs to control, theirs to use.

And it felt amazing to pleasure all three of them for the very first time.

They pulled back together, withdrawing until just the tips remained inside her body.

"You are ours ," they said in unison, then thrust in hard together.

A spontaneous orgasm ripped through Tara.

She screamed and shook as pulses of intense pleasure blasted through her body.

She floated in euphoric bliss for a few moments then drifted back to reality.

The first thing she felt was Isaac's warm hands framing her face.

Then her awareness expanded and she felt his cock sliding in and out of her mouth.

She was so relaxed from the orgasm that his length passed well into her throat with each thrust and it felt wonderful.

Kyle squeezed her breasts, drawing Tara's attention to him. He filled his palms with her resilient flesh, supporting her torso while he pumped up into her wet pussy. She didn't try to move, just relaxed in the embrace of her mates as they enjoyed her

willing body.

Jon held firmly to her hips as he drove deep into her bottom. His long cock slid against Kyle's, separated by a thin membrane. It felt wild and intensely stimulating. She was surrounded by her mates, filled to overflowing, while their energy swirled through her mind.

Emotions, stark and consuming, passed feely from one mind to the next. It was impossible to tell who was feeling what, and Tara didn't care. They were in this together. They would face each challenge and savor each triumph together.

But unlike the empathic link, the soul bond allowed Tara to share their sensations.

Each time one of them thrust, she felt the thickness of their cocks driving into her body.

Yet she also felt the snug grip of her body wrapped around their shafts.

It was disconcerting at first, but she soon abandoned herself to the compound pleasure, giving and receiving as her mind greedily absorbed all the sensations.

The males rocked faster, driving into Tara more forcefully. She let them move her as they needed because their sensations became hers. Then her pleasure swept into their minds, intensifying theirs. She cried out around Isaac's cock, helplessly racing toward another orgasm.

"Wait for us, mate," Jon ordered. "We come together."

It took all her might to pull herself back, but she managed to keep the release from cresting. It felt so damn good to finally take all three of her mates.

Isaac's hands pressed harder against her face and his cock slid deeper into her throat.

"Now," he urged. "I can't wait any longer.

" His seed jetted into her throat as he cried out helplessly.

Pleasure surged across the link, tingling and dizzying.

Jon rocked his hips fast and hard then shuddered violently.

His cry echoed Isaac's and his seed spilled into Tara's bottom.

She lifted, taking him deeper as his release prolonged the pleasure.

Kyle grasped her hips and arched his back, driving deep as release finally claimed him.

Tara cried out sharply. Her pussy rippled, bottom clenching, and mouth sucking greedily.

It was perfect, overwhelming, yet utterly complete. She was lost in euphoric bliss.

The vision struck her without warning. She moaned as her surroundings blurred and another scene came into focus.

"Don't fight it," Isaac advised. "I'll guide you as much as I can."

How is this happening? Confusion surged within her mind and the rapidly forming image wavered.

"We'll figure that out later," Jon urged. "Focus on the images."

Isaac pulled out of her mouth, while Kyle and Jon stopped moving.

Their bodies were still joined with hers.

That had to be what triggered this vision.

She'd been lost in pleasure, her mind wide open.

Pushing all speculation to the back of her mind, Tara silenced her thoughts and waited for the vision to unfold.

Wavering light played across the roughhewn walls of a cave.

Water shimmered in the distance accompanied by the musical tinkle of a stream or waterfall.

A group of women huddled together for warmth and comfort.

Most had blankets wrapped around their shoulders.

Two armed lupine hybrids stood nearby, one stationed at each end of the throng.

A soft cry drew Tara's attention to the far side of the room.

One of the females lay between two of the hybrids.

She was naked and her legs were draped over the shoulders of one wolf.

The other played with her breasts, squeezing the small mounds and pinching her nipples.

It took a moment for Tara to realize the woman was Dawn.

She kept tossing her head back and forth, so her dark hair concealed most of her face.

