



Werewolves Don't Howl (Singsong City #6)

Author: *Juliann Whicker*

Category: Fantasy

Description: One mystery, one romance, and a kitten.

In the heart of Singsong City, a gnome-elven reporter keeps her head down so that her secret werewolf identity isn't revealed. But when the monster who infected her starts leaving behind a trail of dead or mutated girls, she'll need to face her past and put on her investigative reporter hat, however much it disturbs the local pack and her own peace of mind. With the help of an impossible ally, she must unravel the mysteries of her own past before they consume her future. Will she find a murderer and a happy ending, or will the monster under her skin devour everything she loves?

Werewolves Don't Howl is the sixth book in the Singsong City series. It is a standalone paranormal romantic comedy featuring elves, werewolves, witches, vampires, and adorable goblins. It is packed with puns, battles, and a sweet, slow burn romance between a secret elven assassin and the reporter who hates him. Also sushi.

Total Pages (Source): 22

Chapter One

The lanterns bobbed overhead like tipsy dancers caught in the balmy breeze, the scent of hyacinth heavy in the air, promising a delightful evening full of chatter, laughter, and best of all, scandalous gossip. Leticia Marin's annual garden party was a veritable whirlwind of socialites, each one trying to outshine the other with their designer outfits and sharp tongues. It was even more crowded this year, thanks to the buzz surrounding Singsong's newest sensation: Senator Omar Silverton, the young, handsome, charmingly eligible bachelor who had recently moved to Singsong City.

As I glided through the throngs of guests, I kept out a watchful eye for him. He was already a celebrity, and who wouldn't want a front-row seat to a little political drama, particularly if it made good copy for my next article? Silverton was well-known as a senator, but in Singsong, he was the Librarian, Elizabeth Montaine's lawyer, and everyone who was anyone wanted an in with that elusive female.

Her father, Senator Stephen Montaine, had left a legacy by uniting the largest sects in the country, namely the Gray Society and the HOSTs, sealing his work with his mysterious death. Everyone wanted to know what the link was between the legend, Senator Montaine, and the newcomer, Senator Silverton. He had a reputation for 'getting things done,' but no one was sure how high his connections went, or what his real motives were, politically or personally. It was my business to find out whatever I could for the good of society. It wouldn't hurt my own career, either. Amidst the clinking glasses and fluttering silk, tonight promised not just pretty flowers, but unfiltered conversations and possibly a few revelations worth their weight in gold.

"Well, Delphi?" Leticia cried, looping my arm in hers and beaming at me, her love of

tulips overcoming her usual reserved poise.

I smiled at Leticia, the older matron of Singsong society in her lilac gown. “Your tulips are even lovelier than they were last year. How do you do it?”

She wagged a finger at me. “Now, Delphi, I can’t tell you my secrets to spill across the pages of Singer’s society section.”

She honestly thought that bulb fertilizer would make scintillating news. Perhaps in Elven circles. “You’ve caught me. It’s actually my mother who keeps pestering me for the deep, dark secrets of your horticultural genius. You see she...”

Leticia grabbed my arm and peered over my shoulder, so I half-turned, following her gaze.

“He really came. Do you think he’s actually interested in flowers, or is he being a politician?”

Senator Silverton looked like moonlight spilled from an ink bottle, shimmering black hair, fair skin, handsome the way only a pure elf could be, otherworldly, but with a smile so warm and inviting, he was almost approachable. Almost. There was something about the breadth of his shoulders that made one pause.

“And he came with Forsythia? They make a stunning couple. I think that she’s almost a pureblood elf. Only one of her parents has human blood, nothing else to muddy the waters. Her hair is almost as light as his is dark.”

I flinched at the use of ‘muddy the waters’ in regard to human blood. As a half-gnome, half-elf, I was probably too sensitive to off-hand comments about the supposed purity of one’s blood. She was right in that they did make a handsome couple, her silvery blonde hair contrasting beautifully with his raven locks. Seeing

them together set my teeth on edge for some reason, maybe because Forsythia's usual air of superiority was heightened as she clung to the arm of a man who was more than her equal. Maybe it was because they were so tall, and my gnome heritage would make me have to look up at both of them, literally, resulting in an extreme neck pain. I'd have to go to the chiropractor after I interviewed him.

I returned my focus to my hostess. "If anyone is here for gossip instead of tulips, they'll be a convert after your garden party. What was your inspiration for the garden maze and those charming animal sculptures?" I wasn't going to spend my entire evening longing for a beautiful man that was completely out of my orbit.

"Oh, well," she said, distracted by the newcomers until she refocused on my question. "The zoo, of course. Someone proposed a fundraiser, an animal-themed masked ball. I thought I'd warm society up with a little maze. Do you like it? It's not a traditional sculpture garden—I did have to work with last-minute limitations, after all—but I believe it turned out quite charming."

I nodded appreciatively. "Charming doesn't begin to describe it. It's such a breath of fresh air, and such a worthy cause. Who is planning the masked ball?"

She spoke in a low voice, leaning towards me while her blue eyes sparkled. "I suppose it won't remain a secret for long, considering you're such good friends with Zephin Clay. He'll host it at the zoo, of course. Can you see it? Animal masks dotted across the lush sloping lawns around the promenade, the picturesque bridges, provided they hold up for the evening, of course." She sighed heavily. That part of the zoo was in dire need of rehabilitation. I'd written an article about it just last month.

My father's friend was a very proper elf, who, as far as I could remember, hadn't ever thrown a ball of any kind, much less an animal themed masquerade. "Mr. Clay is hosting that kind of soiree? I thought he preferred dinner and conversation, but if he

takes this on, it's bound to be unforgettable." I couldn't imagine the media mogul putting on an elephant mask, but he knew how to innovate when it was important to his business. He owned the paper, *Singer*, that paid my bills, so what was good for his business was good for me.

She laughed and shook her head in agreement. "True enough. It was your article, I believe, that gave him the idea. You do write persuasively. Do you think you'll cover more serious topics?"

I shook my head, feeling embarrassed. "I was the only one who had time for the article, but I'm just a society reporter."

Just then, Forsythia glided up to us, dazzling as ever, and a handsome Elven prince—er, senator—firmly attached to her side.

"Leticia, can I introduce you to my friend?" Forsythia said, looking up at her prize through her thick lashes. He was tall enough that even the tall pureblood elf girl had to look up at him, and she was making the most of it.

I was definitely going to strain my neck as the tall man came closer, smelling of woods at night and a hint of something spicy that made me want to lean closer. I hadn't seen him since the Librarian's wedding to the Scholar. I hadn't actually spoken to the Senator, but I couldn't help watching him then and now. I shook myself when I realized I was staring again at the high cheekbones, perfectly straight nose, and firm mouth. Did he notice me staring? What was one mousy working-class girl in a sea of dazzling elites? He wouldn't look at me twice, and everyone was staring at the stunning senator. Also, it was my job. Why did I feel so self-conscious around him? So what if he was clearly with Forsythia, who was everything an ambitious senator would want? I wasn't in the market for a relationship, so why would I feel that tinge of jealousy when I looked at them?

I let myself get pushed away from Leticia and the shining couple by the eager guests who surrounded him, hungry for an introduction.

I should press in like a good reporter, get my scoop and care more about my article than looking like an idiot, but I had other regular society favorites that I needed to check in with, to hear their thoughts on Leticia's garden, and perhaps spread the rumor of a masked ball at the zoo, mysterious host unknown.

I did my part, mingling, taking notes on a napkin of names and dates as I got the latest civilized gossip. I also wrote down notes of the night's scent, the mood of the evening, the way the lanterns made the tulips look more velvety, while the scent of daffodil and hyacinth became absolutely intoxicating.

"Delphi, you're positively elusive this evening," Forsythia said, catching my arm and swinging me around.

I looked at the blonde in surprise, then at the tall, muscular elf who was looking at me with a slightly amused expression. He was very well-muscled if the way he wore his tuxedo was any indication. Maybe he padded it. If so, they were very good pads, in just the right place to speak to my love of brawny brute strength. Was my mouth watering? He smelled even better this close, but when I saw his eyes in detail, I forgot about everything else. Violet. Various shades of purple lined by lush lashes made him almost too pretty. Violets were my favorite flower, and I loved a lot of flowers. Carnations. That was the underlying spice I'd smelled earlier. He wasn't wearing a carnation, so why did he smell like one? The wolf in the back of my brain whined and wanted to taste him to unravel the mystery of whether he was violets or carnations.

I gave him a quick smile and forced my attention back to Forsythia, my old friend from college. Friend? How could I be friends with someone who hated who I was under my skin? Every time she railed against werewolves, I found our friendship shriveling smaller and smaller. "Forsythia. It's so good to see you, and you've

managed to convince the senator to come.” I gave her a warm hug. She was as cool as an elf should be, but put up with my affectionate gnome ways. Maybe I should stop hugging her. There were so few people I touched anymore, and I was half gnome. Hugging is practically religion to my mother’s family.

She laid a hand on his chest, possessive and pleased with her catch. “Yes, this is Silverton. You should interview him about his political leanings. Maybe find out what he’s doing in Singsong City. You got a house here near Lafayette, didn’t you?” she asked, turning to him with a demure yet flirty smile.

He nodded at her, but then he focused on me and I could feel my neck getting stiff. He was dangerously attractive from afar, but close up he was absolutely lethal. And he knew it. If I knew anything about people, Senator Silverton used his looks to unbalance those around him, to get them to put down their guard. It wasn’t vanity that had him brushing his hair to a glowing sheen, but manipulation. Unless I was wrong. That happened more often than I liked.

“Are you hoping to do a piece on me?” he asked, all cold politeness.

I smiled and shook my head. “I’m just a society reporter, not a political journalist covering policies and elections. I’m sure you’d rather interview with Bertran or Bernice, or one of the national reporters.”

He humphed, and we both stared at him. For an elf, that was incredibly rude. Elves didn’t make sounds. They spoke clearly, eloquently, and always politely. His voice was a low rumble of dismissiveness. “That’s right. You’re only a fluff writer. Best to leave the serious writing to a serious journalist.”

I stared at him, blinking while my heart beat faster and my cheeks flushed with embarrassment. That was an insult. Even for someone who wasn’t an elf with their strict code of conduct, it would be rude. “I beg your pardon?” Surely he’d misspoken.

He was a politician and an elf. Whatever he said was intentional, and no politician would bother to insult an insignificant society reporter.

He gave me a charming smile. Now he'd say something that smoothed my feathers and made me vote for him. "You'd rather feed the egos of the self-important nonessential instead of focusing your efforts on making an actual difference in the world." His voice was smooth, the tone everything polite and pleasant, but the words were as sharp as a slap, leaving me reeling.

The senator had insulted me. Twice. About my job. Was he going to mock me for being short, too?

I laughed and shrugged helplessly. "At least I don't walk around making people crane their necks. It must be hard to be so high and mightily above everyone around you."

Forsythia gasped, and I stiffened up. I'd insulted him back. On a job when my livelihood depended on me being notoriously pleasant and slightly bumbling. Harmless. That's what I was. I didn't have four-inch fangs hiding beneath my skin that could easily rip out Forsythia and the Senator's throats. Nope. I forced another laugh, this time sounding slightly hysterical. The senator's eyes gleamed, and his brow flicked, showing an emotion that the rest of his body hid with perfect indifference.

Forsythia laughed melodiously and put a hand on his arm. "I think I see someone else you'd like to meet."

He smiled at her warmly. "You are very considerate to introduce me to all of your lovely friends and acquaintances."

They walked away, me still standing there, stunned by the words that had come out of such a pretty face and the fact that I'd insulted him in return. If Forsythia hadn't

dragged him away, I might have kicked his shins. I looked down at my red heels that went so well with my simple crimson sheath dress. No, this wasn't a kicking-shins outfit. Not that they had those. Where were my knitting needles when I needed them? I had an image of stabbing the perfectly gorgeous elf through his tuxedo. Bad Delphi. Knitting wasn't for stabbing, but for keeping me from breaking out the wolf and dominating the frustratingly vain populace it was my job to flatter.

I was still standing there, watching the Senator and Forsythia mingle with apparent ease when someone stepped behind me and held a drink over my shoulder, vanilla with a touch of rose. How appropriate for a garden party. The scent of old papers and chlorophyll was distinctly my father's old friend.

"You met the senator. What do you think of him?" His voice was elegant, arch, slightly cynical.

I turned around to smile at my boss's boss, Zephin Clay, the media mogul who'd helped me get a job almost thirteen years ago when I'd been so desperate to regain some humanity. He was tall, as all elves are, with silver eyes and hair that he'd no doubt been born with. His face was more angular than the senator's, and there was something fox-like about him. Clever. Amused at the foolishness of others.

"Mr. Clay," I said, taking the drink with a genuine smile. "Have you seen the maze? I thought it might be of particular interest to you." I raised a brow to suggest that I knew his secrets.

He smiled and took my arm, leading me in the direction of the maze, away from the main party. He was another extremely handsome elf, but old enough that he looked ageless instead of young, like the senator. "Miss Era, are we on such formal terms?" His eyes twinkled, and I let my smile warm up as I focused on my father's old friend instead of watching Senator Silverton's progress through the garden.

“Mr. Clay, as we both know, there’s no such thing as too much formality between elves.”

“But are you an elf?”

I raised a brow. “Just because I’m short doesn’t mean that I’m not elf enough to appreciate the use of honorifics. What do you think of them?” I asked, nodding at the two fifteen-foot metal lions that stretched up as if to battle each other, paws and claws extended.

“You spoke to Lady Leticia,” he said drily as we passed beneath the frozen drama. “Do you think a masked ball would be ridiculous?”

“If you hosted, how could it be anything other than tastefully brilliant?”

“You don’t think me too dull to put on such an extravaganza, Miss Era?”

“Dull? Zephin Clay the great innovator? You must be joking.”

He smiled slightly. “You prefer to speak about a maze rather than the exciting young senator? I’m intrigued. He didn’t catch your eye? I find that hard to believe.”

“He spoke more bluntly than I expected from a politician or an elf. That’s all.”

His eyes shone with interest. “Did he? Shall I refuse him entrance to the ball? That’ll show some Texan upstart that he can’t insult our dear Delphi and get away with it.”

I shook my head. “He didn’t insult me. Nothing like that. He just talked about journalism in general. I don’t believe he’s a fan,” I said softly.

“Then he insulted both of us. I’ll certainly ban him from my ball.”

“I’m sure if that’s the case, you were already looking for a reason to blacklist him. What did he do?” I asked, genuinely curious.

He pursed his lips slightly before he shrugged. “It’s his assistant that’s so irritating. He’s a goblin, but so persuasive and clever, you’d think he was a siren, stealing away your soul. I’ve always wanted to do a good exposé on the senator, and have tried with multiple channels, but it’s always the same dull, carefully rehearsed story that doesn’t dig into who he really is, or what he really wants. I don’t mind a corrupt politician. I know what to do with that, but I have no idea if he is or not, or what his actual agenda is.” He narrowed his eyes as he studied me. “If he was honest with you...”

I held up my hands and backed away. “Writing a political exposé is the last thing I want to do. He’s right. I’m a fluff writer, and that’s how I want to stay.”

“A fluff writer?” He raised a dark brow and then frowned. “That’s all he said? That’s not enough to really draw any conclusions from. You should have argued, accused him of something, so he had to defend himself, to break down his natural reticence.”

“Or I could talk to you about your masked ball. When are you thinking of hosting it?”

He gave me a slight frown, considering if he wanted to push the subject of the senator. “In the summer, after Bram’s wedding. What will you go as?” he asked, stopping to look at a group of sculptures, a large fox chasing three rabbits with a bear in the background. “You ran away from him like a rabbit.”

“A bunny? That would be adorable.” I made a point of looking as adorable as possible, but it helped that I really didn’t like conflict.

“Or a bear. They’re cuddly. Gnomes are notoriously cuddly,” he said, eyes traveling over me the way males did from time to time. Only no, of course an elf wasn’t interested in curves, particularly an old friend of my father’s. He was considering

what animal I most closely resembled. All the same, being looked at so appraisingly reminded me of something. He'd looked at me like that before, a very, very long time ago, commenting on my having grown up to be a beauty. Oh! That's right, it was at the college dance fifteen years ago, the night I was infected by a werewolf I never saw, heard, smelled, or felt. My heart twisted at the memory, when I'd been so innocent and full of hopes and dreams.

I held onto my smile, even though it felt brittle. "I think I'd rather go as something exotic, like an alpaca." Alpaca yarn was so fun to knit.

He almost laughed, but he remained his distinguished air, only letting his eyes smile. "An alpaca? Oh, yes, I can see how elegant this party will be."

I slipped my arm in his, looking up at him. "I promise I'll be a very elegant alpaca. You really should do it. The zoo is on its last legs and is one of the original landmarks of Singsong City since the World's Fair a hundred years ago. It needs strong donors, or it can't continue to exist at all, much less be free to those who are less fortunate."

His eyes shifted from amused to intent, like he'd heard of a new company he wanted to purchase to expand his domain. "Hm. Well, if you promise to strive for elegance, I suppose I'll have to do it."

We turned a corner and almost walked into the senator where he was standing in the middle of the shadowy path, like he was waiting for us. His eyes looked indigo in this light.

"Are you lost?" I asked, then felt idiotic. Senator Silverton was an elf. Elves had an impeccable sense of direction.

He smiled slightly while his violet eyes glimmered. "That's right. Miss Era, do you

mind giving me a tour of the maze? I'm afraid that I'm in grave need of assistance."

I looked up at Mr. Clay for a moment and then at the senator, who was very clearly in-control and capable of finding his way out of the small garden maze. He must have returned to apologize to me for his incredible rudeness earlier. Of course he was.

I relaxed and gave Mr. Clay a small smile. "It seems I am needed. I'll try to shake him down for something juicy," I added in a loud whisper so the senator would hear.

Clay's smile to Silverton was civil, but only barely. "Of course. I need to speak to Leticia about her stunning maze, anyway." He gave me a slight wink, then took my hand, placed it on Silverton's, and strode off. Because he thought I could crack the incredibly tough shell of the senator if his best reporters couldn't do it.

I sighed and shook my head, watching Zephin Clay become just another shadow among the sculptures.

"We're close to the African sculpture garden, if you'd like to start there," I said politely, looking up at him to find him watching the shadows where Zephin Clay had gone.

Senator Silverton turned a warm smile on me, and my knees went weak. Elves shouldn't seem warm, or you'd accidentally think they liked hugs.

"He left you with me rather abruptly. I hope he's not ill." His voice was so decadent and delicious that I leaned closer, inhaling that delicious scent of night woods and carnations. I brushed his chest with mine when I realized that we were standing in a shadowy corner of Leticia's garden, staring at each other.

I pulled away and turned to point at the nearest statue. "That's a rhinoceros." A spotlight shone on it, outlining the silhouette of the creature who was on two back

legs, front legs ready to rip you in pieces.

“Do rhinos stand on their hind legs? I wasn’t aware. You know Mr. Clay well?”

I glanced up at Silverton. And up, and up. He would be a warlord in a different world. Perhaps he wasn’t all elf, like me. I smiled up at the imposing figure, imagining a secret ogre heritage in the scheming politician. “Well enough to know that the only reason he left me with you is that he’s hoping that your previous lack of guarded diplomacy will be repeated, ending in a salacious exposé on the popular senator. He isn’t aware that you came here to apologize.” I smiled a forgiving smile, showing him that I didn’t hold his words against him, but he only studied the rhinoceros statue.

“I’m not going to apologize,” he finally said, turning to face me, expression cool, calculating. “How can you live such a miniscule life?”

Miniscule? I stared at him, completely bewildered. I’d given him a perfect opportunity to be polite and he turned it down? Impossible! “Wait, you didn’t come to find me in the hopes of apologizing, but instead to insult me further?”

He narrowed his eyes slightly, still looking at me too intently, peering into my soul and finding it lacking. “I read your article, the one you wrote after the library incident. Your research was stellar, the writing clear and persuasive. You made people think about old things in new ways by reframing the story. And now you’re back to reporting on garden parties.” He gestured at the statue before he took a step closer and turned those disturbing violet eyes on me. “Perhaps someone’s dress won’t be hand-embroidered. The shock. Or perhaps someone will wrinkle their nose in distaste at the champagne. The horror.” He wrinkled his perfect nose in a perfect imitation of Mr. Braxley’s face earlier when he’d claimed his champagne was too stale.

Was the senator joking? Elves didn’t joke. At least not often. He really must have a

strain of something else that was rude and blunt. Ogre was definitely a possibility with those broad shoulders. Forsythia would be so disappointed, but I have to admit, I found him slightly more interesting.

I studied him openly in return. His lips were taut, braced for my reaction. He was trying to provoke me. “Embroidery is an art, but shock and horror are what I strive to avoid.”

He nodded, looking at me like he could see me in the dark as easily as I could see him. “Yes, I realize that, but your talents are wasted because of your aversion to reality. I hate waste, and I hate avoiding necessary unpleasantness for the sake of denial.”

I blinked at him, my mouth opening and closing while I struggled to know exactly what to say in return to his blunt honesty. Why would he want me to know why he was rude to me? Did he actually think that would influence my career? “And yet, it’s none of your business what I do with my life, or what kind of news I write.”

His lips curled with the slightest sneer. “What do you write? It’s not news.”

If I hadn’t grown up with an elf, I wouldn’t find his expression so insulting. If he kept this up, I really would kick him in the shins. “It’s called good news. Maybe you’ve heard of it. Politics and most other things are bad news. Why not focus on the good?”

“It’s the gnome in you. Must be, because it’s not the elf. If you don’t look at the evil, it will spread unchecked.”