Acting on instinct, Tara sank into Dawn's mind. She was confused and embarrassed that the other women were witnessing her seduction. But she wasn't afraid. This was not being forced on her. Tara had no idea how the scene had begun, but Dawn was currently lost in pleasure and eager for more.

Dawn was clearly in no position to help Tara, so she pulled back and refocused on the huddled women. Claire's bright red hair made her easy to spot. Tara felt her mates helping her as she attempted to contact her terrified friend.

Claire, it's Tara. Can you hear me?

Claire's head came up and she looked around, eyes owlishly round. "Tara?"

Don't say anything out loud. The wolves will hear you. Think and I should be able to hear you.

Claire paused for a deep breath and then asked, How are you doing this?

I'm not sure how long I can hold the link. We need to know how to find you. Where is the entrance to the cave?

Rather than describe what she'd seen, Claire pictured the location.

There was a dense cluster of trees on the left and a rocky outcropping on the right.

The shape was unique and familiar. Tara's pulse leapt and hope unfurled inside her.

She could lead her mates right to this. She'd passed the rock formation each time she'd walked back and forth between the feline village and her old campsite.

Juan triggered the opening with his hand and then we walked right through the rock formation , Claire explained. If you don't trigger it first, the rocks stay solid.

You're wonderful. We'll come for you as soon as we can.

Hurry. Juan ordered the others to leave us alone, but obviously not everyone is listening. She motioned toward Dawn, but the vision disintegrated before Tara could reassure her.

Reality refocused and Tara gasped. Jon started to separate their bodies, but she reached back and grasped his hip. "Don't leave me."

"Never," he assured her, but withdrew anyway.

Kyle sat up and lifted her off his cock, bringing her legs around so she sat sideways across his lap. "We would have done this earlier, but we were afraid it would disrupt the vision."

"Why am I having visions?" She shook her head. "I've never been psychic before."

"Our energy now saturates your mind," Isaac reminded. "You could develop all sorts of abilities."

Not sure how she felt about that, Tara pushed the possibility to the back of her mind. The only thing that mattered right now was rescuing the captives. "Claire showed me the entrance to the cave, but Juan opened it with a palm scanner. I can lead you there, but I have no idea how to get inside."

“If Juan can trigger the opening, so can Elias,” Jon said menacingly. “We’ll go for a walk first thing in the morning.”

“Do we have to wait until?—”

“Yes!” her mates said in unison.

“The vision rudely interrupted our claiming,” Isaac pointed out. “This is our wedding night. We’ll rescue the captives, but it can wait a few more hours.”

Jon leaned down and kissed Tara lightly on the mouth. “I’m going to go clean up. Don’t start round two without me.”

Tara nodded then blew out a ragged sigh. “Could you guys see what I saw?” Kyle and Isaac nodded. “Could you sense what I sensed?”

“The soul bond enables us to share everything,” Kyle reminded. “The only time information doesn’t flow freely is when one of us shields their mind.”

“You need to teach me how to do that,” she insisted with a smile. “You guys are not going to hide from me unless I can hide from you too.”

“That’s more than fair.” Kyle crawled to the middle of the bed, taking her with him. “Rest for a while. I can sense your exhaustion.”

She didn’t argue. Their joining and then the vision left her feeling drained and sleepy. “I just need a short nap then I’ll be ready for round two.”

Isaac pressed in behind her, stroking his hand down her side. “There’s no hurry. We have the rest of our lives for more pleasure. We need you clear-headed and filled with energy. Your first mission as part of Shadow Team One begins at first light.”

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By right and early the following morning, Isaac, Jon, and Kyle gathered around their new mate.

They were showered, dressed, and ready for their first challenge as a bonded coalition.

Sleeping in a tangle of warm bodies and sizzling energy left all four satisfied and happy.

Now it was time to rescue the human females from the wolves.

The first thing they needed was current information.

They needed to make sure nothing significant had changed.

“The pathway was established last night,” Isaac began.

They stood in the living room, Tara in the middle of the males.

“With our help, you should be able to contact Claire without the vision.”

Tara took a deep breath and nodded. “How do I do that?”

“Focus inward,” Kyle instructed, his voice quiet and warm. The specific skill they were hoping to develop in Tara fell under the tracker category, so Isaac let Kyle lead the exercise. “Picture Claire’s face with as much detail as you can manage.”

The soul bond allowed Isaac to see what Tara was picturing. Claire was an attractive redhead, with wide green eyes and an engaging smile.

“Now put her in the cave,” Kyle directed. “See her as she was last night. Again, detail is important.”

Tara pictured what she’d seen the night before; twenty-one females huddled together along the wall of a cave. She omitted Dawn’s seduction, which was fine. She needed to focus on Claire.

“Very good.” Kyle guided her, but couldn’t take over. He had no emotional connection with Claire. Only Tara knew her well enough to establish the link. “Now ease into her mind. If she senses you, reassure her like you did last night.”

Tara tried to connect with Claire, but the image didn’t change. She was seeing a memory, not a visual representation of the present. The males infused her attempt with energy, but their efforts had no effect on the scene. The image was locked, static.

“Why isn’t it working?” Tara cried. “I can’t get her to respond.”

Kyle stroked the side of her face and Tara opened her eyes. “All of these skills take practice, or we could be out of range. Don’t get discouraged. This was a long shot.”

Tara accepted defeat with a nod, but her disappointment was obvious.

“I’ll let the guardians know we’re ready to head out,” Jon said and stepped out onto the porch.

The day was cold and clear. It had finally stopped snowing. Kyle helped Tara with her coat and gloves. Temperatures in the forest were always colder than in the village.

The trees might block the wind, but they also filtered the sun.

Jon returned a short time later with six of Zion's guardians.

Isaac would have preferred to work with Diego's coalition, but they were up at the raptor village again.

He wasn't sure if they were still working out the details of the feline/raptor alliance or if their efforts had returned to building a communication system out of scavenged parts.

Isaac shook away the distraction and focused on the tasks ahead for his coalition. He looked at Tara. "Ready?"

She nodded and produced an uncertain smile. "This is my first mission. I'm an office worker. I never expected to be part of a paramilitary mission."

"You're our guide," Isaac stressed. "You'll point us in the right direction and then find somewhere safe to wait until the battle is over. You will not be anywhere near the fighting."

"Works for me," she assured him, her smile less shaky.

Isaac stepped out into their sunny front yard and looked around.

Jon was talking with the guardians. The small group was clearly anxious to begin.

Elias stood near them. Magnetic cuffs secured his wrists, and a metal collar had been closed around his throat.

Attached to the collar was an alloy leash.

One of the guardians grasped the handle.

It was a fitting outfit for a rabid dog. All he needed now was a muzzle.

More than ready to get underway, Isaac led the small group through the village. Tara estimated that it would take about twenty minutes to reach the rock formation. She walked beside him, but remained quiet and watchful.

Twenty additional soldiers fell into step behind them as they reached the perimeter wall. Tara tensed when she saw them and her gaze flew back to Isaac. “Do we really need so many? There were only four guards in the cave last night. I thought ten of us was overkill.”

“They’re backup,” he assured her. “They’ll be positioned in the forest outside the cave.”

Jon and Kyle walked behind them, keeping the coalition in a tight unit. “They’ll do nothing unless we call for them,” Jon explained. “But we want them nearby.”

“It’s better to have them and not need them than the other way around,” Kyle pointed out.

It only took fifteen minutes to reach the rock formation that Claire indicated the night before.

Isaac hadn’t recognized it during the vision, but seeing it in person made him shake his head.

He’d passed this thing hundreds of times and never dreamed that it was a secret entrance to a network of tunnels and caves.

He fiddled with the foliage for a moment before he found the hidden scanner pad. Motioning Elias forward, Isaac said, "Open it."

Elias glared at him. "Fuck you."

Isaac backhanded the wolf hard enough to snap his head to the side. "The scanner will work whether you're alive or dead. Zion advised us to chop off your hand and save ourselves the aggravation."

"That wouldn't have worked." The wolf smirked. "It will only scan living tissue. It's in your best interest to keep me alive."