I answered sweetly, “And if you don’t focus on the good, there may as well not be any. You can go out and fight your battles while I stay home and protect what’s good by appreciating it. When you’re broken from your battle against an unconquerable foe, there’s something to come home to.”

He stared at me, almost shocked. “You wish to make a home for a warrior?”

I blinked up at him, for a moment side-tracked. I didn’t date, not when intimacy would reveal all my secrets. I certainly didn’t see marriage in my future. Talking about romance with the senator was surreal. Elves wouldn’t talk about marriage or intimacy until after dating for decades. I hurriedly backpedaled. “Is that what it sounded like? I’m a respectable society journalist. I like what I write, and I like the people I work for. I have a small life, that’s true, but it’s what I want. Just because I don’t want to go out and keep evil from spreading unchecked doesn’t mean my life goals are less valid than yours, Mr. Youngest-Senator-from-Texas-who-probably-knew-what-he-wanted-by-age-five. Live a little.” I tugged on his tie, making it slightly askew. Yes, it was offensive to invade an elf’s space, but he clearly had no problem with offensiveness.

“Live a little?” he asked, tilting his head, bemused, leaving his tie crooked.

“Yes. Live more and judge less. If you’re not happy with the way I work, then be the journalist you think I should be. I have no interest in following anyone else’s dictates, particularly a complete stranger I only just met and hope to never see again.” I winced once the unforgivably rude words were out of my mouth, but he only nodded once.

“You’re happy then? Not simply avoiding unpleasantness because of lingering fear?” His eyes were intense for a moment before he glanced around as we walked through the maze.

“I’m not avoiding negativity, I’m focusing on positivity. Haven’t you ever met a gnome before?”

“But you aren’t just a gnome.”

How offensive. There was nothing ‘just,’ about being a gnome. “No, I’m not just anything. Like elves aren’t just placid rocks in the stream of life, letting everything flow over them. You change currents, but you’re just an elf. Or are you?” It was so rude to suggest that he was part something less respectable, but I couldn’t seem to help myself.

He smiled slightly. “You can see my nature even though you refuse to do an exposé on me. Your talents are wasted.”

That was practically a confession! But he was right. I wasn’t going to expose the senator, not when I understood exactly what it was like to hide who I was beneath a sweet and docile exterior. I pointed at him. “Nothing is ever wasted when there is good intention. You think that if something isn’t big and loud, it isn’t valuable? That’s myopic. You can’t see the trees for the forest.”

He leaned closer, the scent of him rushing over me like a storm. “And you can see anything if you care to look, but have no interest in it.” He bowed low, and I realized we’d reached the two warring lions without me realizing that we were walking so quickly.

He said, “It has been a pleasure, Miss Era. Forgive me for my unpleasant company. I am pleased with your life choices if you are pleased with them. Would you like me to escort you back to the party? I’m afraid I have some paperwork I need to take care of and would rather leave by a side exit if you don’t require my company.”

I squinted at him while I studied his strangely relaxed shoulders. That’s where he kept his stress, and now he was much less stressed than at the beginning of the party. What was he really doing here? Not that I cared. I made a point not to get involved with messes. He’d come to find me in the maze. That meant that he was trying to get me involved with the messes I liked to avoid. Was he just perverse like that? He needed to find the one reporter in the world who didn’t want to dig into his psyche

and expose him to the world?

I spoke slowly. “You specifically tried to rile me up. Are you looking for a writer to add to your crew? That’s the only thing that explains it. You do everything with intention.” And he’d intended to insult me and offend me from the very first moment we’d been introduced. Being part ogre didn’t explain it, not when he’d made a point to keep his dark side covered, particularly in front of the media.

His smile seemed genuine, violet eyes twinkling. “I’ll find my own way out then. It’s been a pleasure.” He bowed even lower and strode off, leaving me with the lions and the maze behind me.

Chapter Two

“Can you cover the game for me?” Bertram the Bashful asked on a Friday afternoon a week after the garden party. It was an ironic nickname. There wasn’t anything shy about the sports reporter.

He was leaning on my desk, which was positioned near the water dispenser, the restrooms in the middle of the large office full of busy reporters, and Clara, who was calling up advertisers.

Loren frowned at Bert and shook her head. “Send her downtown and she’s likely to get mugged again.”

I smiled back at the reporter who covered crime and conspiracies. She’d love to get mugged. She’d get a story and throw down the mugger to add to her reputation as serious girl-boss. Woman-boss. There was nothing girly about the human with elf blood who worked out at the gym while Bert played sports.

I said, “I gave Bingo cookies. That wasn’t a mugging. And Bert, we’re talking baseball, yes?”

He nodded and ran a hand through his ashy hair. “Melinda needs me to take the twins to gymnastics because...”

“Tax season,” I answered for him. His wife was an accountant. Every April was the same story, which was unfortunate timing. At least I liked baseball, and most of the team members liked giving interviews to me as much as to Bert. The werewolves

were particularly flirty, but none of them had pushed anything, thanks to Max, the alpha of Singsong City, who kept all but the youngest wolves from losing control.

I was technically a werewolf, but it wasn't common knowledge. Thank heavens that werewolves kept things quiet. I'd lose my job if Nanette, the editor-in-chief, knew that I'd been infected, but that wasn't what kept me quiet about it. No, it was my parents and what their reaction would be.

Gnomes weren't supposed to be able to turn. If they got infected, they died. I'd been 'lucky,' transitioning after two months of the most miserable anguish imaginable. Not that I bothered to imagine anguish. Most werewolves transitioned in less than two days. I was so special to have survived. For the next two years, I'd stalked a vile wolf that I suspected of turning me. I ripped him and his pack apart, picking them off one by one, then let the police find me with the other girls he'd caged, trying to turn them into werewolves so he could mate them to his pack and raise an army.

In the end, it turned out that he wasn't the monster who turned me. That was a huge disappointment, working so hard to get my vengeance only to realize in the end that I'd had the wrong target. It hit the point home that I'm not meant for vengeance or killing, so I let go of the idea of finding the monster who ruined my life, and focused on having a life worth living. It was the best decision of my life. At any rate, my parents were informed by Zephin Clay that the werewolves had kidnapped me, so they hate werewolves with more than a passion. My mom still didn't understand why I'd choose to live in Singsong City when it has one of the largest packs in the world who might infect me to death. It's the only thing that could have kept her from visiting over the last decade she could have spent nagging me about getting married and having children. So I guess there were some perks.

If I were a hard-nosed reporter determined to uncover the truth, I'd be tracking down every new case of werewolf infection to find the monster who infected me as well as the identity of the psychopath who had kept me alive until I could transition, but I

wasn't, and I didn't. Two years of my life was enough. I focused on the positive, the fluff as the diabolically handsome senator had said so bluntly, and I had no interest in changing.

Later that afternoon, the baseball game was enjoyable enough. I took my knitting project to the stands to work on. The sweater was for my brother's fiancé, knitted in a very fine lace pattern and spelled with gnomish coziness and Elven protection runes. I'd promised to go to the wedding, even though I'd managed to avoid most of our family get-togethers for the last thirteen years. I had to bring a present that would show how much I cared. Nothing said care like hand knitting. Hopefully, she agreed. She was a full-blooded gnome and the finest cheese-maker in the world if my brother's rhapsodic tales of brie could be trusted. She was also a nurse at the local hospital where he worked as a therapist. They sounded perfect for each other, and I was so happy that he'd found a way to his happily ever after. I just hoped that no one smelled the werewolf in me while I was there.

I cheered with the crowd when Piney the werewolf hit the ball over the fence and made his leisurely way around the plates. I jotted down notes about the tension in the air as we watched the opposition close in at the end. It was satisfyingly close, and thanks to the new pitcher striking out the opposition's batter, we won. The pitcher was good, but he looked like he knew it, and would rub it in. I'd get to find out if my snap judgment was on target. Lucky me.

When the game was over, I put up my knitting and made my way along with the crowd down the steps, then continued down to the basement areas outside the locker rooms where I could interview the players.

"Delphi, what brings you down to our level?" Jake the Rake said with a wiggle of his bushy brows as soon as he came out of the locker room. The werewolf was good-natured about my desire to not be included in the pack, but he'd still tease me about it.

“Tax season. It brings everybody down. Well, Jake, to what do you owe your fine form this evening?”

“Well,” he said, edging closer to me so I could smell the stench of his unwashed, sweaty body. He’d come out for the interview before he showered. “It would have to be you, wouldn’t it?” He grabbed me in a hug, squeezing me tight while I wheezed and tried not to drop my knitting bag.

“Delphi pile-up!” Piney cried and crowded in on the other side. I was half gnome, half elf, so I wasn’t very tall, not unless I shifted, and then I’d be bigger than whatever form they’d come up with. My beast was massive, which didn’t help me when I was completely overwhelmed by the werewolves’ stench, their size, and their eagerness to squeeze the life out of me.

“What’s this game?” another man asked, but his voice was oily slick while these two were just sweaty. They pulled away, both of them draping arms over my shoulders, so I got a double whiff of all they had to offer. I was either going to faint or puke from their overwhelming manliness.

“It’s just Delphi the reporter,” Piney said, a warning in his voice as he faced off with the newcomer.

I smiled at Ridley, the blonde new pitcher who didn’t smell nearly as terrible as the other two. “Welcome to the team. I haven’t seen you play until now, but the hype certainly wasn’t overrated. Your pitching was absolutely stellar. How are you liking Singsong City?”

“You smell very nice.” He flashed his teeth, and I remembered something about why he’d left Angel City on the west coast. Something about a woman he’d dated disappearing? I’d have to look it up.

“Thanks. That’s because I bathe regularly, unlike some filthy beasts I know,” I said, smiling up at Piney and Jake. They were watching the new guy, who by the smell of him was another wolf, but from a very different pack. Was it him, the one who had infected me? I hadn’t noticed being bitten, so it was highly unlikely I’d be able to smell the monster, but I always tried every time I met a new werewolf.

“Do you? Do you like baths or showers? I’m good with either,” the new wolf said with a leer and a wink that might have been attractive if I wasn’t half elf and ergo understood raw sex appeal. My gnome mother would laugh so hard if she heard me say that. Nope, it’s just that my type was more tall, dark, violet-eyed, carnation-smelling, calculating manipulator than this tawny-haired, white-toothed predator whose warm eyes didn’t cover up the hunger in him. He was used to getting his way, and didn’t care very much about consequences. That was a dangerous combination.

“She’s ours,” Piney growled, gripping my shoulder more possessively.

Usually, I’d push him away and remind him that I wasn’t an object to be owned, but this newcomer would probably understand their claim on me better than my claim on myself. Most werewolves were like that. Just another reason to resent the fact that I was one of them.

Ridley smiled easily. “Yeah? Which one of you is mated to her? She smells untouched. I can take care of you, my pretty, soft sweet,” he rumbled, eyes flickering golden.

The other team members weren’t paying much attention, but they were right there where they’d see me if I shifted into my ridiculously overpowered wolf and ate this guy raw and screaming. That meant I’d rely on Piney and Jake to save me. I took a half-step away from him and moved slightly behind Jake with my hand on his muscular arm. That body language screamed, ‘protect the helpless damsel,’ really loudly.

“She doesn’t have to be mated to one of us to be ours,” Jake said, which made no logical sense, but werewolves used instinct in the place of logic.

Golden-eyes smiled. “She’s not a born wolf. That means that she requires more than a protector, a mate. I’ve never seen a female who needs more protecting.” He looked me up and down slowly, ogling me more than was necessary. Apparently, he liked the curves my gnome genetics gave me and didn’t mind the shortness. He was completely wrong about my needing a protector or a mate, but I wasn’t going to contradict him. Somewhere in the back of my head, my wolf whined. She wanted her mate. You know, the monster who had caged me for two months, so I survived being turned. She got no say in my life as long as she wanted something so incredibly bad for all of me.

“I’m under Max’s protection,” I said, fighting the urge to roll my eyes at Ridley’s drama and my wolf’s whining. “If you don’t want to get kicked out of Singsong like you were out of Golden, you’ll respect the alpha and mind your manners.”

He laughed, low and threatening. “Sure. I’ll let you teach me any manners you want, Soft-Sweet.” Lovely. He’d come up with a pet name for me. I should have flirted with him and stroked his ego so he didn’t feel like he had to step up to the challenge. Jake and Piney were feeding into his whole desperate need to be the best and brightest in the pack. I needed to diffuse this situation before things got any worse.

Jake lunged forward and slugged the new guy in the face. Yep. That’s exactly the kind of worse I was worried about. For a second it was quiet, and then they both erupted into wolves who would probably rip the green room apart.

I jumped away from them and then let Piney escort me out, arm still draped over my shoulder all the way outside to the curb where he helped me into a cab. “Sorry about this, Delphi,” he said with a frown. “Jerk’s not wrong, though. You should be mated. We’ve all been bothering Max about it. It’s not right for you to live in Sing away

from the safety of the pack. Think about it, okay? We're not all bad." He winked at me and then closed the door, nodding at the driver to pull out, which he did. Most people didn't argue with werewolves for some reason.

Me? Mated to a werewolf? That would go over well with my family and my co-workers. I slumped against the backseat, clutching my knitting bag. The only reason I had my job was because I was my Elven father's daughter, and he was old friends with Zephin Clay, media mogul. I could embrace the wolf and become the alpha. My beast was ridiculously overpowered, and Max wouldn't fight very hard. No, he'd be delighted if someone else took the pack off his hands. I shivered at the thought of managing other wolves. Not a chance. That would be a complete nightmare. Also, my family wouldn't talk to me again. Not that we talked much. Things had been strained for some time now. I didn't come home enough. I didn't call enough. I lived in Singsong City, which had all the most dangerous elements imaginable. I wasn't appreciated at my work. I was too thin. And worst of all, I wasn't dating, so how could I give my mother grandchildren?

I pulled the sweater out of my bag and sniffed it before I started another row. It didn't smell too much like werewolves. I hoped. I didn't need to worry about a too-friendly guy, and I definitely didn't need to worry about my nonexistent love life. I had a great job and lived in the most amazing city in the world. I liked being independent and making as many choices for myself as I could, with my limitations. Life was good, and I intended to keep it that way.

The next morning, I got up, made my usual batch of cookies, which would disguise the scent of werewolf, and opened the door to find a bloody ripped-up corpse laid out on my 'Hello Spring' doormat. As a werewolf, I wasn't particularly bothered by a dead animal, but as the elf-gnome society reporter who made her living being part of polite society, it was problematic.

Written in blood were the words: Soft Sweet. Mine which were a lot of words to

write in blood. I sighed and got some garbage bags to clean up the carcass, probably rabbit. I washed off the blood and then had to hurry to make it the six blocks to work. I barely had time to rush into the soup kitchen to drop off my cookies up the street from the Singer office building before I had to keep running. On my lunch break, I left the office, sat in the park in the spring sunshine with happy families all around, and called Max.

He answered with a grumbling, “Just the person I wanted to hear. I’m actually outside your apartment. He left another gift for you. Did you enjoy the first?”

I sighed. “I guess I didn’t need to call you if you’ve got it taken care of. You’re the best alpha in the world.”

“I’m glad you think so. Hopefully, you’ll have the same opinion of me in ten minutes. But you won’t. Ridley’s gone to the Alta to put in a complaint about me. That means that they’ll force you if I don’t. You don’t want them to force you, so you’d better work with me.”

My stomach tightened as his ominous words echoed in my head. The Alta Manada was the ruling werewolf body for our continent. “Force me to what?”

“Choose a mate and protector, as law dictates a turned female do. Move into the pack district in Song. This is the law. We all know Ridley is a pain and a problem, but he’s also good media with connections you lack. I wouldn’t care what anyone pressures me to do, but you are in significant danger. I can’t actually protect you when you’ve removed yourself physically from the pack. There are reasons for these laws, and they’re not all bad. So far you’ve been safe, but it was bound to come down to this, eventually. You’re just lucky you had so many years to figure things out before you were mated to some random furry.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “And if I refuse?”

“The Alta will come for you. They’ll stick you with whoever wants you with the most power. It usually works out as we wolves worship our mates, and it’s hard to resent someone who adores you more than the moon, but you’ve always been difficult. Is it the gnome or the elf that’s so anti-wolf?”

“I love wolves. It’s the were that’s problematic for me. And if I run?”

“You’ll be hunted. You know the pack. Choose a mate from those you know and like.”

I brightened up suddenly. There was one person that I absolutely couldn’t have. “Sure. You, Max. I choose you.” I tried to make my breath breathy and romantic.

He snorted. “Nope. The best thing about being an alpha, no one mates me without my consent. Think about it. I’ll see you after work. We’ll go to dinner at the community center. You choose your mate. Case closed. No more psychopath Ridley’s setting up to stalk you like the easy prey you are.”

My beast would rip Ridley apart. But he wasn’t really the problem. The trouble was that I’d been reported to the Alta Manada.

“There has to be another option,” I said. “It’s not right that turned wolves are treated different from born.”

“But they are different. Born have families, big ones, and you’ve got nobody. It’s not safe. And you’re fresh blood to keep the gene pool from getting too inbred.”

“That’s Ridley’s problem? His inbred genetics?”

“It’s something. There’s always a shortage of wolf females, and you’re sweet. You’d be adored by whoever you chose.”

“Except you.”

He laughed. “You’re too sweet for me.”

“You just wait, Max. You’re going to fall for the absolute worst person. She’ll be a mermaid.”

“I’m already mated to the moon. Anyway, after work, the community center. If you run, you’ll be hunted. Ridley will definitely volunteer. You don’t want him to catch you. They might mate you to him if it gets that far.” He hung up, leaving me feeling cold in spite of the delicious golden sunshine soaking into my skin.

My time was running out. If I mated to a werewolf, it would only be a matter of time before the news got back to my family, my boss. The rumbling growl in the back of my mind was going to give me a headache. She’d already found her mate, and she wanted him to torture her some more. Stupid wolf. I’d choose any other mate before that monster.

I went back to work, finished writing up the interviews I hadn’t actually gotten to take, but no one would mind if I made something up. I knew what they would have said if werewolf instincts hadn’t taken over. For Ridley, I had to do some research, to see what kind of interviews he usually gave. They were generic ego stuff if with men, slimy if they were with women. The really interesting thing is that there had been a slew of disappearances in Golden, one in particular that Ridley was connected to. That is, he’d been interviewed about it, because he’d dated the female before she’d disappeared. If he had something to do with it, he’d covered it up better than I’d expect someone with his subtlety. No, if he had, someone else was covering it up for him. The plot thickens. And he was leaving me dead animals. Delightful.

“Delphi, do you have those interviews?” Bertram asked, leaning against my cubicle wall.

I nodded. "I'll email them right this second. You missed a good game."

"Yeah, I watched from home, so I got that bit worked up already, but it's not the same as seeing it live. Thanks again for taking a hit for the team. You're a life saver." He looked tired. Tax season was exhausting for everyone. I needed to get on mine, but I needed to figure out what to do about the pack meet tonight. Max was the most open-minded, nontraditional werewolf I'd ever met, in spite of being born into one of the biggest clans in the country. The fact that he didn't feel like I had any choice, that my freedom and independence were over, was more than slightly discouraging. Not only discouraging but frustratingly outrageous. What century were we living in, that I didn't get to choose for myself, just because I had the misfortune of being turned against my will? That just compounded the injustice.

I took a deep breath and let it out, along with the anger and negativity. I didn't have time for that. What I needed to do was research more about pack law. If I could find a loophole, I wouldn't get stuck with some perfectly nice wolf that I didn't want, that my family would never accept, and that would just be hurt in the process, emotionally and physically if my wolf got out of control. She would wait forever for her true mate, the psychopathic sadist who had kept me alive while I turned, torturing me in the process. For months. Needless to say, my beast and I had very different ideas of what constituted a healthy relationship.

I went to the Library of Antiquities, feeling the age and magnitude of the tomes weighting down the billions of shelves while I crossed the marble lobby beneath the enormous chandelier to the front desk. I asked the clerk where I could find the section on werewolf law. That got raised brows.

"I have some texts in Latin, but..." he said, looking at me skeptically.

"Latin is fine."

“Also Elvish,” he added, giving me another dubious glance. I looked sweet, cute, and slightly stupid.

“Also fine.” I smiled sweetly at him. “I’m fairly confident in both languages.” I never got tired of being pegged as uneducated. Sigh.

“Oh, well...” He cleared his throat a few times, then directed me up the stairs, past the demon and angel statues guarding the way, and into the mythological creatures section. He scribbled down a call number, and with that, I was set.

I gathered a few of the most likely looking leather-covered suspects off the shelves and got to work at a table in the main second-floor study area. My father, the elf in my parental arrangement, was a researcher. He’d raised his children fluent in all the necessary tongues, including a smattering of celestial. My mother, the gnome, taught me how to bake cookies and knit. She’d taught me other things, like how to plant what under which cycle of the moon, but none of that was particularly relevant to my life. The cookies, absolutely essential, like the knitting, which was my chosen expression of enchantment. Being a gnome-elf made magic difficult. Throw a werewolf into the mix and magic became positively volatile. Still, knitting worked to calm the wolf and channel some of my magic.

Research was almost as soothing as knitting. I’d enjoyed doing the article on the Gray Society, on the Librarian, digging into the how’s and why’s, but politics were even more dangerous than magic. The mayor already knew I was a werewolf, but he hadn’t released the information, and wouldn’t as long as I played his game. It would be nice not to have anything he could use against me. Except that my life would be ruined.

No negativity. I refocused, redoubling my efforts, using slight magic spells to sift through pages in order to track down relevancies.

“The library is closing,” a gentle voice said at my shoulder.