With the help of two guardians, Isaac wrestled Elias forward and forced his hand onto the scanner.

A low buzzing filled the air and then the surface of the rock formation wavered.

Heart thudding in his chest, Isaac reached out and tried to touch the rocks.

His hand went right through. "Thank you, Claire," he muttered as he stepped through the hidden entrance.

He found a manual trigger on the inside of the door and motioned one of the guardians over.

"You're now our doorman. I'm not depending on that dog. "

"Understood."

"Take that piece of shit back to the lodge," Isaac told the guardian who held the end of Elias' leash. "If he gives you any trouble, shoot him. He has just outlived his

usefulness.”

With a gleeful smile the guard nodded and jerked on Elias’ leash. The wolf started walking back toward the feline village. Isaac watched for a moment, hoping Elias was as dejected as he appeared.

Next, Isaac turned to Tara and bent to kiss her mouth. “It’s time for you to go.”

She let out a sigh of frustration, but didn’t argue. “Do I have to go back to our cabin or can I wait here? I’m desperate to see Claire and the others.”

Isaac motioned another guardian forward. “Please escort my mate to the standby troops then return as quickly as possible.”

“Right away, sir.” His smile was friendly but respectful as he led Tara away.

Isaac sent a wave of affection across the soul bond, then minimized the connection. He didn’t shut Tara out completely, but allowing her to distract him would be dangerous.

Kyle and Jon joined him just inside the concealed entrance. The remaining guardians waited on the outside of the opening. “Give us a minute to scan the scene,” Isaac said to their leader. “I don’t like walking in blind.”

Kyle was a scout. His neuro-implants and genetic alterations were designed for seeking out and providing information. Isaac motioned Kyle toward the waiting tunnel. “What do you sense?”

Moving deeper into the passageway, Kyle held out his hands and opened his mind. Isaac could feel the effort and concentration Kyle put into the scan. Something must be off. He didn’t usually take this long.

“What’s wrong?” Jon asked, coming to the same conclusion.

“Their signals should be stronger,” Kyle warned. “We need to get down there.”

Kyle and Jon drew their weapons and hurried down the tunnel.

Isaac motioned for the guardians to join them then followed his teammates.

Their boots echoed on the stone floors, but stealth was no longer necessary.

Either the captives had been evacuated or—Isaac cut off the thought.

He would not even consider the alternative.

They rounded a corner and Isaac smelled blood. Jon and Kyle detected the scent at the same time and started running. The guardians kept pace.

“Should I call for backup?” the lead guardian asked.

“Not yet.” Unfortunately, Isaac didn’t think it would be necessary.

The tunnel widened, becoming a small cavern, then the cavern opened into a massive chamber. Eight wolves were scattered about the room, all severely wounded or dead. The female captives were nowhere in sight.

Using his integrated comm unit, Isaac summoned the medic waiting with the standby troops. “Medical emergency. Eight victims, but most are already dead.”

The medic acknowledged the page with an audible pulse, but didn’t bother speaking.

Isaac rushed over to the nearest wolf and pressed his fingers against the male’s throat.

Not only was there no pulse, but the body was ice cold.

How long ago had the attack happened? Was this wolf-on-wolf violence or had a group of exotics stolen the females?

Everyone knew that several hundred of the most severely mutated victims had been dumped on this planet along with everyone else, but no one had seen or heard from them in the years since their arrival.

Refusing to be derailed by the possibilities, Isaac moved on to the next wolf. He was also dead, the body cold. The third wolf Isaac came to had pulled himself to a sitting position against the wall. He was barely conscious as he pressed his wadded-up shirt against the seeping wound on his neck.

“Who did this?” Isaac asked, crouching down beside him.

“Riverside pack.” He motioned weakly toward one of the other wolves. “Is Juan dead?”

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Hearing the question, Jon crossed to the beta and pressed his fingers against the side of his throat. He looked at Isaac and shook his head.