I sat up, startled. It was the Librarian herself, the angelic blonde who'd worked with the HOSTs taking down a demonic guild intent on summoning a greater demon and bringing hell to earth. Again. Seeing her should have made me feel all kinds of awkward, but the library was closing? That was the ultimate disaster! That meant that I missed my appointment with Max and the rest of the pack. I ran a hand through my already mussed hair and gave the books another desperate look.

"I don't suppose you know anything about pack law," I said, looking back up at her.

She raised her brows, then glanced at the books, frowning as she leaned closer. "A bit. I used to work with a werewolf who was turned. You're looking up differences in turned and born, as well as protection from rogue wolves." She raised a brow at me. "Do they know where you live?"

I winced before I managed a smile. "It's not a big deal."

"No?" She took a seat next to me, leaning her elbows on the table, apparently ready to listen.

"It's not a big deal, truly. He just left an animal on my doorstep."

Her eyes narrowed. "You want pack protection, but don't want to be entangled by the pack?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "Do you think it's possible?"

She pursed her lips and then a slow smile spread over her face. It was a lovely smile, but it hinted at the diabolical, making me shift uneasily. "As a matter of fact, no." My heart sank before she continued. "But I do know someone with an extremely big pool house who would rent it to you. His security is very good. We could camouflage your scent, and then you'd have more time to figure things out. Oh, he's also a lawyer, so

law and loopholes are his specialty.”

I stared at her, embarrassed that she’d think I needed so much help, also that I was tempted to take it and drag some innocent bystander into a pack mess. I shook my head. “I couldn’t possibly accept such an offer.”

“You’ve got a werewolf stalker leaving shredded bunnies at your door. If I didn’t do something, I’d be guilty of negligence when it was your body they found shredded. You did come to my library, and I’m the Librarian, besides which, I practically know you. You’re the lovely reporter who was here the messy day I chopped off Jazharad’s head.”

I wanted help from this magical person who had so many connections and so much magic. The massive library was part of her, so her magic was in finding answers. I nodded slightly, but then shook my head no with a sigh. “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t possibly throw myself on the mercy of a stranger.”

“Come on,” she said, tugging my hand. “I need to talk to Cross about my taxes, anyway. You can check out the pool house and ask him about your werewolf law issues, then decide if you’d like to stay there. Otherwise, where will you go? They’ll check hotels first thing. What’s your name?” she asked.

“Delphi.”

“Delphi, I’m Libby. Why don’t you come and check out the pool house? He bragged about it, the jerk. I only have a waterfall and a river.” She sighed heavily. The poor wealthy.

“You think that he’d know about werewolf law?”

Her eyes twinkled. “If anyone knows anything about something that weird, it’d be

Cross.” She started stacking the books. “We’ll take these with us. It’s always good to have reading material nearby, and Cross might not have books on werewolf law on hand.”

“I shouldn’t,” I said, but I let her grab my hand and tug me towards the stairs. She had a great deal of charisma and will. Who was I to stop her from protecting the little people?

“Why not? What else were you planning for tonight? Don’t worry. If you don’t like the pool house, you can always go back home.”

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Chapter Three

The enormous estate situated on the edge of Singsong in one of the most luxurious neighborhoods still inside the gold walls was lined with old oak trees that gave it an old grove feel. My dad would love it. I loved it. The houses were large, gated, but charming instead of simply gaudy and big. They screamed taste more than wealth.

The iron wrought gates opened as Libby drove her large black car up to them, almost like her lawyer was expecting us. She had said that he'd do her taxes, but what kind of accountant lived in a place like this? Three stories, two charming towers, immaculate gingerbread, and a lush garden surrounding the courtyard where the car pulled around, until it sat between the double front doors and the large yet tasteful fountain.

"Are you sure..." I began.

She grabbed my wrist and pulled me out, tucking the stack of books under her other arm. "If you don't want to stay here, I'll take you with me to my place, although that's not ideal since it's in Song. Sort-of. Werewolves are a common thing, so you'd probably be spotted, but here? In this neighborhood? Even if I hadn't put an anti-tracking spell on you, no one would find you for years, lost in the scent of mildew and money."

She released me and adjusted the books before heading towards the front steps. She glanced around as she moved, like she was habitually wary of attack. I sniffed and smelled nothing but plants, water, and a delicious aftershave. It smelled edible, like it was made out of violets and watercress with a hint of spice. What was that spice?

I followed the scent more than I followed the librarian up the steps to the large double doors. She reached for the knob, like she was going to open it, but it opened first, like he'd been waiting.

I smiled at him then froze while his face, all sculpted cheekbones and elegance, hit me with the weight of a sledgehammer. It was the Silver Senator with the violet eyes and bear-trap mind who used his unearthly beauty to put people off-balance so he could manipulate them more easily. And he'd insulted me every time we'd exchanged words.

I knew who the Librarian's lawyer was. It was part of the known gossip, but somehow I'd overlooked the obvious when she called him Cross. It's like I was stressed out from the threat of exposure and forced marriage hanging over my head. And the stalker. Still, I should have realized who I'd be walking into. Then I wouldn't be here, standing on his front porch, feeling like an abandoned orphan begging for a crust of bread.

The Librarian smiled brightly. "Great, you were expecting me. This is Delphi. Isn't she adorable? She's looking for some advice on werewolf law, so I told her you'd be able to help." She dropping the books in his arms and he scrambled to capture them while looking from me to her with those annoyingly beautiful eyes.

I winced. Now I'm an adorable helpless thing? "I'm sorry. This was a mistake. I can handle the situation on my own. I wouldn't dream of bothering you, Senator."

Senator Silverton raised a perfectly arched brow. "You're already here, and any friend of Libby's couldn't possibly be a bother." He frowned down at the books in his hands and then up at me. "How did you get on the wrong side of werewolf law?" The frown seemed much more authentic than the smile he showed his public.

"She's got a stalker," the librarian called, already in the center of the large hall,

studying an enormous vase of fresh hydrangeas and lilies. “He’s been leaving her presents.”

His face whipped from her to me, the frown intensifying on his annoyingly stunning features.

His voice was certain. “You aren’t frightened, just very, very frustrated. Why aren’t you afraid of a werewolf stalker, Miss Era?”

I wasn’t about to answer that question. I held onto my smile while I considered. No, I never would have approached the senator if I’d realized it was him, but I was already here, and he had a great deal of influence in the government that he could use to apply pressure to the Alta. Maybe he could even push to change werewolf law. I needed to go in or walk away, but where would I go? Anywhere else would be better. And yet, he had a reputation for making things happen, but not for spilling secrets. If he could help me with this werewolf law tangle, it could help other people down the road, not just me. Who knew how many vulnerable females were stuck in this kind of situation? It would be worth the humiliation it would cost to ask.

I hesitantly took a step towards him and the open door. He immediately backed up, gesturing me inside, then closed the door gently, but firmly, behind me.

“The knell of doom,” I whispered, getting a puzzled look from him.

“Beg your pardon?”

“What?”

“Didn’t you say something?”

I smiled sweetly until he shook his head.

“Why don’t we adjourn to the library?” he asked, gesturing towards the Librarian who was already far down the long hall, like she’d been here before and knew where she was going.

The house was large, elegant, tasteful, exactly what you’d expect from an elf like Silverton, in silvery blue and muted apricots, with an underpinning of rich cream.

“Tell me about your stalker,” he said as we walked.

I was stuck between trying not to look at him too much, or ogle the priceless paintings that lined the hall. He certainly wasn’t struggling to pay his rent if he could afford originals like that. A Van Gogh? And was that a Renoir? I stopped to stare at it, raising my hand for a moment like I would touch it before I curled my fingers and turned back to the annoyingly handsome, wealthy, and tasteful man.

“It isn’t the stalker that’s the problem, not really,” I said, shaking my head. It was the Alta Manada that was going to ruin my life.

“No? How many presents has this not-a-problem given you?”

I looked at him suspiciously. That had the bones for an implied insult. I was too stupid to realize that the stalker was a serious problem. “A few.”

“A few dozen? Please be specific, Miss Era,” he drawled, an elf who was on his last manner.

I smiled brightly. “Two at last count, but I haven’t been home since I got off work, so who knows how many fluffy bunnies he could have sacrificed to my beauty since then?”

His eyes hardened until they were violet sickles of death. “Where are you staying?”

I gave the senator a side-long glance. “I haven’t decided yet.” Not here, though. You couldn’t pay me enough money to live with this terrifyingly capable, manipulative, handsome elf. I’d probably fall in love with him and end up leaving fluffy bunnies on his doorstep. That would almost serve him right for being so rude.

“But you aren’t going back to your home? Good. Establish new territory, habits, scents, and perhaps he’ll forget his fascination.”

“Yes, well, I hope so.” But would that be enough? Everyone knew where I worked. I stopped walking. Why try to hide? Maybe I could go to Max, show him my wolf, and convince him that I wasn’t in danger. But the Alta Manada had been notified, so I’d have to display my wolf to them as well. Perhaps it would be fine. Maybe they would be open-minded and allow their laws to be broken so I could be independent. Or they’d want my extremely strong wolf in the gene pool. Ridley was connected to someone in the Manada, so there had to be some corruption.

“Miss Era?” Senator Silverton’s low voice startled me from my thoughts.

I turned to offer him a smile. “Sorry. I was distracted.”

“I can see that,” he said soberly. “Before we go into the library, let me ask you privately: would you like to stay here? Libby wouldn’t have brought you if she didn’t want me to take you under my protection. If you walk in there, she’ll push you into it, so tell me now what you want.”

I stared at him, shocked at the bluntness and lack of pretension in the question. “You hate me.” We could both be honest.

He smiled slightly. “You are impossible to hate.”

“You’ve tried?”

His smile bloomed into something magnificent, far more breathtaking than the paintings in the moment before it vanished, leaving the stoic elf behind. “No, Miss Era. I haven’t tried to hate you. I make a point not to waste my time on hopeless cases.” He shook his head. “I don’t live here alone. I’m not trying to lure you into my den of depravity. I have a housekeeper, a driver, a secretary, and a media specialist, as well as any number of other associates who stay with me from time to time. The house is very large. It wouldn’t be an inconvenience to me in the slightest. In fact, we could go weeks without even seeing one another.”

I stared at him, trying to read him, to search out those thoughts behind the guarded eyes. Protective. Guarding. Concerned. He really was worried about my safety. Why would he care about someone he barely met?

I laughed lightly. “Really? You wouldn’t mind if a complete stranger moved into your pool house?”

He cocked his head. “Pool house? That’s right, I do have one of those. Would you be more comfortable out there? It’s slightly less protected than the main house, but the security on the entire property is very good. I do mind. I’d prefer that if a situation comes to my attention, I do something about it instead of hearing about the girl on the news who’d been knifed forty-six times by her stalker a week later. I know there’s a problem. I’d be grateful if you allowed me to help you solve it.” He sighed heavily. “Now I regret being so rude to you at the party.”

The story of a woman who had been stabbed forty-six times was the big news story last month. Loren had covered it with so much glee. Would she enjoy covering my murder? Not that I was going to be murdered by Ridley when my beast could eat him without a hint of indigestion. Still. “Regret, but no apology? Oh, I forgot. For an elf, that was an apology. Why were you trying to get a rise out of me? Be honest.”

I looked into those violet eyes, searching for truth while he stared back at me. My

heart started to beat faster, my skin prickled, and everything in me became hyper-aware of everything about him. He hesitated then leaned close enough that his scent, the spicy carnation and the hint of vanilla made my mouth water. No, my mouth was already watering, now it was outright drool. “I wanted to be sure that you were happy.”

I blinked at him and then leaned closer to try to gauge his honesty. There was wariness in his eyes. He certainly wasn’t telling me everything, but that, him needing to be sure I was happy, I was almost positive, was true. He smelled like he was telling the truth. He also smelled like woodland forests and fields of carnations. I found myself breathing him in more deeply, lips parted. I pulled away when my neck protested. He wasn’t leaning towards me, but I was close to toppling in his direction.

“You’re so annoyingly delicious,” I mumbled, quieter than he should be able to hear.

He gave me a charming smile. “Why, Miss Era, are you tempted to eat me?”

I froze as I searched those eyes with renewed intensity. He knew that I was a werewolf. Of course he did. He was a genius, and I’d brought werewolf law books to his house. Only a wolf would be bound by wolf law. But he’d still invited me to stay with him? He was a protector. That really was his core, or he wouldn’t be willing to protect a werewolf. He’d asked a very pertinent question. Was I tempted to eat him? He smelled so good, but even if I wanted to nibble, there would be no biting bloody chunks out of him. Every part of me revolted at the idea of hurting him.

I hurriedly shook my head. “No. I’m not out of control. I’ve never lost control, and I wouldn’t start with you. You’re safe with me.” I put my hand on his arm, trying to reassure him, but maybe my touch would be a threat.

Before I could pull back, he covered my hand with his, strong fingers grasping me with the right amount of pressure. “I know, Miss Era. I wouldn’t be worried about

your happiness if I hadn't already researched you."

That shocked me. He'd researched me? Why would I come up on a senator's radar? We were standing so close, I could see the pale lilac striations of his eyes. So lovely. So dangerous. He wouldn't ever hurt me physically, but there were machinations that were beyond me, that I wanted to stay beyond me.

I cleared my throat and pulled away, having to tug firmly to retrieve my hand. "You'd actually be comfortable sharing your sacred personal space with a member of the media?" I gave him a skeptical look. "To be blunt, there's no way that you aren't part of one of the secret societies with your connection to the Librarian and Senator Montaine."

He smiled at me, only a slight smile, but it was warm and sweet, so it softened his chiseled perfection into something almost touchable. "You never spill secrets without permission. Also, I don't keep anything too incriminating at the house. That's what my secret lair is for." He winked at me, then took my hand and tucked it on his arm while he led me towards the library.

How he could escort me while carrying so many books was a miracle. He was a miracle. And he wasn't afraid of my wolf. A thrill went through me as we walked down the lofty hall filled with gorgeous art, the finest work the gentleman at my side.

He murmured, "We should carpool to events. How are you going to handle your work situation? I imagine your stalker knows where that is."

I sighed heavily as I looked up at him, clinging to his arm. "I know. Is there any point in fighting the inevitable?"

His eyes twinkled. "Of course not. But whether something is inevitable must always be tested." He gestured me through the door into a library that was two stories tall,

with a surrounding balcony lined with gilded cream bookshelves. The gorgeous library reminded me of my dad's study at home. It was the one vaulted space my parents had, because my mother preferred to be cozy. Cross's library felt elvish, that touch of beauty and magic so much like its owner, Senator Silverton.

Libby was standing in the middle of the space, soaking in all those books, hands outstretched like an otherworldly statue. "This is a beautiful thing, Cross."

"Yes, you would appreciate it. Do you have all your paperwork for your taxes?"

She spun around to grin at him. "I already emailed them to you. I'm just here to make sure you aren't overworked and taxed beyond what you can bear." She snickered while he audibly groaned.

"You came here just to deliver that awful pun, didn't you?"

"Basically, but also to bring Delphi. She's much too cute to let the werewolves devour."

I smiled slightly as I said, "I don't believe that cuteness should be justification for protection. To be honest, I don't need protection. I just need..."

The two studied me, waiting, listening with an intensity I wasn't used to people giving me. I listened. Others talked. He already knew, but it needed to be made as clear as possible. "Can I have both of you promise to keep what I say confidential?" I asked, hesitantly.

Libby nodded quickly. "I swear it. Cross never tells anyone anything. Most elves are like that, closed-mouthed, but he's more. Getting things out of him is like prying a dead dwarf's hands off his rubies."

That was an image. I spoke quickly, shooting a sidelong glance at the man who already knew. “I’m a turned werewolf, but I don’t want that to become public knowledge. As a turned wolf, legally, I’m supposed to have a mate and protector, but Max has let me do my thing for years. I’m so grateful to him, but now, with Ridley stirring things up, he’s given me an ultimatum.”

“Marry someone or be exposed?” Senator Silverton asked, eyes narrowing in disapproval.

“How barbaric,” Libby said with a curled lip.

I shrugged. “It makes sense.” I glanced over at Silverton, not having to look hard to see his judgment of these archaic werewolf laws. Maybe also the wolves. He still didn’t shift his position away from me or look at me as if I was a pariah. Instead, he opened the book on the top of the stack he carried.

“I am such a fool to bring an exciting case to you before you’ve done my taxes,” Libby said, sighing heavily.

He didn’t look up from the book, but he did move to the nearest table with a chair, and sat down, putting the books on the table, and taking the individual book into his lap, dark hair bent over the thing.

Libby grabbed my arm. “And with that, he’s off. He’ll solve the problem if it can be solved by loopholes, and if it can’t be solved by that, he’ll come up with something else, less legal, but just as effective.”

“I heard that,” he said without looking up.

“Good. I’m going to take Delphi to tour the pool house. Okay?”

“Mm. Manny will tell you when dinner’s ready.”

“Does he cook?”

“Mm.” He turned a page and grabbed a long notebook from the side table, and wrote a few things down, completely absorbed with his thoughts and the legal tangle at hand. He really was like my dad when he found a tantalizing subject to research. It made me want to plonk on his lap and distract him with something. How would the protector handle rambunctious gnomish children swarming all over him? The image that filled my head of Senator Silverton in a domestic setting with our children was a shock. I wasn’t daydreaming about playing house with the man. He was involved in things I had no interest in. I was a fluff reporter while he needed to change the world.

“Shall we?” Libby’s warm smile was infectious.

I let her lead me out of the library while my stomach twisted uneasily. I’d told them I was a werewolf, and nothing horrible had happened. “You really won’t tell anyone?” I asked.

“That you’re a werewolf? I give my word as a librarian. Also, I wouldn’t talk about someone else, anyway. Except for Manny. He’s Cross’s bodyguard, and he’s an ogre, so I’d be careful about eating whatever he cooked. Then again, as a wolf, you’re supposed to have an iron stomach. Nothing about you looks very tough.”

“Senator Silverton hired an ogre?” That was surprising. Maybe he really was comfortable around the infernal, or he liked to live dangerously. Inviting a werewolf to live with you was very dangerous. What if I never left? I could eat him out of house and home. And get possessive of him and start stalking him and his delicious violet eyes. I really needed to watch that. Fantasizing about what his children would be like was completely off the table.

“Absolutely. You know that they’re the best bodyguards, and Cross always has the best. Like his personal assistant, Henrick. He’s a goblin, and terrifyingly competent. He’s the spin doctor of Cross’s life. Henrick keeps Cross’s image immaculate. He’ll probably use you for something, maybe make people think you’re dating if it helps Cross’s campaign. If not, he’ll keep you out of it. You should be aware that it’s a danger. Cross is basically a pure perfectionist who would never take advantage of you, but Henrick has no such scruples. That’s why Cross hired him. He’s always aware of his own weaknesses and makes sure that others cover for him.”

“Oh.” That was a lot of information. “Is Senator Silverton aware that’s a danger? People will think there’s something romantic going on if it comes out that I’m staying here. Particularly if he doesn’t admit that I’m just a werewolf he took mercy on.”

“He’s aware. And he won’t ever let anyone think anything you don’t want them to think, even if he has to make you his distant cousin. Or Henrick, I guess, if the idea of dating him bothers you. I noticed that you didn’t immediately swoon when you saw him, almost like you don’t adore him.”

I cheered up. Really? I gave the impression of not automatically thinking he was the most beautiful thing in the world? How wonderful! “It’s not that I dislike him, but when we met, he wasn’t very polite.”

She turned her head, giving me her full attention, which was extremely heavy and uncomfortable. “Cross wasn’t polite to a pretty member of the media? That’s interesting. Have you met before?”

“I did see him at the library on the day you...But I didn’t speak to him.”

“That’s unlike him. Maybe he was coming down with the flu or something.”

“I think he was trying to get me upset so he could see how I reacted. Maybe he’s

looking to hire a speech writer.”

“Maybe.” She threw open the French double doors at the end of the hall dramatically. “Behold, the pool house.”

The small building was on the other side of the enormous pool, which was a sinuous thing, the edges covered in plants that made it look like a natural haven. The pool house itself was small, cozy, and painted a cheerful pink that didn’t quite go with the elegance of everything else.

“Come on.” She skipped outside, onto the large deck, then headed to the right, where the pool narrowed and an elegant bridge spanned the water. It didn’t take long to get to the building, and when I did, I realized it wasn’t as tiny as it looked, but it was just as bright.

“It’s pink,” I said, putting my hand against the stucco.

“It’s Harold’s daughter’s favorite color. She asked Cross if they could stay in a pink beach house when they come to visit this summer, so he had it done, much to Harold and the boys’s horror. She’s the only girl, and her mother is absolutely not a fan of pink, so I think she might just want to torture everyone. Little girls can be like that. I know I was. Cross said it’s a good pink, and he has perfect taste, so he must be right.”

She pushed open the door and led me into the cutest little cottage I’d ever seen. It had a kitchenette, the window over the sink looking out on a charming garden. There was a bedroom with a large bed, as well as a loft with bunk beds stacked up on either side of the space.

The living room boasted a fireplace, with a down couch just waiting for me to curl up on. The lighting was excellent, in fact everything was perfect except for the lack of oven. I couldn’t make cookies in this cottage, but otherwise, I couldn’t imagine a

more perfect place.

“You’re sold. Good. I wouldn’t want to tell Cross, but he’s actually kind of lonely. He wouldn’t have moved to Singsong City otherwise. He could use some cheerful company, and I don’t have nearly enough time to devote to him, not with my library and my own husband. Not to mention my sushi buddies. Do you like sushi?”

I blinked at her. There was no way Cross was lonely, not when he’d mentioned all the people who lived with him. “Yes. But it’s so expensive.”

She nodded soberly. “It is, but the Cat’s Pause has reasonable prices, and the sushi is always fresh. You should come some time.” She started walking towards the door.

“Wait. You’re going to leave me here?”

She turned around to study me for a long moment before she nodded. “Yes. I get that you’re a werewolf, so not entirely defenseless. Not that any females I know are remotely incapable of destroying their enemies, but you’re facing not only a stalker, but an entire system. You need help. Cross is the best at manipulating large bodies of people. He’s clever, driven, and motivated by his protective instincts. I’m leaving you in good hands. Cross’s fridge will be well-stocked if Manny’s cooking is a disaster. It won’t be, though. Cross wouldn’t have told you there was dinner if it wouldn’t be edible. You aren’t hysterical. Do you need me to stay and give you emotional support?”

I shook my head. “I never agreed to stay, but the pool house is really nice. And the security here is really great. And if he can actually help me with the legal issues regarding werewolf law that would also help others who get caught in the tangle, then how could I say no?”

“You can’t.” She gave me a smug look. “So relax, enjoy your vacation. You look like

you need it.” She waved and then left me alone in the senator’s pool house while he studied my case in his library.

I stood in the doorway for a moment, watching her walk back to the house, before I closed the door, curled up on the couch, and tried to process everything. Of course, I ended up falling asleep, because that couch was way too cozy for an elf, even one who had painted his pool house pink for a little girl.

Chapter Four

The kitchen in the main house was both a thing of beauty and of function. It was also large enough for half a dozen people to work in comfortably, but still managed to have everything necessary to bake my ritualistic morning cookies in my short-arm's reach of the stove. I stood there, mixing dough, and looking out the bay windows of the breakfast nook into the garden. Redbuds were budding with that almost neon purple hue, while daffodils skirted the slender trees, all of it backed by shrubbery that was pruned the right balance between too wild and too tame.

He had a very good gardener. My father would be impressed. I was impressed. I'd woken up happier than I had been in a long time. I wasn't alone with my heavy secrets anymore. It wouldn't last forever, of course, but I'd enjoy my vacation from reality as long as it lasted.

"Miss Era, what are you doing?" Senator Silverton said, coming into his kitchen hesitantly, like he might be infringing on my space.

I smiled shyly. "Good morning, Senator. I'm making mint fudge and double chocolate pumpkin cookies. I hope you don't mind. I have to make cookies every day, so I smell less like a werewolf. Is it too much bother? If I am, let me know and I'll be gone faster than you can blink. I can be very fast. It's the gnome in me." My words came out in a rush and I stood there, shifting uncomfortably while I stared at the elf, who looked even more stunning this morning in his business suit and purple tie.

He smiled slightly. "It's no bother, Miss Era, and neither are you." His words were

soft, gentle, the kind of tone I usually got from people who pitied the helpless little reporter, not someone who knew I was a werewolf.

I stared at him for another long moment before I cut the last line of brownies. “Your kitchen is incredibly well-stocked. Do you have a housekeeper other than Manny the Ogre?”

“Mm. Did you eat? You shouldn’t start the day with brownies. You missed dinner last night. When I came to inform you it was ready, you were sleeping on the couch. Did you stay there all night? It’s not good for your neck to sleep without proper...”

I laughed, but it came out as an awkward snort, which was way too embarrassing. I was half elf. I could be elegant for five minutes. Couldn’t I? Apparently not.

“Right. You remember me complaining about my neck health? Proper alignment is so important in life. I’m so glad you agree. Don’t worry, I won’t make a habit of falling asleep on the couch. Except that maybe I will. It’s such a delightfully cozy thing. My neck feels perfect. Also, I usually have cookies for breakfast. It’s part of my brand. Good thing I have all these Elven genetics to mitigate my bad life choices.” Actually, as a werewolf, I could recover from anything, including a bad diet. I stared at him. I could actually tell him that because he knew that I was a werewolf. How in the world had that happened? I shouldn’t have let down my guard to two practical strangers, particularly when one of them was so handsome. No, his handsomeness wasn’t a reason for something. It was his intellect and ability to manipulate politics that should have me worried. And yet, I wasn’t worried. That was worrisome. I needed to get out of here before I lost my mind completely.

“Any luck finding a loophole in the werewolf law?”

He frowned, shaking his head. “Not yet. The entire structure is antiquated and should be rewritten. Anyone civilized would ignore half of the mandates.”

“Max is a jewel. He wouldn’t be making a thing out of this if Ridley didn’t notify the Alta Manada about my shocking independence.”

“Max the Alpha of Singsong? Do you like him?”

“Of course I like him. I asked him to be my mate, but sadly, he refused.”

He blinked twice. “If you want him, then we will convince him to have you. Why would he say no? You’re everything a wolf wants.”

I raised a brow. “Everything a wolf wants? Do you mean my shortness or my excellent cookie-making skills?”

He picked up a mint brownie and bit into it, in spite of it not being proper breakfast food. “Your cookies are delicious,” he said once he’d swallowed that bite. He held the brownie like he wasn’t sure what to do with it, eat the rest so as to not offend me, or to throw it away so as to not offend his personal health codes.

I took it out of his hand and nibbled on the corner. Mm. I’d made it particularly minty. Was anything better than chocolate mint? “Thanks, but most wolves aren’t that particular whether food has been cooked or is still in its original raw state. Also, I only asked Max because I knew he’d say no. He values his independence as much as I do. That’s the only reason he’s the alpha, so no one can boss him around, even an adorable, gnomish elf wolf who cooks. So, you didn’t find anything at all that you think you can use? Maybe it would help if you asked me some questions about being a wolf.” I chewed on my bottom lip. I was still incredibly uncomfortable about admitting that out loud, but the wolf was officially out of the bag.

He frowned and then stole the half-eaten brownie out of my hand and took another bite out of it.

I gasped. “What are you doing? You can’t eat something I’ve had my mouth on! Do you want to become a furry, vicious monster?” I lunged for the brownie, but he side-stepped, blocking me with one forearm. His forearm was very well-muscled.

“Do you consider yourself a member of the pack?” he asked, ignoring my outrage.

“I consider you a lunatic. Give that back! I’ll give you a nice new one, okay?”

He glanced down at the brownie as I lunged for it. He blocked me almost negligently, putting his hand on my face like that was civilized. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes,” I snarled, pulling back and scowling at him, at the brownie, at his mouth, all of those things pinging against my werewolf nerves like a rubber band. “I’m part of the Singsong pack. I go to some of the potlucks. Max insisted that I have good relations with the wolves.”

“Not the runs?” he asked, holding the dangerous brownie negligently in two graceful fingers.

“No. I’ve never shifted in front of them.” I moved as fast as I could, channeling the werewolf in order to snatch it, but instead of a brownie, I caught his fingers. He’d stuck the whole thing in his mouth like a completely careless imbecile.

I sputtered as I stared at him, watching him chew for an eternity, while my heart raced from horror and excitement. It would be nice to have a werewolf elf in Singsong. I’d never met one before. But what if elves were almost as difficult to turn as Gnomes? Also, it would ruin his life, his ambitious goals, his destiny.

He smiled without a trace of chocolate in his teeth. “Interesting. Why don’t you want anyone to see your wolf?”

I wrung my hands and stared at him, half-expecting him to sprout furry ears. “You shouldn’t be so careless with your happiness and well-being.” I wanted to howl. I was so upset about the idea of him losing his whole world like I had done. Why didn’t he care?

“That was an evasion.”

I said, “No, it’s called having the proper perspective. Asking about silly things instead of being careful with your health is absolutely horrifying. You need to be properly horrified at the thought of turning. It’s like you’ve read a romance novel about shifters and now have no sense of the very real danger it poses to your life. As a werewolf, you’d lose everything you have and become something completely different. All of your friends, family, you’d lose them all. Elves don’t exactly favor werewolves.”

“No? I believe you are under seriously strange misapprehension. You clearly don’t mingle with your kind at all,” he said, giving me a look that was more than slightly disapproving.

“Elves aren’t my kind,” I said, crossing my arms and feeling like a teenager. But he was so frustrating! “Aren’t you worried about being turned?”

He shook his head. “No. I’d be very difficult to turn. Also, people don’t get turned from eating brownies, or even kissing a werewolf. It has to be a bite, usually more than a few. Are you close to biting me?”

“As a matter-of-fact, yes. I’d like to bite you for being so stupid. I wasn’t ever bitten, but I still got infected. You think you know so much about werewolves when you have no idea.”

He studied me. “I’ve worked with a few. Were you infected from eating something a

werewolf had bitten?”

“I don’t know. Probably not, but that doesn’t mean...”

He put a brownie in my mouth and then turned towards the fridge to get out a lumpy disgusting shake the color of rotting produce and pour it into his glass while I chewed. Mm. Minty. “Libby wouldn’t have brought you here if she didn’t think I could handle it.”

“But Libby didn’t know I was a werewolf,” I mumbled.

“No? Are you sure? Why else would you want to know about werewolf law?”

He was probably right. How many other people knew what I was but were too polite to mention anything? Well, that was actually really encouraging. If people were kind and polite, what did I have to be worried about? Other than my parents? And Max. And now the Alta. Sigh.

“Are you sure you weren’t bitten? Do you remember what happened before you turned?” he asked before taking a long swallow of his disgusting lumpy shake.

I frowned, recalling the night before everything had gone to pieces. It had been a college party where all my friends were decompressing from the last week of finals. At the Songbird Academy for Fine Arts and Sciences, they had the most beautiful parties, filled with elves and fairies, with humans in the mix. It took place in the green, surrounded by flowers and lit with sparkling magic, while they crafted the food to make all of your worries disappear. My mother wouldn’t ever have allowed me to go to a college with werewolves. Not that they were forbidden, but the application process weeded out anyone who wouldn’t flourish, which included everyone on the dark side of the spectrum. Like me now.

I shook my head. “There weren’t any werewolves at the school. The only people at the party were elves and fairies. I must have gotten infected during the previous week, but I was busy taking tests. I did fall asleep in the woods one afternoon. That must have been when I got infected by a random, passing feral werewolf.” I frowned, because to sleep through being bitten by a werewolf sounded impossible.

“It sounds like a great mystery. Tell me about the party.”

I eyed him. He looked like a sculpture, studying me with those soulful eyes, cupping his glass of noxious health while he waited for me to explain. “The party was beautiful.” Like him. “Elves were there from all around the country. My friends Forsythia and Nala left me at the desserts table. I was trying to find them when my stomach started cramping, the music became impossibly loud, and the people incredibly irritating.”

“You don’t remember any specifics between your friends abandoning you and your illness?”

I shrugged. “I asked some people if they’d seen my friends. Mr. Clay was there, and he said that he’d seen them at the light drinks bar flirting with a very handsome elf, but when I asked that elf, he hadn’t seen them. After that is when I got sick. Right. Because the pretty elf grabbed my arm and asked if I was all right.” He’d been very pretty, and I’d been so embarrassed at the thought of throwing up on him in the middle of all that perfect beauty.

“The pretty elf? How can you tell which are pretty when we all look the same? You think that he infected you somehow? Perhaps he injected you with werewolf saliva. That would do it.” He nodded solemnly.

“Elves don’t all look the same. Why would an elf infect some random girl? I’m not powerful enough to be a threat, and most people actually like me. I’m very likable.”

“That must be coming from the gnome. An elf would never be proud of such a thing.”

I poked his muscular arm. “You’re likable when you want to be, just not around me. Why is that? I’m naturally what you pretend to be around other people.”

“You’re too agreeable. If I were as likable as you, then the combination would be intolerably sweet. Can you describe this pretty elf a bit more specifically?”

“He had very short hair, buzzed so you could see the perfect sculptural qualities of his skull. He looked like you, only thinner, smaller, less powerful.” I eyed his shoulders. “You’re quite large for an elf.”

“And you are quite large for a gnome. Perhaps we’re both werewolves.” He frowned at me. “Mr. Clay was there? Why was a media mogul at a college party?”

“He’s a huge benefactor of the school. My parents know him, so it was an easier sell to get my parents to let me go off into the big bad world if it was at a safe school like Songbird.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “It should have been safe, but it wasn’t. There is no safety in the world, which is why we must always...”

“Look for the good in everything. You can always find the evil if that’s what you’re focusing on, but you can also see the good. And life is much better with the one rather than the other.” I beamed at him and handed him a brownie. “So, thanks for letting me stay in your lovely pool house. I’m going to go and enjoy it right this second. You don’t mind if I use the pool, do you?”

“You may use anything you like,” he said with the warm enthusiasm you’d expect from an elf, as in none at all.

“Perfect. I don’t have a swimming suit, but I do have some extra yarn in my knitting bag that would probably be just enough for a bikini.”

He stared at me, shock rolling over his lovely features. “You’re going to knit a bikini?”

“Is that strange? It’s the gnome in me. You’ll have to get used to it. Of course, you could always evict me, but I’m far too adorable to throw to the wolves.”

“Mm. Don’t get sunburned,” he said, leaving me in the kitchen by myself, carrying his noxious drink away with him.

“Gnomes don’t burn,” I called after him.

“Elves do,” he said over his shoulder, gave me a small shake of his head and then continued out of sight.

The bikini was a bit shocking, but not because it was knitted. I wasn’t accustomed to following that particular pattern and found that I needed to unravel the top pieces a few times while I adapted a stitch that I wove with magic that would hold me up as well as a serious underwire bra. Gnomes tended to curves, and elves to planes, which made me somewhere in the middle. Planes were so much easier to fit, but when I finally tried it on, I was pleased with the suit even if I wasn’t so sure about myself. I knew what beautiful gnomes looked like, and elves were always beautiful, but I was both and neither. Not round and sensual, not tall and elegant. I didn’t even have the lean, athletic musculature of a werewolf. Oh well. Senator Silverton wouldn’t be in the pool.

He wasn’t, which was a good thing, because the knitted fabric immediately stretched out, so I had to use quite a few spells before it remained in its proper shape. My decency was not assured during that time of adjustment, but eventually, I could focus

on floating and swimming around, enjoying the natural pool, lined with rocks and plants that fell into the water, making it feel more like a lake than anything manmade.

“You’re burning,” Senator Silverton said from the side.

I was floating on my back when he said that, lazily keeping my body up while I soaked in the sunshine. His pool was so wonderful. It didn’t stink of chlorine, just life and sunshine. I needed to pay him back somehow for all of this.

“I feel fine.” So fine. So wonderfully perfect.

“Mm. Are you going to the fund raiser this evening?”

I finally let my legs float down so I could look at him standing on the edge in his elegant tuxedo. He was stunning, naturally. The fund-raiser for the charity hospital was something I’d been looking forward to covering, but it was hard to want to leave the pool and face the rest of the world. Max was going to be so furious when he caught up to me. I’d disobeyed a direct order, and he couldn’t let that kind of thing go, however little he personally cared about what others thought about him. It would make problems for him and his pack if he didn’t maintain order and enforce those orders. I sighed heavily, stirring the heavy water with my hands. “I don’t have anything to wear. It would take me too much time to knit a dress for the occasion.” Did he think my knitted bikini was weird? Of course it was weird, but this whole situation was not normal. I mean, I was living in the Senator’s pool house, for crying out loud!

“I ordered some things in for you.”

I stared at him in shock while horror and embarrassment washed through me. “What do you mean, you ordered things for me? Like clothing? You, Senator Silverton, ordered clothing for the poor unfortunate you couldn’t help take in? Tell me you’re

joking.”

He blushed slightly. Had I ever seen an elf blush before? I felt suddenly vulnerable being below him and dressed in so little. I swam to the side and pulled myself out, then grabbed the fluffy enormous pool towel and wrapped it around myself before I turned to face him. He’d walked up to me and was examining my cheeks and shoulders.

“You’re definitely burned. I suppose you’ll stay in then with some aloe on those.”

I pointed at his still-pink cheeks. “Maybe I’m just embarrassed that my unwilling landlord, who isn’t getting any monetary compensation out of this arrangement, felt like he needed to clothe me. I have clothes in my apartment. I’m not entirely penniless. Maybe you’re just worried about being seen with someone who isn’t wearing haute couture. Don’t worry, I have no intention of being with you at events. You can call up Forsythia and ask her if she’s available. I’m sure for you, she’ll be very available.”

He raised a brow. “I’m a public servant whose life is to serve the poor unfortunates. As for the clothing, it was Libby’s idea, not mine, once she heard about your apartment.”

I gripped my towel more tightly while my stomach churned. “My apartment?”

His eyes tightened with concern or anger. Maybe both. “I should have seen to your things last night, before he...” He cleared his throat and took a step back. “I have some paperwork to do until you’re changed. I’ll be waiting in the library.” He gave me a slight bow and left me standing there in a towel.

Panic was threatening to swallow me, the voice in the back of my head whining that I needed to run, to attack whoever had attacked me. Senator Silverton’s back was

towards me, so I dropped the towel and shifted into the cutest little wolf you've never seen. I darted through the underbrush, stalking the elf as he made his way back to the house.

I'd brought danger to his peaceful world. What if Ridley decided that he needed to hurt the Senator for taking me in?

I sniffed the air, scenting the elf, admiring his smooth, even gait. He was graceful and powerful, a lethally attractive combination to me and my wolf. And he knew that I was a wolf, so I could shift whenever I liked, the better to keep an eye on his fortress.

Chapter Five

I walked into the pool house to find it had been changed. The scent was the same, so someone had taken care not to have a smell as they put in shelves and stocked it with my yarn. Who had done that while I was floating in the pool all day?

When I checked the closet, some of my old clothes were there, but not many. The new pieces were all more expensive than I could afford. I couldn't wear anything on the Senator's dime. My red sheath dress wasn't there. I grabbed a navy sheath that was the only appropriate option that wasn't new and then took my time with my hair and makeup, making sure my brunette waves were as flattering as possible around my rosy cheeks. Did I want to accentuate the lush lips of my gnome heritage or lean into the large eyes of my Elven? Both?

I ended up with too much makeup, far more than I usually wore, almost like I was trying to match the Senator's glam, even though I had no intention of actually being seen with him. I'd ride in his limo to the gates and then slip out and walk up. I did that sometimes when I took a cab.

Senator Silverton would need rules, apparently, because he had no sense when it came to his duty and public service. Or maybe he had no sense when it came to women. He never dated any woman more than once. Maybe it's because he lost his head and bought them wardrobes when their lifestyles didn't live up to his.

I found Senator Silverton in the library at his desk, going through papers. He immediately rose and came to me with a polite smile. "You look beautiful."

I gave him a look. “Are we exchanging compliments? You’re far more beautiful than I am.”

He held out his arm to me. Did I take it or not? I crossed my arms and took a slight step away from him. He raised a brow in question. “It is my place to compliment the beautiful woman.”

“Really? And your place as a man who buys beautiful women clothing? What kind of place is that? What do they call the mister to the mistress? Master?”

He gave me a full smile that was as effusive to an elf as someone else breaking out in loud laughter. “Miss Era, for a moment consider that our roles were reversed. You are in a position to help someone who is being stalked by a predator, chased out of their home by a brutal and revolting monster who marked most of the precious yarn and clothing. Would you not...”

I held up a hand while nausea roiled in my stomach. “What do you mean, he marked my yarn? The yarn in the pool house is only a fraction of the yarn I had in my stash. Hardly any of my cashmere collection is there.”

He gave me a small sigh. “He urinated on most of it. There’s nothing as potently noxious as werewolf...”

I grabbed his arm, digging my nails into the smooth silk-wool. Horror mixed with growing rage. Ridley went into my apartment and peed on my cashmere yarn? What kind of twisted, sick, vile creature would do something like that to harmless cashmere?

“Miss Era? Do you need to sit down?”

I gave him a bright smile while rage thrummed beneath my skin. This was going too

far. Ridley wouldn't ever be allowed to desecrate someone's holy sanctuary of knitting ever again. "I'm just tired, no doubt from the sunburn. Thank you for saving what you could, or thank Libby for me. I'm fine. I'm going to slip out of the limo outside the gate, so no one links our names."

"Are you sure you're..." His words trailed off as I pulled him towards the front door.

No, I wasn't fine. I was so angry, beyond angry. Werewolves didn't handle anger well. I didn't get angry often, because gnomes were notoriously jolly, and even elves didn't usually bother sustaining negative emotions when it drained your magic and energy, but now, the anger of the werewolf combined with my own gnome-like disgust at the blatant disrespect. Even the elf in me thought the wolf needed to be seriously disciplined.

The party was productive. I got the necessary material for my article, and then I slipped out through the front gate like I'd come, waving at the security guys before I disappeared into the shadows.

I shifted into the small wolf and disappeared into the night, abandoning my navy sheath under a bush. I'd never really liked it, anyway.

I tracked Ridley to a human sports bar in the upper city, drinking and looking mean through the front window. When he finally got up and left, I stalked him from a block away as he headed towards my part of town. Was he going to burn my place down? He had a lighter in his hand, flicking it on and off. I'd light him on fire if he tried.

Two couples walked along, chatting easily, and one of the guys bumped into Ridley. The werewolf snarled and then one of the women pointed at him and squealed.

"It's Ridley, the new pitcher! Are you really a werewolf?" She fluttered her lashes at him while admiration honeyed her words.

His snarl vanished as he smiled at her. “You can come with me if you’d like to find out. I never bite.”

She laughed like that was hysterical and grabbed her guy’s arm. “I wish. You could come with us to the party we’re going to! It’ll be a lot of fun. Everyone loved your last game.”

“Some other time,” Ridley said, then sauntered away like that had restored his enormous ego.