“I’m sorry. Juan didn’t survive.” Despite the apology, Isaac felt no pity. Juan was almost as vile as Elias. He had murdered without remorse and tortured Akari to send a message to Zion. Isaac knew nothing about Riverside pack, but they had to be a better alternative than the exotics. Didn’t they?

The wolf coughed, eyes squeezing shut. “My pack is done. We don’t stand a chance without a leader.”

“Where’d they take the females?” Isaac asked coldly.

“Don’t know.” He coughed again, even more violently and blood sprayed from his mouth. “Not my... problem... anymore.” He slumped, chin dropping to his chest as his breath rattled out and then stopped.

With a deep sigh, Isaac stood and looked around. Two of the wolves clung to life. The rest were dead.

The medic did his best to save the final two wolves. Unfortunately, their wounds were too severe, and they had lost too much blood. Within an hour all eight wolves were dead.

Discouraged by the outcome, Isaac crossed to where Jon and Kyle stood. The wolf bodies were being loaded onto a hover cart, so they didn’t really need to be here. Still, Isaac couldn’t make himself leave.

“Scan the room. Can you tell when this happened?” What he really wanted to know was could they have prevented the attack if they’d left immediately after Tara’s vision.

“I’ve already tried,” Kyle told him. “I can’t pin down an exact time.”

“Then it’s a good thing Juan showed me what happened,” Jon offered with a secretive smile. “We couldn’t have made it in time even if we left immediately last night.”

“How did Juan show you anything?” Isaac objected. “He was already dead.”

“I was wrong. He was unconscious, not dead,” Jon told him.

“Juan arrived while they were playing with Dawn and he was furious. He’d left specific orders that the females were not to be touched.

Clearly, they were touching Dawn. The argument became a fight, and the fight turned into a coup.

Alex, the Riverside alpha, showed up with half his pack and we saw the results.

Riverside pack now rules the village, which means they control the captives. ”

“Did Juan tell you where they took the women?” Kyle asked hopefully.

Jon shook his head. “Juan didn’t tell me anything. I just watched his memory, which ended as Alex hurried the women out of the cave.”

“Damn it.” Isaac heaved another sigh. “I really wanted to do this for Tara. It would have been the perfect wedding gift.”

“They had to have taken them back to the lupine village,” Jon mused, rather than responding to Isaac’s complaint. “There are not that many places to hide a bunch of females.”

“We had no idea this place existed and it’s right under our noses,” Isaac pointed out. “There could be other places like this all over the planet.”

“Let’s go talk to Elias,” Kyle suggested. “If he finds out that Riverside pack just wrested power away from him, he might be willing to help us.”

“It’s worth a try,” Isaac conceded.

Most of the standby troops had already dispersed when Isaac reached the clearing where they had been waiting. “Where the hell is our mate?” he demanded of the first soldier they came to.

“She wanted to return to the village, so we escorted her back.”

Releasing his pent-up breath, Isaac said, “Very good, and thank you.” It wasn’t their job to babysit females, and he needed to stop taking out his frustration on everyone around him.

“You can just beat the shit out of Elias instead,” Jon suggested. “It might make you feel better.”

“I’ll beat the shit out of him after we question him,” Isaac responded with a halfhearted smile.

Knowing that cheering up Tara was going to take some time, Isaac, Jon, and Kyle went directly to the lodge.

Not surprisingly, two of the guardians were updating Zion when they arrived.

Zion looked nearly as frustrated as Isaac felt.

The pride leader finished his conversation with his guardians then approached Shadow Team One.

“Your mate will doubtlessly give you hell, so I won’t bother berating you,” Zion began. “Was there anything you could have done differently that would have changed the outcome?”

“I don’t believe so, sir,” Isaac told him stiffly. He felt defensive, but wasn’t sure why. Zion was being more understanding than usual. “Jon was able to memory share with Juan before he died. He witnessed the entire attack. It began moments after we learned how to find the entrance.”

Zion nodded. “The medic confirms your timeline. Most of the wolves had been dead for hours.”

“We would like to question Elias,” Kyle told Zion. “See if he might be willing to share dirt on his enemy.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath, but you’re welcome to try.”