He walked down a dark alley. Instead of following him, I ran as fast as I could around the block to cut him off on the other side. I waited there, but he didn’t come out of the alley. Had he noticed me? Was he waiting to grab me?

I smiled my wolf smile and then crept into the alley, letting the smells of the night wash over my senses. Ridley was a subtle pulse out of the ebb of the evening, waiting behind a dumpster for me to come out.

He’d actually peed on my cashmere.

Rage fed my strength and speed as I lunged at him, ripping out his left Achilles tendon before I whirled away, out of reach of his swiping paws.

He grinned at me when he saw my adorable wolf, ignoring the wound I’d given him. One arm shifted into a massive paw and glittering claws. “Hello pretty, soft, sweet. I’m going to enjoy this.”

I bared my teeth in a smile. I was going to enjoy it much more than he would. Then I shifted, expanding, bubbling up in to the massive force of power and destruction that wasn’t cute. Not at all. My fur in this shape was patchy, my form more humanoid than canine, except for my head. That was all teeth and jaws. I drooled, because I

didn't have a lot of lip to keep back the hunger. And when I looked at him, I was hungry.

He stared at me, shock and horror replacing his contented smirk.

"Run," I rumbled in my deep, low bass of noxious misery.

He turned and run, but sprawled when he put weight on his left leg. I leapt on him, landing on his back, knocking the air out of him. He tried to roll over and shift, but for a moment I held him, letting my massive weight crush his lungs before I leapt off and let him roll and shift into a trembling, wicked beast. His were form wasn't anything like mine. He backed up while I slowly advanced.

"What happened to you?" he whined. "You're disgusting."

I narrowed my gleaming red eyes at him. That was the last thing he was going to say tonight. I lunged and ripped into him, his pretty fur flying. He fought back and left some good gashes, but the pain only made me hungrier. Werewolves don't eat werewolves. But I was so hungry. And he'd heal. Eventually.

I left him in the alley, bleeding, because he was still alive. He'd heal, but he wouldn't be assaulting any women, werewolf or not, for a long time.

I shifted back into my adorable wolf and headed home, clinging to shadows and feeling extremely satisfied. That lasted until I reached the yard. I leapt over the wall, landed, and then bright lights came on, blinding me, and there was Senator Silverton, crouching in front of me, a dark scowl on his beautiful face.

"You're covered in blood! How badly are you hurt?" His hand brushed the deepest gash, and I whimpered and looked up at him with my big eyes like honey, really working the adorable angle. He sighed deeply and picked me up. I was so surprised

that I let him. He took me right into the main house, to the kitchen, and started cleaning my wounds. It was the strangest thing to have someone touch me while I was in wolf form, either one of them. Not that he'd ever see my beast. My adorable little wolf was as much of my monster as he'd ever see.

"If you were going to exact vengeance, you should have asked me to come along," he murmured.

His hands were so gentle, and to be honest, channeling the big bad wolf took a lot of energy. I relaxed on the towel on the kitchen counter and let him clean the blood out of my fur, the dirt out of my wounds, and, in general, take care of me. I dozed off, comfortable and content, until he picked me up and carried me to the bay window seat. He left me there while he cleaned the kitchen, then shut off the lights, and left me there. I was inside the house. I couldn't open the doors unless I shifted into one or the other. But I'd heal more quickly in this form than the two-legged one.

That decided, I closed my eyes, and slept on the nicely padded window seat cushion. I woke up in the morning from Senator Silverton smacking a newspaper against the table, waking me up with a jerk.

"You killed him?" His voice was even, but his eyes were hard.

I peered at the paper, but I couldn't focus on the fine print very well in this form. It would give me a headache. I dropped off the bench and padded to the living room, where a throw blanket dangled over the arm of a couch. Mm. Cashmere and silk blend. I pulled it down with my teeth, climbed underneath and then shifted. I straightened up, pulling the blanket around me. The Senator had followed me, still holding the newspaper.

"I didn't kill him," I muttered, taking the paper out of his hands, then flinching when I saw the mutilated body of Ridley. Had I done that? I'd done a lot of it, but not that

huge gash across his neck that nearly severed his head, and not the gouges ripping out his kidneys, either. Had I? Maybe I'd lost control and my memories and...No. I hadn't lost control like that, not ever.

"No? But you did attack him."

I gave him a look. "I messed him up rather well, but I didn't kill him."

"You weren't in that adorable wolf form. How big are your claws in your beast form?"

I stiffened up. "Why?"

"Because you're going to have to prove that you didn't kill him. I'm your lawyer, remember? You need to think about your defense when you assault someone. Things tend to escalate," he said drily.

I backed away from him, feeling defensive, also incredibly underdressed, me in a blanket, him in his neat three-piece suit. "It was a fair fight between werewolves. Not murder. And you aren't my lawyer. I can't afford you."

His violet eyes almost glowed with resolve. "I am absolutely your lawyer, and you can't afford not to have me. I don't care if you killed him or not, except insofar as it implicates you. We both know that he killed those missing girls in Golden City. You were next on his list. But he was well-connected, or his former crimes wouldn't have been buried. So tell me every detail so that we can prepare a good defense."

I sputtered for a moment. "I didn't kill him! I left him breathing. I took some good chunks out of him, but not enough to kill him. I didn't slice his throat, and I didn't eviscerate him. Someone else finished him off, a wolf by the looks of it, but even larger than me."

He raised a brow, implacable, immovable. “Show me. I need to document it if I’m going to prove your innocence.”

“I’m not exactly innocent. I mean, I did rip him apart, but I didn’t finish him off. I don’t want to shift.”

His eyes narrowed at me. “Do you have a problem demonstrating your beast?”

“I’m not in the mood.”

His jaw hardened, and then he straightened up, crossed his arms and looked as aloof and disinterested as an elf could look, which was very. “I beg your pardon. I didn’t take your mood into consideration. You do realize that I’m implicated by the behavior of my house guests, but if you don’t mind...” He turned and started walking out.

I sighed heavily as I stared at my arm. I could shift just my arm, right? “Wait. Just don’t scream, cry, or faint, okay?”

He slowly came back to me, but his arms were still crossed. “I will try to restrain myself,” he said drily.

Was I seriously going to show him my beast? He’d never look at me the same again. Even Ridley, a born werewolf, had called me disgusting. It was one thing to know I was a werewolf, and an entirely different thing to know that I could kill you without breaking a sweat. I took a deep breath and shifted my fingertips, nails stretching to curve over my hands, sinew pulling and splitting while purple veins popped up. Everyone loves purple veins. Patchy fur sprouted up my arms, towards my shoulder, and then the beast came out, full throttle, in a rush of high sensation that left me towering over the Senator, still clutching the blanket in one hand around me to protect my modesty. I really didn’t want him to see my patchy fur and bulging veins,

and scaly skin. I wasn't adorable, just monstrous.

Senator Silverton inhaled sharply as he looked up at me, but only he held out his hand. "Let me measure your claws." His voice didn't even shake.

I bent down and exhaled in his hair, sending it floating around before the strands settled once more around his serene, beautiful face. I flexed my claws right in front of that straight, noble nose, almost brushing the tip of it.

He grasped my hand and then held it against his own before snapping a few pictures for comparison. "Your beast is strong."

"He deserved pain and humiliation, not death," I rumbled in that scratchy growl. I didn't hate him calling me strong. Much better than disgusting. And he was so pretty and would taste as good as he smelled.

"He deserved all three. You're right. You definitely didn't kill him. The monster who did had much bigger claws." He finally looked up from my massive claws to my massive maw. "It isn't the wolf who infected you, is it?"

I shrugged and pulled away, but he still had a grasp on my hand, the pads of my fingers against his. Something fluttered in my belly, something hungry, but not for flesh, at least not to eat. His soft skin would taste so nice. I wanted to press my nose against his throat and inhale his fear and sweetness. I wanted to follow him like Ridley followed pretty girls. I wanted to take advantage of his weakness and my strength.

I struggled with the beast, who was looking at Silverton as a different kind of prey. Finally, I pulled the wolf under my skin, trembling and weak-kneed from the effort. I sat down on the carpet, pulling the delicious throw around me and trying not to show my fear, once more in my gnome-elf skin.

Losing control to the wolf was my greatest fear. Assaulting the Senator like Ridley assaulted girls would make me a true monster. Maybe I should be locked up for Ridley's murder if it kept me from acting out on those terrifying instincts. I'd never wanted to hunt for more than meat before. Maybe it was Ridley's flesh, assimilating with mine, making me like him.

"Miss Era?" the Senator said, brushing my hair back from my face so he could look into my eyes. "I apologize for pushing you to shift when you weren't ready."

I looked up at him with a shaky smile. "You didn't cry. I'm so impressed."

"I was crying on the inside. Your beast is very..." His expression became particularly blank.

I laughed and managed to keep it out of sob territory as I patted his head. He was sitting next to me on the floor, like my wolf made his knees shaky too. "I know. I have the cutest, softest, fluffiest little wolf in the world, which is frustrating because werewolves never take me seriously, and then the beast comes out and then they're past serious to terrified. That's why I don't shift around other werewolves. They can't help not take me seriously until it's too late."

"Why would another werewolf kill Ridley?" he asked, leaning over his knees while he frowned in thought.

"Maybe he killed someone else's girlfriend, and it's a revenge strike."

"Maybe. Or someone's trying to frame you for his murder."

I made a face at him. "Or a monster's stalking me and doesn't want anyone else to mark their territory on my cashmere."

His eyes widened, then narrowed as he studied me. “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s nonsense. We were saying nonsense, right? Why would anyone want to frame me for something that will probably get brushed off? No one cares when werewolves kill each other?”

“Are you aware how difficult it would be to find someone with larger claws than yours?”

I blinked at him. “I know my beast form is slightly larger than average.”

“Mm. With some training, you could be impossible to defeat.” The way he looked at me was appraising and intrigued.

My beast stirred in my belly, and I felt the press of claws against my nail beds. She’d love to show him how absolutely powerful she could be. I broke out in a cold sweat. The last thing I needed was for my beast to get a crush on an elven senator. That was the last thing he needed as well. I stood up and took two steps away from him while my stomach churned from raw nerves. “If you have the documentation you need, I’ll go get dressed.” And hide in the pool house for the rest of the day. Maybe for the rest of my life.

“Very well. You should expect to get papers served the next time you go out in public.”

“Perfect. My plan was to hide in the pool house indefinitely.”

“Now you’re going to hide?” He looked slightly put out.

I gave him a sheepish smile and edged away until I was out of the room, then I turned and darted for the back door as fast as I could go. All day, I couldn’t hold still, even

to knit. My spells were as tangled as my yarn, and that night, I couldn't sleep. Who had killed Ridley if I didn't? I didn't, did I? And what beast had bigger claws than mine? I looked at my nails while I lay in my bed in the moonlight, the civilized nail beds that hid the monster just waiting under my skin to claim me and the Senator. My mouth watered at the thought of his pretty eyes. That's what worried me more than anything.

I couldn't keep hiding here, because it put my host at risk. Of course not. My stalker was dead. My life wasn't at risk. There was no reason for him to keep me here other than the Alta Manada nonsense. If I hurt someone who opened his home to me, I'd be a monster that truly deserved death. I'd leave first thing in the morning. Well, after I baked some cookies. I had to get on with my life and let the senator get on with his.

In the morning, I got up, showered, and dressed in my black skirt and vest that were a little tight, which is why they'd been in the back of my closet where Ridley's mark hadn't penetrated.

I was going to work and face reality, not hide in the Senator's mansion and pretend I was on vacation. Monsters didn't get vacations. I had to walk a few blocks away from the Senator's street to get to a bus stop. I wasn't nervous, just resigned to fate. I'd had a nice long run, but I never should have survived turning in the first place. Maybe the werewolves would execute me. Maybe they'd mate me to someone, and I'd kill him, and then I'd be executed. Either way, Senator Silverton wouldn't need to worry about me. The senator didn't need his name mixed with a werewolf who shouldn't have gotten angry and ripped Ridley apart in the first place. A civilized person would have reported him, but I wasn't civilized, however much I looked like it.

When I got to work, I went through security and then took the elevator up to the sixth floor, where Singer was located. The doors opened, and I went straight to my boss's office.

“Come in, Delphi!” Nanette smiled and waved at me, dark eyes twinkling while her hair swirled around her even more magically than usual. With her mermaid blood, her hair was always glorious. Her extra cheer meant that she wanted me to take someone else’s assignment. Usually, I was game, but today was not one of those days.

“Hey. I need to—” I started, but she cut me off.

“You remember Moss.” Nanette gestured to the goblin girl in the corner who claimed to be fifteen so she could legally work four hours a day. I had my doubts. She was small, but wily.

“Of course. Hi Moss.” Her full name was Sludgemoss, but for some reason, it didn’t quite seem like the thing to call a young woman.

She flashed me a bright smile filled with sharp teeth.

Nanette continued. “I want the two of you to work as a team to cover for Loren while she’s out of town. She had a family emergency. I’m sure between the two of you, you can make short work of it.”

I stared at her. “Loren had a family emergency?” Loren covered sensational crime, such as a baseball star being found ripped apart in a back alley. She was extremely good at uncovering the shocking truth. She’d rather lose her right eye than a story like Ridley’s murder. She’d spin it and spin it for weeks.

“Yes, she left this morning in a rush. I believe she had to leave the country.” Nanette’s bright eyes beamed out of her warm skin, wavy hair reminding me of tentacles. She was like tentacles, wrapping around you and sucking you into whatever she needed you to do. That’s why the paper was such a success.

I took a step away from her. “I was actually going to ask for a leave of absence.”

Nanette laughed. “Oh, Delphi. Such a joker. Don’t worry, I have your vacation time scheduled for your sister’s wedding.”

“Brother.”

“Whatever. But right now, I need you on this investigation. I checked and your social calendar is scant this week. I need you to focus on this baseball player’s death. Find a new angle no one else has. Interview the wolves. They all love you. Everyone loves you.” She wrinkled her nose. “You actually smell like them.”

I winced and sniffed my arm. “From the baseball interview? They put their arms around my shoulders so their armpits...” I shuddered melodramatically and Moss giggled.

“Yeah, that stench will stay for weeks unless you soak in tomato juice or something. Werewolf sweat is worse than skunk spray.”

Which wasn’t true at all, but stories like that tended to stick. Werewolf urine was much worse than their sweat.

“Loren didn’t write up anything on the Ridley murder?” I asked.

Nanette grinned at me. “I love the way you immediately jumped to calling it murder. Sounds sensational. I don’t know. I imagine she called me from the airport and didn’t hear anything before that, because we both know that she would drop her family for a murder every day of the week. It’s good she’s taking time for family. Heaven knows she needs it, but right now, what we need is this story.”

I opened my mouth to say that I really wasn’t going to make it, but it was too weird for Loren to run off like that. “Do you have her home address? I’ll go over there and check for notes.”

Nanette grinned. “Sure. I’ll text it to you along with her email and password. Moss can open the door for you.”

Moss’s eyes widened. “Are you suggesting something?”

“Never. You probably won’t even have to pick locks, because Delphi will just look sweet and adorable, and the doorman will let her in.”

Moss sighed in disappointment. “That’s probably true. You’re too adorable.”

I wrinkled my brows. “Thanks?” Neither of them had seen my beast. And that’s how it was going to stay. Which is what I’d thought the very night I’d ended up showing my beast to my landlord. I nodded at the goblin. “Let’s go. We’ll go through her desk first to check her email and see if she left any notes before we hit her apartment.”

“Or you could go directly to the crime scene,” Nanette said.

I gave her a brief smile and left the room, Moss on my heels.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Six

“I expected you to protest,” Mossy said in a low voice. “Do you think something happened to Loren? And if so, don’t you think it’s too dangerous to investigate?”

I frowned and glanced at the slight green-skinned girl. She was almost too observant. Was it too dangerous for her?

She flashed her sharp teeth at me in a grin. “Don’t worry about me. At the slightest hint of trouble, I’ll run. I’m very fast.” She smirked and nodded like there was nothing to worry about.

I sighed. But if Moss wanted to be involved, it would be virtually impossible to stop her.

Loren’s desk was very neat, everything packed away like her trip was intentional. Nothing was askew or out of place, like she’d been in a rush. I clicked on her computer and waited for it to load while Moss fiddled with Loren’s tidy pencils.

“You could check the security cams to see if she was alone when she came in last night,” she said idly.

I nodded at her. “We’ll check on our way out.”

“You smell like werewolf and worry. I’m not sure which is more unpleasant.”

“I’m sure they’re both equally amazing. Aha!” I got into her email and checked to see

that the notification from the police was unread. I checked the time it was sent and then forwarded it to my inbox. I quickly went through her files on working projects, but there wasn't anything about Ridley. There was a small clipping about the case of a missing girl in Golden Gates City, but nothing to tie it to the werewolf.

I shook my head and turned off her computer, then nodded at Moss. "Let's go then."

She followed silently, keeping up with my hurried pace. I took the stairs two at a time, and when I reached the floor for security, I walked out into the main passage slowly, after checking it for werewolves. All clear.

"You're still looking at the cams even though nothing about her desk was suspicious?"

"You suggested it."

"Yeah, because I'm a paranoid goblin. You're a social butterfly. It's like the time with the demon cultists who tried to take over the Library of Antiquities. You actually could be an investigative reporter."

I didn't like hearing the Senator's words echoed by my young co-worker. I didn't want to be an investigative reporter. I wasn't actually going to do this case, because I'd most likely be taken by the wolves and my life would be over. But in the meantime, I'd like to know that Loren was definitely not involved in the Ridley mess. That I'd caused when I left him bleeding and helpless in an alley for anyone to effortlessly finish off. How could I have been so stupid?

"Hey, Delphi! And little Mossy-Nose. How are you two?" Gregor the Dwarf smiled beatifically while he sharpened a knife. He was armed to the teeth, but unlike most dwarves, didn't hate people.

“Hi, Gregor,” I said, returning his smile.

“What kind of cookies do you have for me today?” Okay, maybe he was happy to see me because I always brought him a sugar rush.

“I didn’t make any today. I was wondering if I could see the footage of last night on the floor. I’m trying to check the timing of one of the employees.”

“Who?” he asked, waking up his screen.

“Loren Umptry.”

“Hm. Log shows she came in at four-thirteen a.m. and left at four-twenty-five.”

“And you have video of the floor during that time?”

He flashed me a quizzical frown. “Sure, but why do you want to see it?”

“She thinks Loren might have gotten murdered,” Moss said equal parts drama and excitement.

Gregor drew his fluffy brows together as he studied her, then shrugged and pulled up another screen. “Here we are, your floor, and there’s the elevator, four-fifteen, then the lights on, and our girl walking towards her desk. Looks tired. Usually she charges, not walks.”

We all watched as Loren went to her desk and organized everything neatly, put her things in her bag, closed down her computer and then stood and walked back out. I didn’t get a close-up of her desk, since she was in the middle of a dozen or so, but it was definitely her, and she was definitely unaccompanied by anyone visible. I hadn’t smelled anyone else at her desk. So what was I doing here, being so suspicious?

“Thanks Gregor. Next time I’ll bring you some gingersnaps.”

His eyes twinkled. “No problem, Delphi-girl. My pleasure. Later, Mossy-Nose.”

When we were out of security, she huffed. “I hate it when he calls me Mossy-Nose. My nose isn’t mossy. If Moss is too short for him, he could go by my real name, Sludgemoss. At least that’s dignified.”

I glanced at her and then looked down over the balcony that led to the main floor, with the security gates, where four werewolves led by Max were arguing with the security guy.

I immediately backed up four steps, so I was out of line of sight of them. “Let’s take the back stairs. I think my scooter might be out of the shop by now.”

“Your scooter? You want to get it now?” Her skeptical expression matched her cocked hip and crossed arms.

I nodded and linked arms with hers, hurrying down the hall past Gregor’s centrally located office to the back stairs that were mostly used for emergency. The back door was exit-only, which suited us perfectly. Once we got outside, I walked briskly so Mossy had to hurry to keep up.

“And when you get your scooter, we’ll go to the scene of the crime?”

“Loren’s house.”

“Why? You saw the footage.”

“Because she went in after the email from the authorities was sent.”

“So, she didn’t see it.”

“She would have seen it on her phone. She would have checked it on her phone, but it was marked unread.”

“Maybe she was paralyzed by grief because her grandpa died or something.”

“Maybe. But she’d always check an email from the authorities.”

She grabbed my arm. “Wait, you actually think something happened to her? What? She walked right in there of her own free...” She shuddered. There were things that could take away your free will and turn you into nothing but a vessel. “Shouldn’t you go to the police or the Gray Society?”

“I have no evidence.”

“But you’re so adorable. They’d believe you just based on that.”

I gave her a look. “Not as adorable as you are with those green dreadlocks and rosy cheeks.”

She made a face of revulsion. “Ew. I’m not adorable.”

“If it’s an insult, maybe you shouldn’t say it so many times to someone who could get your hours cut.”

“Was that a threat?” she eyed me suspiciously then shook her head. “Naw, you’re just worried that I might be getting in danger with you. Don’t worry, Delphi. I told you, I’m super-fast and not afraid of being a coward. I will leave you, no problem.”

“That’s very comforting.”

The shop with my scooter was open, and the cherry red thing was as cute as I remembered it being. I sighed happily as I settled onto the seat once I'd signed the papers and paid my fees. I'd enjoy riding her for perhaps the last time.

I handed Mossy the helmet, which she put on before climbing behind me.

"It's such an adorable bike," she muttered.

I laughed and then turned on the engine, pushed in the clutch and took off. I'd had them add more power to the engine, as well as given her a full tune-up that would make her purr like a kitten.

Speaking of kittens, in Loren's kitchen, a gray and white beast crouched in the middle of her white floor, staring up at us with big blue eyes while we stared back at the little fluffy thing.

"I didn't know Loren had a cat," I said, sniffing deeply, but not too deeply because I didn't want Mossy to know I was a werewolf, although what was the point when the truth would come out soon enough?

"She doesn't." Mossy sneezed loudly and shook her head, dark green dreadlocks waving. "I would have noticed because I'm allergic."

"Then how did it get in?"

She shrugged. "She's a fussy cat, not the kind that could rip a screen and climb in. And look how fat she is. Street kittens are scrawny enough to squeeze through a crack, but not this one. If I wasn't allergic, I'd take her home to eat."

"Mossy!"

She grinned at me. “Just joking. Knew that’d get you. So, what are we looking for?”

There were no signs of forced entry. Loren’s place wasn’t an apartment but a small house just out of downtown in a neighborhood of artistic types. Not wealthy, but people who cared. Everything was neat and tidy. I couldn’t tell if her clothes were missing. The only out-of-place thing was the kitten.

“There’s no cat food,” Mossy said, coming out of the pantry and avoiding the cute kitten, who made it difficult because she’d decided to chase Mossy’s long laces.

“And no one would go on a trip without taking the cat somewhere else, so why is it here?” I walked hesitantly to the kitten and then crouched down over it. I was a werewolf. Cats didn’t like wolves. She looked at me and then meowed and batted my hand. She was absolutely adorable. She had a collar with a cute little star constellation on it.

“Is your name Star?”

“It’s the constellation of lynx. That’s optimistic,” Mossy said.

“Oh. So it is.” I smiled at her. “I didn’t know that you studied astronomy.”

“Astrology, but same difference. My aunt’s a fortune-teller.”

“Maybe we should have her predict the future.”

“You could go. She does a good job. You’ll have a tall, dark, handsome stranger, romantic adventures, and true love. I’ll have a buck for bringing a sucker in.” She winked at me.

“Win-win. What do we do with Lynx?”

“We don’t do anything. I’m allergic.” She danced backwards, away from the pouncing kitten.

“But I’m...” I didn’t say ‘a werewolf.’

She looked at me with raised brows.

“I’m living in someone’s pool house right now. I don’t have my own place.”

“So take it to a shelter. If I took it home, my cousins would eat it. No joke.”

I took a deep breath and scooped up the kitten. She stared at me with big soft eyes and mewed. She was truly adorable. And also, my beast kind of wanted to eat her. I tucked her into my bag and turned to Mossy. “And now we have our best clue yet.”

“If you say so.”

I nodded firmly while the kitten meowed in my bag. “Now, we check the crime scene.”

My heart was beating too fast the whole way. Returning to the scene of the crime wasn’t what I’d intended to do this morning. Or ever.

The alley was blocked off by yellow tape, but no one was currently there. Of course, they’d moved the body already, but the blood wouldn’t have been cleaned up yet. I parked my scooter at one end and handed her my bag with the kitten in it. “Watch Lynx and Cherry.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, taking the bag, but holding it at arm’s length. “Hurry up.”

I nodded and took out my phone, taking shots before I ducked under the tape and

continued down the alley, crouching down to take pics of the blood, of which there was a great deal. Some would be mine. Yes, I was definitely irrevocably tied to this crime scene. What would Loren have seen? I clicked open the email I'd forwarded and read through it, checking the photos of the body with the alley. I took photos and scanned the whole thing, but it took me ages to notice that the large garbage dumpster had been moved a few inches. I crouched there, staring at the big metal square, avoiding stepping in the dried blood, trying to peer beneath the can without getting my hair on the filthy floor. Senator Silverton had washed it out so well for me. My beast wanted to rumble at the thought of him.

"There you are. You're little, but not even you'd fit underneath that can, and think how disgusting that would be." Max's voice was slightly amused, but underneath was a strain of worry.

I looked up to see him standing at the end of the alley opposite where I'd left Mossy and my scooter.

I stood up and held up my hands. "Max. I didn't do it."

He snorted. "Obviously. But you were here. What wolf ripped him apart like that?"

I blinked at him. "I don't know. If you don't think I killed him, why are you here?"

"For your protection. And I don't get to take you into Song for you to choose one of the nice wolves there. I have to take you north. So, come on. We just grabbed some lunch so you can eat on the way."

I stared at him. "You don't need to worry about my protection."

His brows lowered. "You're standing in Ridley's blood. Your own blood is in the mix. You shouldn't have been in this. He got mixed up in some bad business. Should

have known the first time he opened his mouth. No respect. I'm just glad you're okay."

"Max..." If I argued that I could defend myself, he'd want to see my beast. And if he saw my beast, he'd think I killed Ridley. There was no winning.

I licked my lips and glanced towards the other end of the alley.

"You think I don't have someone at the other end? The chase is over, Delphi. You had a good run." He smiled as he walked slowly towards me.

I laughed and sounded slightly hysterical. "I was just thinking that this morning, that I had a good run. But Max, there's another woman that I'm worried about. She's a journalist and she..." He lunged and grabbed me, wrapping me up and carrying me towards the alley where the others waited.

"Yeah, you're going to have to worry about yourself. Because you, Delphi, are in a pickle. I just hope you don't end up mated to someone who doesn't appreciate you."

I didn't struggle, just let him carry me while my mind raced. "Max, how hard would it be to move that garbage bin?"

He grunted, then paused and glanced back at it. "Depends on the shift. I could do it now, but it'd be a struggle. My beast would tear it apart if it was in his way. Why?"

"It was moved a few inches to the side. You can see where the bottom marks the alley. The entire thing moved precisely that far. Isn't that weird?"

"What's weird is that you're worried about garbage bins when you're off to face the Alta who will mate you to someone you've never met."

“That’s out of my control. I just hope he likes kittens.”

“Why?” he asked, pulling away so he could look at me.

I smiled sweetly. “Because I just got one.”

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Seven

I n the backseat, I looked out the window, trying not to notice the way the other men were staring at me. Mostly I sensed sympathy, which made me more nervous than if I'd sensed interest or aggression. I'd be taken somewhere filled with old-fashioned werewolves who believed that females needed protection and males needed power. They'd take one look at my adorable wolf and then they'd start the teasing. My beast would come out, and then the problems would escalate.

“So, why don't you tell me about last night?” Max said after a few minutes of silence. “How'd Ridley get you in that alley? Did you see the monster? How did you get away? You fought. Good girl.”

Good girl? I wanted to snarl at him, and that wasn't even bad. “I was walking, and I ran into him.”

He raised a brow. “He was hunting you, then. Did you see the other beast?”

I shook my head. “No. I got away because he didn't take me seriously. I'm very fast in my wolf form.”

“I'm sure you are, but still, it's unlikely...”

I shifted, and then had to climb out of my clothes so I could sit there, fluffy and adorable. Actually, it would be much more comfortable on the drive in this shape. I lay down with my face and paws on Max's legs and gazed up at him adorably.

He stared at me, face impassive. “Never mind. You’re fast?”

I nodded and then stretched out so my back legs were on the guy next to the door. He put a hand on my back, stroking my silky fur automatically. It felt very nice. Werewolves didn’t have a lot of physical boundaries and piled up to sleep more often than not. That is, other wolves did that. I stayed alone.

Max frowned down at me. “Delphi, now I’m really worried. What’s a wolf like you doing on your own? I could gobble you up in two bites.”

“One and a half,” the guy petting me said.

I raised my head and growled at him, ears pulled back.

“Sorry,” he said with a smile, but it was soft, like his eyes, because I was adorable.

I huffed and put my head back on Max’s leg, and closed my eyes.

Max scratched behind my ears, exactly where it felt best. “Yeah, you’re worn out. And you tried to fight him? You look good, though. No blood in your fur, just a few fresh scars.” He leaned down and sniffed me deeply, then pulled away with a sour look on his face.

“You stink of elf.”

“But she’s part elf,” the other guy said.

“Sure, Brick, but now she smells like a night elf, not a woods elf. It’s a different stink.”

Brick leaned over to sniff me, so I turned my head to snap at him.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “You’re just so…”

I growled, and he raised his hands in surrender, then kept petting me, so I relaxed and drowsed off, my head once more on my alpha’s leg.

“You sure you don’t want to shift back? This form is even more vulnerable looking than the other,” Max said.

Brick answered. “But she’ll heal better in this form, and they’ll make her shift, anyway. It’s custom.”

Max rumbled his disapproval, but he wasn’t going to do anything about it. Why didn’t he defy the Alta? He was powerful in his own right, maybe the most influential alpha on the continent, because Singsong had so many werewolves. He kept a tight leash on them, too. More wolves, fewer crimes by werewolves, and all because of Max. He knew werewolf politics like my mom knew gnomish, how it was when you were born into a pack instead of turned unwillingly later in life, or on the outskirts because you were part elf. If he thought he needed to take me in, he had a reason. That made me nervous. Not nervous enough to stay awake, though.

I slept until the car slowed down, bumping over an unpaved road. When I raised my head, Max murmured. “Sorry about that, Delphi. Not much further, just around the lake, and to the cabins. We’ll park there, then take the trail to the amphitheater. You’ll enjoy the run.” He smoothed my fur and gave me a small smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He was my alpha, but he couldn’t protect me from this.

I wagged my tail and sat up to look out the window. We were in the mountains, the pines standing tall, strong, with drifts of snow in the shadow of the largest ones. Spring hadn’t gotten a strong grasp yet. It was beautiful though, the untouched woods with one single road winding through it, off the beaten path, free from anything that might interfere with pack law.

I whined before I could stop myself.

“It’s okay,” Brick said, trying to sound encouraging, but it didn’t reach his concerned eyes. “They’ll make you a good match or our Alpha won’t stand for it.”

Max grunted.

We curved around the small lake, the water lapping in gentle swirls from the tugging wind. I wanted to jump into that lake and swim away, but then I’d only smell like wet dog. I should have made my cookies this morning. If I was going to be mated or executed, I shouldn’t smell this bad.

Once we were around the lake, we passed through the last stretch of woods, the branches reaching over the narrow road, protective, dark, cool, and then we came out in a clearing, cabins on one side in the trees, a large meadow stretching out on the other. It was beautiful, timeless, and completely removed from civilization or modern expectations.

We parked on the edge of the woods, then Max got out and held the door open for me. I hesitated only a moment before I leapt lightly after him. Max closed the door while I looked around, breathing deep to catch the scents of wolf, human, ashes and the fresh breeze that rippled over everything.

“What is that? A puppy?” a teenager said, coming out from behind a cabin, wearing a plaid shirt and jeans. He was cleaner than I expected a kid to be in the wild.

Brick came up on my other side and growled at the kid.

He backed up a few steps. “I meant no disrespect. I’ve just never seen such a small wolf.”

“She’s my pack,” Max said, not looking at the kid, but looking over his head at the trees. “Well, shall we get going? Let’s see how fast you can be.” He broke into a run for the trees and I leapt after him instinctively. Brick fell in behind me, and we ran down narrow trails, up and down hills, leaping over streams. I sank my paws into the mud as I leapt and enjoyed myself without worrying about silly human troubles. We ran until it was shadowy blue dusk, and the air grew chill.

Max slowed down, and I followed suit, happy with our run, happy to follow my alpha, backed up by Brick. I didn’t let the future bother me. Max put a hand on my neck and I stopped, straining my senses to pick up whatever he’d heard.

A torch came to life, a bright flickering fire held above a bare-chested man with a very scruffy blond beard. He had blue and red paint smeared across his forehead and under his cheeks, like one of the crazy baseball fans.

He looked at me, and for a second there was a hint of surprise in his blue eyes, reflecting the flickering golden flames, but then he turned and strode off, leading us into the rocks, onto a path separate from the one we’d been on, leading up rough-hewn stone steps. Some of the steps were high enough that I had to leap to get to the next one, but I could jump very high, so it was fun, almost as enjoyable as our run on the trail.

My tail was wagging when we came out into the amphitheater. Sheer cliffs were broken up by ledges where men and wolves perched, looking down at us. It was almost a perfect circle, with more of those jagged steps leading up to each ledge.

Max stood next to the guy with the torch, my alpha’s body language casual, relaxed, but I was close enough to smell his unease. He shouldn’t be nervous about this. I licked his hand, trying to help him relax.

He glanced down and smiled wryly as he rubbed behind my ears for a moment. I sat

at attention and looked around at the crowd, looking adorable. Should I try to look fierce? This form was what it was. No sense fighting the inevitable.

“This is the female you’ve allowed to run unprotected in Singsong City for over a decade?” A man dropped down from the ledge, his long dark beard tangled with silver. He was old, and werewolves didn’t show their age for a very long time.

Max grunted. “That’s right, Alta. She’s very fast.”

“You’re saying that she can protect herself because of her speed?” Old Blackbeard gave Max a squinty look.

“No, Alta. I’m saying that she kept running away from me when I mentioned that she needed protection. It’s taken fifteen years to catch up to her.”

The Alta snorted. “Is she any larger in her human form?”

“About twice that size.”

“So still very small. Well,” he said, coming to stand directly in front of me.

I wagged my tail and looked up at him adorably.

“Are you ready to be mated to a strong protector?”

I stopped wagging my tail and couldn’t help backing up into Brick, who was rather similar to a brick wall, come to think of it.

“No? Then you’re here to challenge me as Alta?”

I crouched down, because that’s not what I wanted.

Old Black beard leaned over to study me with concerned eyes. They reminded me of Max's. Were they related? He came from a prestigious family, so it was very likely. "These are dangerous days in Singsong. Monsters roaming the night, sorcerers plucking souls from the air, even the angels coming down to burn everything to the ground."

"What about Ridley?" a woman said, dropping off the ledge and coming to stalk towards us.

Old Blackbeard got a pained look. "Alpha Golden. Your nephew pushed his limits further than could guarantee his safety."

"Her blood was mixed with his in that alley. There was no other. Ridley would have drawn the blood of any other creature there." Unless he was already unconscious.

"How do you suppose this female," the old man said, gesturing at me. "Killed your son?"

"You haven't seen her beast form. My son will challenge her. It will be good for her to show her strength so the males may know if she is a worthy mate." Her curled lip showed what she really wanted, and it was my death and pain, not a happy match for me.

I whined and looked up at Max.

He put a hand on my head, but didn't look at me. "She needs a protector. That's why we're here. If a male isn't strong enough to make up for her weaknesses, then he need not apply. Asking her to fight Silas is an exercise in brutality."

The woman hissed as she stormed across the clearing, her eyes burning gold from her rage. "Her blood mixed with his. It is pack law. She has been challenged. She will

accept or die.”

Pack law was so stupidly archaic. It really did need to be entirely rewritten.

Max growled at her, but old Blackbeard stepped between the two, arms raised in a placating gesture. “She’ll receive no permanent damage, just a spar. Silas will be gentle with her.” He shot a warning look at the shirtless guy who had his long hair pulled back in a topknot, the sides shaved.

He was staring at me intently, like he wanted to taste my steaming entrails. “I will test the female.”

The female? Why didn’t that alpha chick slap them all? Oh, right. Because she was completely insane.

Max turned to me. “Are you okay sparring with him? He can’t do any permanent damage, but that’s not saying much, considering how much we can heal from.”

I wagged my tail and licked his hand. I could handle pain. I was a werewolf. It would be fine.

At first, it really was fine. Silas shifted into his large, fierce, golden wolf and I had no trouble evading him. I was fast, agile, and he was big and slow. But we were pinned in a circle, and he ran me around, saving his energy while I got more and more exhausted from running and twisting away from him. I was fast, but my energy wouldn’t last forever.

After fifteen minutes of running, I twisted away from the swipe of his claws a second too late, and those claws raked across my ribs, sending me flying, stunned, pinned by him in the next second.

He put his jaws over my throat and squeezed. Not enough to break the skin, just enough to slowly suffocate me, like his weight on my lungs wasn't enough. I kicked and twisted, trying to get him off me, but he was too heavy.

"If she'd been in the woods, he never would have caught her," Max rumbled.

"It's essential to be capable of holding your own, no matter the terrain," the old man said.

I lay there on the stones, while that wolf choked the life out of me. No matter how I kicked or whined or struggled, there was no way out.

Until my beast took over.

She rippled under my skin with a shudder and then rolled through me, tossing the golden wolf off as I shifted into the monster that drew several gasps of surprise.

"She killed my nephew! There's your proof!" the golden alpha cackled.

Silas crouched away from me, his eyes gleaming and then his skin rippled, and I was facing a beast that was much more intimidating than Ridley's had been.

"This is much better," he growled, looking me up and down.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You must not like to breathe." I leapt on him, but he rolled with me. For a moment I struggled against him, but at the last second, I twisted so I was on top. My jaws were around his throat, and it was my turn to squeeze. I tasted his blood and wanted more. My jaws ached to close down and rip out, but I wasn't here to prove that I was a murderer. I hadn't killed Ridley. I didn't lose control of my beast. Not then, and not now.

I squeezed, ignoring his clawing until finally, he was still. I released him and backed away, wiping my mouth from the blood and excessive drool with the back of my monster paw.

The old Alta nodded at me. “Do you challenge the Golden pack?”

I growled and shook my head. “No. I defend myself. I protect myself. I need no wolf mate.” The thought of Senator Silverton passed through my beast brain for some reason that was going to make me nauseous later.

“Did you kill Ridley? I assume it was a fair fight.” He spoke to me as more of an equal. Finally.

“I didn’t kill him. I left him alive. He should have healed. Something else killed him.”

The Alta rubbed his beard as he considered. “You defeated Silas. But surely there is a wolf here who can defeat you. Who would like to win her beast?” he asked the surrounding wolves.

There were several howls, and then another guy leapt down, shifted into this very pretty beast with gray hair and a snowy face that reminded me of Lynx’s markings, and then I had to worry about fighting this beast and not killing him. He was harder to beat than Silas and knocked me rolling, but I managed to use his momentum to throw him and knock him out against the wall, but then there was another, and another. Six beasts challenged me, and I defeated them all, but each one left their mark, more with every battle until I could barely stand after the sixth.

“Well done,” the Alta said in a kindly voice as he came towards me where I crouched in the classic werewolf pose. “You say that you didn’t kill Ridley?”

I was breathing hard, and it took time to get out the words. “I wanted him scarred, not dead. He marked my cashmere.”

His brows raised. “He marked your cashmere? You’re a knitter? How delightfully domestic. If there’s a beast out there with claws that large, then you and your yarn need protection.”

“I’ll protect myself,” I growled.

He tugged on his beard. “We shall see.” He shifted into this massive black beast that easily dwarfed mine. This wasn’t an ordinary beast. A war-beast. That’s what they were called. I instinctively backed away from him while he stayed for a moment, watching me out of gleaming eyes. Why did he want me to have a mate so badly? If I was strong, they said I needed a mate. If I was weak, I needed a mate. I didn’t need anyone, but it didn’t matter because they had an agenda that had nothing to do with what I wanted.

I snarled and lunged at him. He was faster than I imagined, and threw me over his shoulder without the slightest effort. I hit the rock wall and slid to the ground, stunned for a moment before I came up and ran back at him. He twisted away, and grabbed my wrist, broke it, and my leg before I realized what he was doing.

I collapsed in howls as he backed away from me.

“Need protection,” he rumbled in a low, deep, grave voice that I hated.

I snarled and lunged at him and managed to rake him across the chest with my claws before he had that arm as well. He snapped the elbow that time, and then returned the blow across my face, then body, sending me sprawling back, soaked in my own streaming blood.

He studied me solemnly. “Your beast is done.” And then turned and walked away, shifting as he went, back into a man.

I closed my eyes so I wouldn’t have to see him naked. My beast struggled, but the weight of the Alta’s command was as heavy as my own exhaustion from lack of blood, from humiliation, from frustration. No, I couldn’t beat the Alta, but who could? Did everyone who couldn’t beat the Alta need a protector? That made no sense.

I coughed and gurgled, and then my beast melted away, leaving me in my human form, broken, bleeding, thoroughly defeated. The humiliation was worse than the pain, but they were both up there. What was the Alta’s game? Would he claim me as his mate? That would be ludicrous. But there was nothing I could do about it. There was nothing I could do about any of it.

“Who will be her protector?” the Alta asked, wearing a pair of pants although his chest was bare beneath his beard as he stood over me while I bled at his feet. This would make such a fine painting. The senator could hang it in his elegant hall. We’d call it, ‘the great protector,’ and laugh at the irony.

“I think you have to take that responsibility,” Max said, standing up from his crouched position. He hadn’t moved during all of those fights. “You’re the only one who can defeat her beast. Who wants a mate like that? Particularly when she’s unwilling?”

The old man gave Max a look. “You think I would be a better mate than you?”

Max’s eyes grew cold. “I never offered for her.”

“Then I’ll send her to Henredon. He could match her.”

Max laughed. “If you could find him. He’s been avoiding you and your manipulations more successfully than anyone.”

The Alta sighed heavily. “Why won’t you be reasonable, Max? How long are you going to refuse a mate? She’s a good female. She knits. And that sweet wolf, and the fierce beast, she is a perfect combination of lethal and lovable. You can’t claim that she wants you for your power.”

“Because she doesn’t want me,” Max stated flatly. “I’m not going to force anyone to be my mate.”

“Then Henredon it is,” the old Alta said with a dark scowl.

There was a thud of boots on rock and then spinning golden lights flared high above, and there, standing on the top ledge, was Senator Silverton in a tuxedo. He had a long cape draped over his shoulders, but that was definitely a tuxedo underneath. Interesting. I’d started hallucinating sooner than I expected. I must have an amazing concussion.