Isaac led his team down to the detention level. Now that Babcock was dead, Elias was the sole occupant. Isaac nodded to the guards and one of them scanned open the door leading to the row of cells.

“Come to gloat?” Elias snarled. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Well, this is definitely not going to improve your mood,” Isaac predicted. He moved

to stand in front of Elias. The wolf sat on the edge of his bunk, hands folded in his lap. “Juan is dead along with the others on duty in the cave. Riverside pack is now in control of the lupine village.”

Clearly shocked by the news, Elias pushed to his feet and approached the energy barrier. “Are you sure Juan is dead? He...” Elias closed his eyes and his features went blank. He was likely trying to contact his beta telepathically. “How many did I lose?”

“There were eight in the cave, including Juan,” Isaac told him. “We have no idea what took place once they reached your village.”

“I knew Riverside was dissatisfied, but this is unbelievable.” He began pacing his cell. It only took three small steps to cover the space, so it wasn’t much of a trek. “I didn’t think Alex had the balls.”

“Well, he clearly does,” Jon sneered. “He just slaughtered eight of your men and kidnapped twenty-some potential mates. Do you have anything to say about that?”

“He’ll take them to his mountain stronghold,” Elias said, staring off into space. “The village will be too volatile until Riverside pack establishes their dominance.”

Elias sounded emotionless, empty. If Isaac didn’t know all the atrocities this bastard had committed, he might feel sorry for him. “How long will that take?”

“Weeks, maybe months.”

“Are the women safe until then?”

He looked at Isaac and scoffed. “Hardly. Alex will bury his cock in one of them before nightfall and the rest will go to the most trusted members of his pack.” He turned his head again, staring into nothingness.

“You think I’m a monster. I know that. But we’re all just trying to survive.

Good luck with Alex. He’s much more ruthless than I’ve ever been.

” Without warning, Elias transformed his fingers into claws and tore out his own throat.

Blood gushed from the gaping wound, and he was dead before he hit the floor.

Determined not to scream at her mates the moment they walked through the door, Tara anxiously paced their living room.

They were up at the lodge. The soul bond was nice that way.

Never again would she wonder where they were.

She could sense their locations. She could sense all sorts of other things too.

She knew that the women hadn’t been in the cave.

There had been some sort of uprising, and a bunch of wolves were dead.

She wasn’t sure if this meant the captives were in more danger or less.

All she knew was she wanted it to be over, and it wasn’t.

Claire was still a captive. Dawn had likely been claimed.

And the other human females were still in danger.

The door opened a few minutes later and her mates strode in. She took a deep breath,

meaning to unload on them. But all three looked stunned. “What happened? Why did you go to the lodge?”

Isaac walked right past her as if she wasn’t there and printed himself a double shot of whisky.

“Print a bottle,” Kyle suggested. “It’s going to take more than one drink to get that image out of my head.”

“What image?” she asked, her annoyance turning to concern. “What in the world just happened?”

Isaac tossed back the shot then printed a bottle before he spoke. “We went to question Elias about the other packs.”

“Riverside pack is trying to take control,” Kyle interjected. “The wolves are in the middle of a pack war.”

“Meaning the captives are in the middle of a pack war,” Tara said, her voice tremulous.

“Elias knew his days were numbered.” Isaac crossed the room and handed Jon the whisky bottle and a stack of tumblers. “He had nowhere left to turn.”

“He answered all Isaac’s questions, then ripped out his own throat,” Jon told her.

She gasped, then covered her mouth with her hand. What did you say to someone who’d just witnessed that? “I’m sorry,” she whispered helplessly.

Isaac looked at her and shook away his stupor. “We’ve seen far worse, love. It was just shocking to see someone do it to themselves.”

“We weren’t expecting him to react so... negatively.” Kyle shook his head and forced himself to smile, but his gaze was still deeply shadowed. “Give us a few minutes to process. We’ll be fine.”

Tara moved to the couch and sat down. She sat quietly and let her mates work through their emotions in their own way. Kyle grew talkative, but he refused to talk about work. Jon brooded. Isaac moved to the workstation and began researching the Riverside pack.

A couple of hours passed before they were ready for a meaningful conversation.

“Elias said Alex likely took them to his mountain stronghold,” Isaac began. “I think I’ve found it. I hate to delegate this to anyone, but it’s close to the raptor village. One of the birds could fly over there and check it out without the wolves thinking anything of it.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:40 am

“Zion has been trying to figure out how to give the raptors better access to potential mates ever since the alliance was finalized,” Jon mused.

“If we pass on this rescue to the birds, it will accomplish two things. They will prove that they’re serious about the alliance, and they will have direct access to human females. ”

“Direct access to court or to claim?” Tara thought of Dawn and shuddered. She had always seemed so sweet and innocent. Was she now the mate of two ruthless wolves? “Will my friends be allowed some say in who they bond with, or will the raptors simply take what they want?”

“We would never ally ourselves to rapists,” Isaac insisted. “A few of the raptors have flown down here so they can participate in the gatherings. I thought you knew that.”

Tara sighed. She wanted her friends to be safe more than anything, but it would have been nice to have them in the same village. The raptor village was so far away. And worse, the trek up there involved hours and hours of grueling hiking.

“I’ll see if one of the eagle brothers is available for a quick conversation,” Jon said as he walked over to the communications center.

Tara watched him intently, curious about their avian neighbors. She’d heard all sorts of stories about the eagle hybrids, had even witnessed one transform, but she’d never interacted with any of them.

Jon sat down at the workstation and activated the system with a series of voice

commands. After a long pause, the image of a dark-haired male was displayed on the wall in front of Jon.

“Your boss just left,” the raptor said. “Or weren’t you trying to contact Diego?”

“You’re the one I needed to speak with,” Jon told him. “Well, you or your brother.”

Jon had referred to them as the eagle brothers. It was likely he’d meant Raphael and Gabriel, co-leaders of the raptor village. Her mates had mentioned the brothers numerous times over the past few weeks, but Tara had no idea if this was Raphael or Gabriel.

“Gabe hasn’t left his lab for almost a month. What can I do for you?”

Okay, so this was Raphael, the more agreeable of the two.

There were golden streaks woven through his long, dark hair.

His features were angular, and his eyes were bright orange.

As if sensing her perusal, his gaze shifted over Jon’s left shoulder and connected with hers.

Raphael grinned, the expression making him look rakish.

“Well, hello, beautiful. Please tell me you’re a blood relation.”

She laughed, put at ease by his silliness. “Sorry. Jon is one of my mates.”

“She is not the reason I contacted you,” Jon growled out. “We need your help, but I don’t think you’ll mind this mission.”

Raphael dragged his gaze away from Tara as he asked, “What do you need?”

Jon told him about Riverside pack’s coup and the mountain stronghold. “We don’t know for a fact that the females are there, but it will be worth your while to find out.”

“How many females do the wolves have?” Raphael asked, eyes narrowed speculatively.

“Twenty-two,” Jon admitted with obvious reluctance. “We started with three hundred, but fifty-one have been claimed. Twenty-two is roughly ten percent of the remaining females.”

“Meaning we wouldn’t be able to keep them all?” Raphael crossed his arms over his chest and his expression hardened.

Tara moved closer to the workstation, not wanting the deal to fall apart. The raptors were in the best position to quickly rescue her friends. She couldn’t let anything disrupt this negotiation, and that included Jon’s temper.

“We’ll have to work out the details once the females are safe,” Jon insisted, dark eyes reflecting his frustration. “Ten percent is a big number. I’m not sure Zion is willing to be that generous.”

“You expect us to risk our lives for your females? I’m not sure I’m that generous.” Raphael sounded less enthusiastic than Tara had hoped he would.

“You would keep some of the females. I’m just not sure how we would divide them.”

“How about letting the females decide?” Tara suggested firmly. “We’ll give your raptors a month to convince the females to stay, or you’ll agree to escort them back to the feline village.”

Jon shot her an annoyed look, but didn't argue.

Raphael uncrossed his arms and released a sigh. "This is still a lot to expect."