“I will protect her,” the prettiest elf in the world said in a voice that carried and wrapped around you and filled you with a sense of the inevitable. This was the weirdest hallucination ever, but also the best, because he was just that pretty.

Chapter Eight

I passed out for a second, but then woke up from the pain of being dragged upright. Was that Max? What was he doing? Where was I? Where were my clothes? Then again, who needed clothes when you have open flesh wounds?

No, this hurt too much to be a hallucination. The pain of trying to put weight on my broken leg cleared my head astonishingly well.

“Stand,” Max murmured and then released me, which didn’t hurt as much as him holding me up, but on the other hand, balancing on one leg while my other broken limbs dangled wasn’t exactly fun.

“Do you accept the senator as your protector?” the Alta asked me while he pulled on a nice blue button-down shirt.

“Pardon?” I mumbled through swollen lips. I blinked and then looked up to see if it was possible that I hadn’t hallucinated.

Senator Silverton leapt lightly down to another ledge, then another, until he was in the circle with us. I stared at him. Yes, he really was wearing a tuxedo. He came forward with his charming politician smile, holding out a hand to the Alta.

They shook hands, and then Silverton gestured above us. Light flickered and then lightning lit up a figure in a cloak with a large decal on his chest that I recognized as the sorcerer’s guild. I was definitely still hallucinating.

A wind rose, and then the silhouette of an enormous winged beast flanked the sorcerer while on his other side another creature crouched with cruel twisted features, cast from stone. A gargoyle. So we had a sorcerer, a dragon, and a gargoyle up there. That made absolutely no sense. Were they having some kind of political thing and needed the Alta to join them?

Silverton said, smiling persuasively, “As you see, I’ve brought a few guardians who can assist me in escorting Miss Era home. Her safety is assured.”

“Delphi’s a werewolf.” The Alta looked Silverton up and down. “Unless I’m mistaken, you aren’t.”

“I’m not, but I have recently read your entire werewolf code of law. You can only force her to mate with someone who can defeat her. That leaves you. Aren’t you a bit old for her?”

The Alta scowled at Silverton, rubbing his black beard. “I’m not going to force her to mate to an outsider. I refuse to let you challenge her.”

“I’m not going to challenge her. She already chose me. She’s living in my house. She asked me to let her stay when this Ridley threat arose. She asked me to be her protector. It was one thing to date her, but taking on such a role is serious. I had to consider, but now that I have thought it over, I accept the role of her protector and will serve her faithfully.”

Dating? We weren’t dating. Were we? His tuxedo was ready, but my outfit was distinctly lacking. And there he was, getting his first glimpse of my gorgeous nudity. I sighed and then winced when so many things hurt. Ow, ow, ow. Who cared if the Senator would always see the poor helpless girl wearing bruises? I did. I didn’t need to worry about anything else, but here I was, worried about something as stupid as what the Senator thought about me naked.

“Max, is this true? Were they dating?” the Alta asked with a frown.

Nobody asked me. Good thing. Breathing was tricky enough. Also, my thoughts were still muddled. Was this really happening? Surreal. The elf had such pretty eyes, and his tuxedo was so fancy. He could make an event out of anything, even a circle of barbarians.

Max rubbed his chin and glanced at me, a warning in his eyes. “He washed the blood out of her fur. You could smell him on her, but she never stated directly that he was her protector.”

“Because I hadn’t committed myself,” Silverton said, like that was perfectly reasonable.

The Alta frowned at him, then up at the ledge where Silverton’s backup watched. The Alta didn’t seem worried, but that was a serious threat that Silverton had walked into his territory, er, flown into his territory. “You’ve been hunting a monster for a long time. Do you think it’s connected?”

“You’ve seen Ridley’s death strike. It doesn’t match her claw size. Or yours. The killer’s bigger than any wolf’s.”

The Alta rumbled low in his chest. “So, you’d use her as bait?”

“You doubt my genuine concern for a charming member of my city?”

The Alta grunted, still rubbing his chin. Finally, he turned to me. “Did you ask him to protect you?”

“Did I?” I frowned, trying to remember, but everything was so surreal. “I went to his house and asked him for something.” Help finding a loophole in the werewolf law,

but safety from my stalker had been mixed in that. I finally said, “I asked for his protection,” but I wasn’t entirely sure.

Silverton threw his cloak around my shoulders, the sudden weight knocking me off my one leg, but before I could sprawl into the dirt, I was in the Senator’s strong arms. Weird.

I stared into his eyes, aware that I must look about as appetizing as a smashed slug. “This is going to ruin your tuxedo,” I said.

“Such is the price of chivalry.” He stepped into a loop attached to a rope that disappeared into the inky darkness above us. He shifted my weight until I was more securely against him with one arm, and with the other, he held to the cord.

I looked up into the darkness, but I couldn’t see a sign of wings or lightning. “Where did you get a dragon and a gargoyle?”

“Libby’s husband is one, and her best friend’s daughter is the other. The sorcerer is here because I bought him.”

"Are sorcerers very expensive to buy?" I gasped as we rose into the air more quickly than I’d expected. When hands grabbed me, pulling me into the cockpit of a silent helicopter, I could only stare around at the angels who manned the war chopper.

Definitely a hallucination.

“You didn’t buy the angels,” I whispered when Senator Silverton put me in a seat and fastened the belts.

“No, they can’t be bought,” he agreed evenly.

“Then why are they here?” I looked over at a particularly terrifying archangel with wings and an aura that clung to him like the shadow of death.

He glanced at me and I looked down at my blood-stained hands, not wanting to meet his eyes.

“It’s their chopper. They refused to loan it, but agreed to come along for the ride.”

“The beast,” the broody angel of death said softly, but it wasn’t soft enough for me to be able to pretend not to have heard him.

“My beast’s going to stalk the pretty elf,” I mumbled and then wanted to stuff the words back into my swollen mouth when I realized what I’d said.

The angel smiled and, for a moment, the heavens sang. He was magnificent when he smiled, like sunshine parting through the rain. “Not that beast. The one who murdered Ridley. Have you seen it?”

I shook my head and let it flop over until it landed on the Senator’s shoulder. He had such nice shoulders. “No, but I never see anything. I didn’t even see the wolf who bit me.”

The chopper took off, pressing me back into my seat as we accelerated, the wind blowing through the open doors as we shot through the night. I couldn’t breathe, we were going so fast. Or maybe that was from my broken ribs. Both.

When it stopped, I started breathing again, at least until the Senator undid my straps and picked me up, carrying me once more to the door. I looked out into the darkness and gripped the lapel of his tuxedo with my one good hand.

“Don’t drop me,” I whispered.

“Mm. I’ll make a point of it.” He stepped out, and we fell, but not wildly, like we were rappelling down a cord. He hit the ground and then carried me to a black van that blended with the night remarkably well. He opened the back door, climbed in with me, then closed it.

The engine turned on, and the van started moving. The senator put me down on a bed that was attached to the floor so it wouldn’t move around, however bumpy the terrain, and drew his thick cloak back over me.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I lay there on my back, feeling terribly vulnerable, both from my injuries and my shocking lack of clothing in the face of his tuxedo, even if I had his cloak.

He smoothed back my blood-soaked hair. “I’m going to set your bones, and then I’m going to pour healing spells over you. Once we’ve made sure that everything is healing well, you’ll shift back to your best healing form.”

I frowned, then nodded. This was logical. I grabbed his sleeve again before he could turn away to grab his bone setting equipment. “What do you know about setting bones? And how did you find me? And why did you come? You can’t pretend to be my protector. They’ll be watching and...”

He took my hand and kissed the back of it, sending a shocking sensation through me before he tucked it back onto the bed. “I am your protector, Miss Era. From the moment you came into my house and asked for assistance, I have been so. If you had told me that you intended to leave the house, I would have accompanied you and assisted you in your endeavors. Then we could have avoided this unpleasantness.” He brushed his fingertips over my broken wrist so lightly that it didn’t even hurt before he turned and got to work. The van was very well-stocked, and he was very good at medical emergencies.

I breathed through my nose while he set things in place. He kept the cloak over everything that he wasn't required to see and touch in order to set, but it was still shocking to know that I wasn't wearing any clothing under it.

Once he had me all set, snicker, he put his hands over me and started weaving spells. They were beautiful, sparkling dots of energy and healing that floated over me before they slowly sank into my skin. His magic was strong, but so gentle that I relaxed into his healing, trusting him more absolutely than I should, considering the circumstances.

The Alta had mentioned a beast, using me as bait to catch it. Why would the senator care about that? I didn't know. But I did know that he was bringing me home. His pool house was already home to me. I should be terrified by that. I needed to warn him of the very real danger my beast posed to him.

"Silverton," I mumbled, still too relaxed in the delicious healing spells to speak clearly.

"Mm."

I smiled slightly. That was his favorite response in the whole world. It was a universal response. 'The world is ending!' 'Mm.' 'Your tuxedo needs to be taken to the dry cleaners.' 'Mm.' 'My beast wants to gobble you up like a cream puff.' 'Mm.'

"Silverton, my beast wants to gobble you up like a cream puff. I think she's going to stalk you."

His answer was surprisingly eloquent, considering I'd expected a non-speak elf-grunt. "That will be difficult, as she'll be living with me. Also, I'm nothing like a cream puff. I'm more of a dark chocolate brownie dipped in moonlight."

“How do you dip chocolate in moonlight?”

“That’s another word for white chocolate.”

“Mm,” I murmured and then giggled. He definitely wouldn’t get the joke, but I was having a hilarious time. His magic must have some properties that dulled pain and gave everything a glow of happiness. In other words, he was drugging me. I giggled again.

“You may shift now into your best healing form,” Silverton said, straightening up and letting the magic sparkles fade from sight. They were still in his eyes, though, sparkles like an entire universe contained in those mysterious depths. They looked indigo in this light. How absolutely mesmerizing.

“But then I can’t make jokes.”

He smiled slightly and rested his hand on my forehead. “That is a tragedy, but somehow we must bear it. Please shift, Miss Era. I look forward to seeing you healed as quickly as possible.”

“So you can use me as bait more easily?”

“So I can assuage the guilt I feel after a member of my household was brutalized so thoroughly. I understand that werewolves subject each other to this kind of pain, but I dislike it almost violently.” His slight smile mixed with his violet eyes to give me an understanding of what it would look like if he were violent. It would be absolutely beautiful.

I nodded and closed my eyes, shifting into my adorable wolf. I curled up on the bed as well as I could with the splints that had shifted with me. Magic splints? How expensive.

Silverton rubbed my head and flopped onto the bed next to me, draped a hand over his forehead, and promptly fell asleep. Maybe he'd fainted. Either way, I curled next to him and closed my own eyes, because there was nothing nicer than dozing and cuddling with the prettiest elf in the world.

I woke up to the senator ruffling my fur. "Miss Era, I've left some clothing here. Please shift and then come inside when you're ready." He opened the van door and went out before I could properly look at him. I nosed the slacks and blouse stacked beside me and then shook off my lethargy, shifted back to human, and quickly pulled everything on. It was new, but everything fit perfectly.

When I got out of the van and went into the house, I found Mossy in the kitchen eating an enormous bowl of ice cream sprinkled with cold cereal while the kitten pounced after a ball of red angora yarn that I'd left in the pool house.

"Lynx!" I scooped up the kitten and snuggled her while she purred and nuzzled my neck. "Such a good kitty. Do you need a treat? Of course you do." I went to the fridge and fished out a chicken. I broke off bits and fed them to the kitten while Mossy stared at me.

"So, you're a werewolf," she drawled.

A shock of horror flashed through me before I retorted, "And you're a coward, so that wasn't a clumsy attempt at blackmail, was it?"

She grinned and stuffed her face with another bite of cereal-covered ice cream. "Nope. Just glad you've got an inside scoop on this Ridley case. The Nanny's going to go ballistic if you don't get something handed in before eight."

I blinked at her, then at the clock. Six thirty in the morning? I carefully put Lynx down with more pieces of chicken on a tea plate, then I grabbed my bag with its

laptop, put on my glasses, and sat at the breakfast nook and wrote the most salacious, grabby copy I could come up with. The gist was that Ridley, of the Golden Pack, had come to Singsong City for mysterious reasons that may have something to do with rival pack warfare. Was it murder, or an inter-pack outbreak of violence? Was it a solo incident or the first of many such conflicts to come? I wrote the tale the way that Loren would have written it if she couldn't come up with any solid leads.

“Read it for typos,” I told Mossy, slumping back.

She went over it quickly, corrected a few cases of commas and one outright typo, then nodded at me. “So, what happened after the hot alpha grabbed you?”

“I’m not talking about Max.”

“Ooh, you’re on first name basis with the hot alpha?” She raised her brows mischievously.

I was still incredibly exhausted, injured, and just wanted to go back to bed. Not that I’d been there recently. I sent the email. “I’m going to bed. You should go home too.”

She smiled, but it wasn’t a nice smile. “Don’t you mean you’re going to go shower and bake cookies and then take them to the bi-annual Bouquet Brunch?” She batted her lashes at me while my heart sank.

“I don’t have anything floral to wear.” Women had to wear florals. Men wore floral ties. They literally wouldn’t let you in without a floral print. Also, I didn’t want to go. I desperately didn’t want to go face polite society when I’d been rolled through a meat grinder last night. Werewolf super healing was one thing, but you didn’t heal from broken legs that fast.

“Of course you do,” Silverton said, coming in and straightening his floral tie. I stared

at the incredibly tasteful thing that was more abstract wallpaper in green and cream than an actual traditional floral.

“I see that you’re going. Maybe you can do a few interviews for me,” I said, smiling wanly. I still didn’t know how to deal with him showing up to claim to be my protector. How did he find me? Why did he want to protect me? There were secret societies and mysterious beasts behind those questions, so I wasn’t going to ask them, at least not out loud.

He gave Mossy’s ice-cream-and-cold-cereal breakfast a look. “I see you’ve figured out my stocking system.”

She stuffed her face and hid it in the bowl.

“Miss Era,” he said, facing me with a slight frown. “Would you allow me to escort you to the bi-annual Bouquet Brunch? I believe it would be an ideal opportunity to announce our relationship publicly.”

“What?” was all I could think of to say. Writing an article had used up any remaining brain cells I had after last night.

“We are dating.” He glanced at Mossy. “I know that you’d rather keep it private, but after last night, it seems essential to be bold.” He took two steps, closing the distance between us, and took my hand. It wasn’t a grabby grip, just nice, cool, with the good energy you’d expect from an elf who had no idea how to hold hands. I stared at him. He’d never held hands before or he wouldn’t be doing it like this.

The werewolves would be watching. They expected more than just protection. It wasn’t any of their business, but at the same time, as a werewolf, they had power over me. And honestly, if Senator Silverton had actually asked me out on a date, if my whole werewolf thing didn’t keep me from dating anyone, I would have said yes.

But, “Dating me isn’t going to be good for your career.”

He raised an elegant brow. “Trust Henrick. He’ll spin it perfectly so that you’re an asset.”

“But, I’m a werewolf,” I said, glancing at Mossy, who flashed me a sharp-toothed smile dripping with ice cream. Shudder.

“He’ll spin that too if it comes out. It’s not public knowledge, and hopefully won’t be until you’re prepared for it.”

I squeezed his hand until his fingers curved around mine properly. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

His lips twitched. “I’m sure.”

He said it in a way that sent a rush of nerves through me. He was sure of what, exactly? Did he want to date me? He couldn’t, not possibly, and yet, he’d slept with me on the hospital bed last night, letting me snuggle up to him. If he didn’t mind that, he probably wouldn’t mind anything. For some reason, he’d let me into his very personal space that elves guarded above everything. He must really want to catch the monster.

“I’ll try not to make you regret it,” I said with a bright smile, then dropped his hand and edged away. “I’ll go get dressed.”

Chapter Nine

We held hands while he drove a very nice blue sports car that would help us fit in with all the other young, handsome, wealthy socialites who would be there. He'd asked if he could hold my hand, and I'd said yes, and not added that he needed the practice before we got out in public.

"What will you say when people ask you about dating me?" he asked.

I shot him a look. We were stopped at a red light a few blocks from the Henredon estate. "What will you say?"

He smiled slightly and looked superior. "No one will ask me, because I customarily bring women to events as part of my image as a social butterfly. You never date, so it will make people curious."

"Ah. You're trying to prep me for my real interviews here, being interviewed. How long do you think it'll last?"

His lips pressed together for a moment in thought or discomfort, I wasn't sure. "I assume you're not talking about the brunch, as you'd know far better than me. Our relationship will last until you've found someone else to protect you, I imagine."

"That could take a long time." Forever, most likely.

"There is no rush, Miss Era. Having one steady girlfriend will be good for my image, make me look more reliable. And you are universally liked. Everyone will think I

have surprisingly good sense to choose you. And elves date for years, decades, sometimes centuries before they settle into marriage.”

“It will take that long for you to learn how to hold a hand properly, not to mention kissing.”

He squinted at me. “You’re shocking, Miss Era.”

“I’m a werewolf, Mr. Senator. If there wasn’t danger of infecting you, I’d take it upon myself to train you up in all manner of scandalous ways.”

His lips twitched in a smile. “How very selfless of you to consider the greater good.”

“Naturally. I believe that I mentioned that my beast wants to make you her pet. That might get messy. If you didn’t have a dragon, a gargoyle, and a sorcerer’s guild backing you up, I might be worried.”

“You did very well last night. Miss Era, I believe with proper training, you could defeat even the Alta himself.”

I turned to stare at him, intrigued and horrified at the same time. “You realize that if I defeated the Alta, I would become the Alta, right?”

He shrugged. “You would be an excellent leader.”

“I would rather die. Literally. I can’t imagine anything worse than trying to deal with all the other alphas, like the crazy lady from Golden. It’s a pity that she’s representing women so badly.”

“There was a female Alta before. Her reign began very bloody, but became one of the most peaceful periods for the longest time.”

“You’ve done a lot of research.”

“Mm.”

I smiled at him. “I’ll tell people that I couldn’t resist your scintillating conversation.”

“Very well.”

“Also that you’re too pretty to possibly resist.”

“They’ll know that you’re joking.”

“And then I’ll move onto the fact that you knocked me up.”

His face remained impassive. “And that you’re being farcical.”

“Why? My parents only married after he got her pregnant.”

He inhaled sharply and looked truly shocked for a moment. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not. Bram was a great surprise. Elves never think that they’re going to get anyone pregnant, because elves have such a hard time conceiving, but gnomes don’t.”

“Werewolves do.”

“Then I suppose it’s unlikely for us, but the fact that I’m a werewolf isn’t exactly common knowledge, is it? My mother entrapped him. Gnomes can will themselves pregnant. He didn’t think it was appropriate to take away the life she could have with a nice gnome, but once she was having his baby, what could he do?”

“He didn’t think it was inappropriate to make use of her body in such a way, but he

had a problem marrying her?" Disapproval colored every word. He was such an elf.

I patted his knee. "I see that you've never been seduced by a gnome. Someday, Senator Silverton, you're going to be hit so hard by love and desire, you won't have any control over yourself."

"That sounds positively optimal," he said drily.

I nudged him. "Everyone wants to lose themselves in love, at least once."

"No, they really don't."

I sighed and rested my head on his shoulder. "Well, it will happen anyway. And when it does, I hope that you enjoy it."

"Mm."

"Mm," I said agreeably, holding his hand in both of mine.

He'd already let me into his personal space, so me being so close to him shouldn't bother him.

"If you don't like me snuggling up to you, just say so," I said.

"I will."

I laughed, because of course he would.

Once we got to the party, it was time for the interviews to start. As soon as we entered the large main hall where all the floral arrangements were displayed, flower art, which would be purchased for exorbitant sums of money, and some of it would

go to charity, we were cut off by Forsythia.

Oh. She'd been dating him. Would this be awkward? I had my hand looped in Silverton's arm, but we weren't holding hands. This was our first public outing together, so we wouldn't have too much PDA.

"I read your article this morning," she said to me, brows lowered over accusing eyes.

I stared at her. That's what she was going to be upset about? "Did you? I'm gratified. It's not my typical fare, but our regular investigational reporter had a family emergency."

"Why would you suggest that Singsong City is on the brink of pack war? Do you want to threaten the city's tourism industry?" She did own a few hotels, come to think of it.

This must be why Loren never came to these things. I noticed that Silverton's arm had stiffened under my hand. Did he not read the article or did seeing Forsythia make him uncomfortable? I smiled sweetly. "I suppose I didn't think about the economy when I was looking at the photos of that poor werewolf."

She sniffed. "If he hadn't been killed in Sing, it wouldn't be a problem. They should keep their issues in Song, where they belong."

"A murder is only a problem in Sing?" Silverton asked with a slight smile and warm interest coloring his voice.

Forsythia was Elven, so she wasn't going to fall into the trap of his pretended warmth. "Of course not, Senator, but there are always problems in Song that should stay there."

“So even when someone’s murdered in Sing, it’s a Song problem?” he asked, this time letting the bite in his words show.

Her smile was positively soothing. “Werewolves don’t live in the upper city. They’re uncomfortable there and enjoy the undercity much more. If there are a few murders among their rival packs, that’s their business. It shouldn’t involve anyone else.”

Someone cleared their throat behind us. I smelled werewolf the second before we turned around to find Max dressed in a black suit with a floral tie. He looked surprisingly comfortable in a suit. Come to think of it, he did own a lot of things in Sing and Song, he just didn’t usually show up at society events. Almost like he didn’t feel like he belonged there.

“Max, it’s so nice to see you,” I said warmly.

He looked at me with anger burning in his eyes. “I’d like a word with you.”

“By all means.”

“Privately.”