"I don't 'expect' anything," Jon insisted.

"I'm asking you to do a flyover and assess the situation.

From there, everything is up to you. You can provide us with accurate information, and we'll organize another rescue, or you can rescue the females yourself.

The location of your village has made courting a challenge.

This could be the solution to that complication. "

Raphael stroked his chin, gaze narrowed thoughtfully. "Gabriel will have to sanction an attack, but I can do the flyover. I'll let you know what we've decided once I find out what we're dealing with." Without giving Jon the opportunity to respond, he ended the comm.

"They'll take over the rescue," Isaac predicted. "Raphael wants a mate badly."

"Bad enough to defy his brother?" Kyle wanted to know. "Gabriel has worked hard to keep the birds out of our conflicts with the wolves. He has always insisted that the fighting has nothing to do with his village."

"All that changed with the alliance," Jon reminded.

"Does Gabriel see it that way?" Kyle persisted.

Jon shrugged as he deactivated the comm unit and stood up.

“Even if all Raphael does is the flyover, we’re ahead of where we are right now.

I’m hoping he can convince Gabe to do more.

The logistics of an attack are nearly impossible for us.

It makes much more sense to let them do it.

Besides, Zion’s new rules are going to sideline us no matter what the raptors do. ”

“Zion’s new rules?” Tara asked.

“Zion has decided that any coalition who claims a female cannot be directly involved in battle. We can gather intel and interrogate prisoners, but the actual fighting must be left to unmated soldiers.”

Tara tried to fight back her smile, but failed. “I like this new rule.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “We figured you would. Zion insists that mates, and eventually offspring, benefit the entire village. So any coalition that has succeeded in claiming a mate cannot be put at risk.”

“Will this apply to Lexie’s mates? They are part of Zion’s private guard.”

“Kane is the one who told us. He has accepted it because he has no choice, but he’s not any happier about it than we are.”

Tara tensed and searched their emotions, but they were so conflicted right now that she wasn’t sure what they were feeling. “If you had known about this yesterday, would you have claimed me?”

“God, yes,” Jon insisted.

“We don’t regret claiming you,” Kyle stressed from beside the window. “This was just another shock in a day full of them.”

Isaac walked to where she sat and drew her to her feet.

He brushed the hair back from her face, then traced her lips with his thumb.

“Today was a very bad day,” he admitted, then he opened his mind and let her feel his frustration, his sense of failure.

“I wanted to come out of that cave with my arm around your friend just to see the joy in your eyes. Instead, we found eight dead wolves and no sign of the females. Then we got back to the village and Elias killed himself. We were still reeling from that when we learned about our demotion. It’s been one hit after another all day. ”

“I’m sorry,” she said sincerely. “That’s a lot for anyone.”

He let out a heavy sigh and lowered his arms to his sides. “It’s never going to be easy to hear that you’re no longer a warrior, no longer allowed to fight for those you love.”

Her brows arched at that. “There is no way Zion will ever prevent you from protecting those you love. He just doesn’t want you risking your life unnecessarily.” Had she just defended Zion? This was a strange day indeed.

Isaac rewarded her with a lopsided grin. “You have to let me moan and groan for at least a day. Zion wants to take away my man card.”

The claim made her laugh as she boldly pressed her hand against the front of his pants. “You still feel like a man to me.”

He growled and rubbed against her hand. “You’re playing with fire, little girl.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m in the mood to get burned.” She held out her other hand toward Jon as she continued to stroke Isaac. “Ready to help us build a fire?”

“Always,” he promised as he stood up and took her hand.

“What about you, Kyle?” She licked her lips and smiled as he turned from the window. “We were interrupted last night. I’d like to see how hot we can make each other when we have an entire day to ourselves.”

Kyle closed the distance between them and kissed her mouth. “An entire day and night,” he countered. “I’m not answering any form of comm until tomorrow morning.”

“I love the sound of that.” Isaac picked her up and headed for the bedroom as Tara’s laughter, and the promised pleasure, finally lifted the gloom.

The End