“I’m actually here to work. I don’t have time...”

“You want to interview me about this pack war we’re having. Now.” The weight of his command as my alpha hit me hard, making my whole body tense. In a second, my beast was going to burst out of me and challenge Max. That would be one way to declare myself a werewolf.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said to the senator.

He gave me a slight bow and then turned back to Forsythia, letting me slip off with

Max. The second we were alone in a hall, he turned on me.

“What were you thinking? First, revealing Ridley’s pack, second, suggesting pack war, third, coming here when you should be at home resting. You’re limping. You’re not taking care of yourself and your protector isn’t either.”

I hissed at him. “And what did you do to protect me? Dragging me to the Alta? You think that was a strong alpha move? You did nothing to protect me from Ridley or your higher ups. Don’t you dare criticize Senator Silverton. Right now, I really hate werewolves. You think I should have loyalty to a group of slaving monsters who think nothing of selling a woman to whoever can be the most violent? I wrote that article because I think that Loren’s missing because she saw something, maybe who killed Ridley, maybe something else, and I want to create a lot of noise so I can look into it without getting attention.”

He blinked at me and the anger faded. “Loren? Another female’s gone missing? You think Ridley...”

“No. I think someone might be using Ridley’s reputation as a cover for their own criminal behavior.” I shivered as the pieces arranged themselves in my mind. “Loren is the person who should have written that article. I’m taking her place, which will make me a target if I mention what I really think. I get that it’s bad for tourism and werewolf reputations, but if I’m going to get to the bottom of this, and I am, I need my target off his guard.”

“You don’t think I’m the perpetrator or you wouldn’t be telling me this.”

“No, Max. There is no way you could ever be anything other than noble.”

He blinked at me. “You’re good. Make me feel guilty for my failings, diffuse my anger with an unexpected announcement, and then end it with flattery. You suit a

politician.”

I winced. “Yes, well, I’m sure he’ll be delighted to hear that you approve. I’ve got to get back to the party. Can you send me everything you know about the missing women, both in Golden and elsewhere?”

“There are a tragically high number of missing women, but I’ll do what I can. I am sorry about last night. Are you truly okay with the senator?” His warm eyes were concerned.

“Mm,” I said with a smile and looped my arm in his. “Now, Max, which of these living artworks are you going to pay an exorbitant amount for since you showed up to corner me?”

He growled as we walked back to the main halls. He looked at the first one we came to and nodded at it. “That one.”

I studied the floral art that depicted a toucan made out of black and white roses surrounded by green moss. “Oh, yes. That will look magnificent in the pack hall. Maybe you can gift it to the Alta. That’ll teach him to mess with your weekend.”

“There you are,” Senator Silverton said, coming up with his warm politician smile. He held a hand out to shake Max’s and somehow got my arm to switch people in the exchange. He would be an excellent pickpocket. Mossy could give him lessons. Or he could give her lessons.

“And so are you. Now everything is in its proper order,” I said, smiling up at him.

The rest of the banquet was spent in the senator’s care. He manipulated every conversation to make certain that I got everything I needed, and no one got the chance to talk about my most recent controversial article.

We left directly after Silverton purchased a living scene of the woods in the moonlight, foliage specimens buried in the soil behind the frame so it would actually last longer than the month Max's toucan would. They'd deliver it to the house shortly.

"Tell me about Loren," he said once we were in the car, driving out the gates of the place.

I looked up from my laptop and peered at him through my glasses. I was going to write up some notes on the party while they were still fresh. "You overheard me talking to Max? You followed me?"

He didn't look at me, just kept his focus on the road. "I'm your protector. Tell me about it."

I did, starting at the beginning, and ending with the dumpster being in the wrong place.

"That's strange, isn't it? Why would someone move a dumpster? It must have been intentional with how precisely it was shifted."

"We'll check it now." He made a U-turn at the next intersection and headed towards downtown instead of continuing to the outskirts of the city where his own house was located.

I liked how decisive he was, how he didn't put off doing something he could do right that second. "What really bothers me is the kitten. If she was taken against her will, why wasn't the cat? Was it left there by the person who took her? And the Lynx bit is weird, too."

"Mm."

I looked at him, because there was something off about his tone. “Have you heard of it?”

“I’ll look into it.”

“You’ll look into it? You’re not an investigative reporter.”

“But I am your protector. Be a good little female and stay safe.” He winked at me before I could get really worked up at the blatant disregard for my feminine strength, then I remembered that he’d seen my beast up close and personal.

I blew through my mouth and shook my head at him. “You almost got snacked.”

“Your beast wants to make me a pet. Not even beasts eat their pets.”

I pushed his arm while I fought the heat that wanted to rise in my cheeks. “I don’t think you took my warning with the seriousness I gave it.”

“If I’m your pet, would that make you my owner? In that case, you should probably buy me a pretty collar with a tag. You could be the master to my mister.”

I huffed and felt my cheeks heat up. “You’re definitely not taking this seriously.”

“But pretty elves should wear pretty collars. None of those glaring neon things.”

I wrinkled my nose at him. “Now I know what to get you for your birthday. It’ll be the most glaringly neon thing you’ve ever seen. Your eyes will burn out immediately.”

He flashed me an extremely attractive smile that made my heart twist uncomfortably. “I look forward to it. It’ll be worth the successive centuries of blindness, I’m sure,

just to please my master, or would it be mistress?"

Why did that make me squirm so much? Was he being suggestive? He was, but why? He was an elf. They were so slow to approach any kind of intimacy. He was teasing me. He really didn't take my wolf seriously.

I turned towards my window and opened my laptop. I had notes to take if he was going to be ridiculous.

In the alley, the garbage can was in its original position. Someone had moved it back, precisely two inches from where it had been.

I crouched there next to the side of the garbage can and stared at it. "Maybe it's messing with us. Like, 'let's move this and then move it back just so they don't notice that the sky is on fire.'"

Silverton walked towards the wall, studying it before he brought up a hand and blew magic sparkles onto it. They hit the wall in a spray pattern that glowed like black-light, showing a line of dirt with various substances except for the area the garbage can had been covering, which was immaculate.

"Looks like there was some evidence, but they cleaned it since. Pity this alley isn't under surveillance," Silverton said, looking up at the wall that stretched up. There were a few small windows, but none were particularly visible from this garbage can.

"Do you think Ridley did get some of its blood?" I asked, frowning at the freakishly clean spot on the alley wall.

"There was definitely some kind of evidence," he said, glancing at me.

I smiled back. "That's the best thing I've heard all day. If Ridley's got its blood under

his nails, they'll find it in evidence."

Actually, Ridley's nails were clean. Immaculate. Freakishly tidy, like the wall had been. Mick, the guy at the morgue, shrugged as he pushed Ridley's mutilated body back in its refrigerator. "Sorry, Delphi. Why isn't Loren on this beat? She really gave up a story like this for family? That's weird." His voice had no intonation. He looked like a corpse with hollow eyes and cheeks, but he definitely wasn't dead. Probably.

"Were his nails like this when he came in?" I asked, while Silverton looked unapproachable. Usually he bothered to look charming, but he didn't have time for that while he was considering this new evidence.

Mick shrugged. "Sure."

"Really? You're sure?" Silverton pressed, tone hard.

Mick shrugged. "Yeah. One of the docs mentioned how weird it was for him to be a piece of mangled meat, but have one clean hand. Impressive, really. Most killers don't pay attention to the details. The details are what always get you."

"Mm," Silverton said, taking my arm. "Thank you for your time. Delphi, we should get home. You're tired and still need to write up your article for the evening paper." He nodded at Mick and ushered me out rather briskly.

"What are you thinking?" I asked, very aware by his eyes that his thoughts were turned inwardly.

He gave me a brief smile. "How much more interesting my life has gotten since you moved into my pool house. We'd better pick up some kitten food on the way home."

And that's all I was going to get out of him. Elves. So annoying.

Chapter Ten

First thing first, I had to write up my article on the astonishing living art display, making sure to keep my artists untangled from the florists, since there were multiple artists in each, and most of those had Elven blood so their work would last much longer than a human, as they compelled the plants to life.

My father would make fun of elves who spent their time like that instead of actually working land, improving soil, growing a beautiful sustainable food forest instead of playing with flowers for the entertainment of the bored and wealthy. Those with power should use it responsibly. I, personally, didn't feel that strongly about what other people did with their lives.

I sat at the breakfast nook, my glasses on my nose with Lynx on my lap, while Mossy ate eggs. She ate so many eggs. I stole a few from her to feed my beautiful soft kitty every few minutes. Finally, I finished my article and nodded at her. "Check it for typos, please. And why are you still here?"

"I left and came back. What's it like to be a werewolf? Are you really dating the senator? Why don't you eat more raw meat? What are you going to do about Loren? Why does the kitten like you?"

I nodded at my screen and she sighed and plopped down in front of it while I read over her shoulder. When she was done, I hit send and closed it.

"Have you ever heard of girl scout cookies?" I asked her.

“Girl what?”

“I have a lot of cookies in the freezer. We could put them in some cute boxes I happen to see in the pantry, and then you can sell them door to door.”

She squinted at me. “Did you lose your mind?”

I sighed heavily. “The cat. Neighbors would notice an adorable kitten, particularly kids and old cranky types who hate animals messing up their flowers. You’d ask about the cat while you sell cookies.”

She gave me a skeptical look. “You think a goblin teen would blend in that neighborhood?”

“I’d give you a glamour.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Really? You know how to do glammers?”

“I have a few short-term glammers I have leftover from my last masquerade ball that will make you a cute fairy girl.”

She wrinkled her nose. “A fairy? I hate fairies.”

“You’d rather be an angel?”

Her face got truly scowly. “Fine. I’ll be a fairy, but only if I can keep the profits from your cookies. I’ll have Mr. Senator’s driver take me so you can stay here and do research. I’ll be perfectly safe on this fool’s errand, so don’t worry that you’re taking advantage of a poor underage chump.”

It didn’t take long to tuck her in the back seat of the black car with several very large

boxes of cookies and my potion bottle. “Only two droppers, or you’ll stay a fairy for a week. Maybe a month if you have any fairy blood in your veins.”

She made a face. “Like any goblin would have a fairy. Go do research. I’ll interrogate the neighborhood.”

I started with the case of the missing girl in Golden that Loren had on her computer. There were no signs of struggle, no clue other than Ridley’s interest in her. There was a distinct lack of coverage on the girls’ disappearance. No one had made a point to dig deeper.

I had better luck when I started trolling various conspiracy sites about Lynx with my own Lynx happily purring on my lap. She understood snacks like a gnome. It took time to get even the gossip straight, but eventually I found a site that listed Lynx as one of the secret societies that ran under the radar. It linked to another site on the dark webs where I had to engage my magical protection so I didn’t catch a virus that could literally dissolve my computer, or perhaps steal my soul, depending on the kind of malevolent force you were dealing with. Possessed computers were incredibly not fun.

Finally, I got through his firewall and found an actual article about Lynx, a secret society of science. I frowned at the screen. All that for an order of science? I’d expected an assassin order at the very least, but no, science. What could a science order have to do with a werewolf or missing women? Or Ridley? He certainly wasn’t a scientist. Maybe he’d been a secret scientist.

I sighed and then emailed the guy who ran the site, hoping to get some more direct information, then I went back to compiling cases of missing persons in Golden and other places, checking if each had the same MO. I made a spreadsheet with the pertinent information until I got a ping from the conspiracy guy.

Ooh, a personal message. I double checked my security and then accepted his message.

Don't ask about things you shouldn't.

Well, that was useful.

I flexed my fingers and typed, Why shouldn't I? How could a science guild be dangerous?

It took a moment for his response.

Everything is dangerous if left in the darkness to fester and grow.

Written like a true conspiracist. "Although, he's not wrong."

I found a kitten with a Lynx constellation on the collar. I'm trying to find its owner.

I leaned back while I waited for his response.

Where did you find it?

That was personal information I shouldn't give him, but then again, Singsong was a big place.

Singsong City.

The Lynx constellation has been spotted on the lower levels of the old train station. But if I were you, I'd forget about finding the owner and just send it to a shelter. The owner will look for it and find it there. Scientists who keep their work secret are not the sort of people you want to meet, Delphi.

I sat back with a gasp. He knew my name? The screen went dark, and I didn't touch my computer. I put Lynx on the floor with an indignant squeak. Soon smoke came out of it and I grabbed it and threw it in the sink before it exploded into flames. An electrical, magical fire wasn't going to go out with water, but the ceramic sink should keep it from spreading while I hunted for the baking powder. Ah, a nice large canister. I dumped it over my computer, white plumes of dust filling the air until it finally stopped burning. Then I had to open the windows and air out the kitchen, coughing because that smoke was nasty.

I wrapped my laptop in a towel and carried it outside, hoping that would help clear out the smoke. And now what? Now I went to the Union Station and tried to find that elusive Lynx marking.

Before I'd gone anywhere, an extremely dapper goblin walked towards me out of the shadowy hall, making my heart race as I stared at him. Was this somehow connected to getting my laptop blown up? I scooped up the kitten and backed away, ready to defend her with my beast.

He bowed. "Miss Delphi. I'm Henrick, Senator Silverton's personal assistant." He gave me a close-mouthed smile, so you could hardly tell he wasn't human except for the greenish cast to his skin.

I put my hand on my chest, exhaling. I was still recovering from the last rumble. I didn't really want to summon my beast tonight. Not for a while. "Oh, it's so nice to meet you. I'm not Miss Delphi, just Delphi."

He nodded and opened a briefcase, pulling out several tinctures that he studied with a frown. "He asked me to give you this. It's to help you recover more quickly." He handed me a bottle. "Three droppers, no more, no less. Take it tonight and tomorrow morning."

I stared at him, then at the bottle of dark liquid. For some reason, I wasn't incredibly eager to trust a strange goblin. "Where is the senator?"

"The Senator has some meetings regarding a bill he and his constituents are trying to pass. He sends his apologies."

I frowned at him. "Not to be rude, but do you have any proof that you're not some goblin assassin?"

He smiled with sharp teeth and pulled out his phone. "She thinks I'm a goblin assassin," he said to the screen.

"I don't—" I stopped abruptly as he put the phone to my face and I got to see a video of Senator Silverton behind a desk filled with papers, white shirt-sleeves rolled up, showing some pretty curlicue silver tattoos in his skin, magical runes like my father had.

He smiled slightly, but he looked tired. "Miss Era. I appreciate your caution, but I trust Henrick with my life."

"But do you trust him with mine? I mean, just because he doesn't want to assassinate you doesn't mean he doesn't want to assassinate me."

He frowned through the screen. "You're nervous. What happened?"

"Not much. I just lost my computer to a nasty virus while I was doing some research."

He raised a brow. "Sounds like you found something. If you're going to do more investigating tonight, be sure to take the elixir first. Also, take Henrick with you."

I took a shaky breath and nodded. “Thanks. I’ll do that. It’s probably not much, just the Lynx constellation written in the basement of the Union Station, but I might as well check it out. I’ll also need to get a new computer before the stores close.”

He smiled. “It sounds as though your evening plans are complete. Don’t forget to get dinner while you’re out. Henrick is terrible company, but your charm will more than make up for it.”

I smiled at him and then Henrick took the phone away from me and put it to his ear, turning away to talk in a low voice.

I had extremely keen hearing, so I picked up a few words, “No, not injured... No sign of an intruder...” and then I stopped listening because it was rude.

Instead, I sat on a lounge chair next to the pool I loved so much with my kitten on my lap, and unscrewed the lid. When I sniffed, it smelled green and rich, with a slight tang of bitterness, so similar to the tonics my father made for us. I took one dropper, and it tasted much better than my father’s.

I missed him. He hated werewolves so much, and my mother feared werewolves so much, but if they got to see me how I was, surely they would get over their prejudice and I’d have my family back again. Or I’d lose them for good. How long could I use Silverton to hide what I was?

I leaned back in the chair, heart aching beneath the warm ball of fluff, watching the evening shadows play over everything. I needed to hurry to the store before it closed, and then quickly check out the Union Station, but I was so tired, and the evening was so peaceful.

Henrick took the bottle out of my hand before I dropped it, capped it, then drew a throw over my shoulder. “Cross will tuck you in once he gets home. Rest well, Miss

Delphi.”

I let my eyes drift closed, only vaguely bothered by the fact that I was resting instead of going shopping and checking out the station. I could take care of it tomorrow. There was no hurry. Not for anything.

I came awake in the middle of the night when I heard a crash of shattering glass. Lynx meowed adorably while I blinked into the darkness, the moon shining on the silver water, the tree branches rustling around the edges of the yard. Where was I? By the pool. Why was I sleeping outside? The elixir. Henrick had drugged me. Why would he drug me? Why wouldn't a goblin randomly drug someone? No, it was an elven potion. Silverton had drugged me. I sat up, but I was still shaking off the lethargy. That potion was strong, and I'd only had a third the recommended dose. He'd wanted to knock me out for a long time. I held Lynx carefully while I stood. My whole body felt so much better. Fine, Silverton was right that I needed more rest, and it was sweet of him to want me to feel better, but at the same time, you didn't just drug people.

Another sound came from the house. Was it Silverton? The windows were dark, but who else would it be? I crept quickly and quietly towards the house and then, when I reached the kitchen door, slipped inside, blinking in the shadows, trying to pick out what it had been. A dark shadow draped over the island, pale silver elf skin glittering in the moonlight in the middle of that gleaming dark hair and the scent of fresh blood.

I turned on the light and saw Silverton on the counter, his bare back raw and bleeding. I dropped Lynx and ran across the room. There was a medic bag with some bottles and needles spilled on the counter and floor in a pile of broken glass.

He was holding a syringe in an awkward position, like he'd been trying to inject himself over his shoulder before he passed out. There was so much blood, and the jagged wounds in his back took me right back to Ridley's death photos. Silverton had

found the monster, but how, and why, and...

I stopped when I saw the black mask and hood on the white counter. I knew the patterns of eye screens, as well as mouth and nose. That was the mask of the monster who had forced me to turn, had tortured me for two months, keeping me alive when I begged every day for him to end it.

Silverton couldn't be that psychopath. I picked up the mask with trembling fingers and felt the dampness from his blood. The monster that I hated more than anyone else in the world was lying here, unconscious, at my mercy. He hadn't given me a drop of mercy, no matter how I begged.

I picked up a scalpel and with my heart beating in my throat, I pressed it into his skin, releasing a flow of dark red elixir that made my beast rumble. I pressed harder until I hit something metallic. Were his bones made of metal? No. There was shrapnel or something else in him.

I bit my lip so hard that I tasted blood before I pressed into him with more focus, pulling back the skin to reveal a bar that had skewered him from the front and was coming out of his back. I stared at it for a beat and a half before I exhaled and grabbed him around the chest, lifting up and pushing down on the end of the bar until it came out of the underside of his shoulder, falling to the floor with a clatter.

He was in such bad shape. He might actually die. Except he didn't get to die if I didn't get to die. He didn't get to escape before I finally faced the monster and demanded to know why he did that to me.

I stabbed him hard with his syringe. The bleeding stopped almost instantly, then I cleaned out the wounds, the vicious claw and teeth marks as well as the puncture wounds. It had gotten him by the jaws. It was a miracle Silverton had made it home. No, not a miracle. He really belonged to one of those secret orders, only nothing so

innocent as a science guild.

When I finished his back, I rolled him over and found his eyes open, watching me with those violet orbs, curious, clear, no pain or concern in them as he calculated a myriad of things like quicksilver.

I pulled back, crossing my arms.

“You’re getting blood on your clothing,” he said in a frustratingly delicious voice.

I was shaking with anger, with rage, with absolute fury. “You! How could you do that to me?”

He glanced over at the mask and then slowly pushed up on his elbows, so his brawny muscles pulled where it wasn’t torn from the beast’s claws. He was so beautiful. How dare he be beautiful, even like this?

“I could because of who I am. How could you heal me when I hurt you? Because that is who you are.”

I scowled at him and picked up the scalpel. “You took pleasure in my pain.”

“No. But I couldn’t let you die, like you can’t kill me.”

“We’re not the same!”

“No. We’re not. I would have killed you if I hated you as much as you despise me.”

I glared at him and edged away. “You deserve a slow, painful, agonizing death.”

He nodded calmly. “Indeed. But since you’re unwilling to give it to me, could you

finish what you started? I'm about to collapse again." He did, sinking back to the counter with his eyes closed, dark lashes against the pale skin of his face. His skin was waxy, much too pale from the loss of blood.

I sputtered, but he was right. I wasn't going to kill him, so I might as well do what I could to treat him like he'd done to me in the van. We weren't even, no matter how many times he put splints on me, or gave me healing tinctures, or drugged me. I glared at him, but he was either unconscious or had given up caring.

I cleaned and bandaged him until he was swathed in white, and then I shifted just enough that I had the strength to pick him up and carry him to the couch. As I laid him down, he opened his eyes to stare into mine, the beauty in those eyes making me snarl. There was no sign of guilt or remorse.

"You're a psychopath," I snapped.

"No. I'm only someone who will do whatever is necessary. I think that's worse, don't you?"

I gritted my teeth, wanting to cry, to scream, to yank out his pretty eyeballs and throw them back in his face.

I spat, "Yes. Whatever you are is the worst that there could ever be. I hate you so much!" I pulled a soft blanket over his bandaged body.

He smiled, a ghost smile on his pale lips. "I deserve to be hated with far more diligence than you seem capable of giving. Thank you."

I snarled at him. "Don't thank me. I'm not doing this for you. I'm not a person who lets people bleed out in front of me, no matter who they are."

“I know. It’s ridiculous to thank you for being who you are, but I can’t help it. Thank you for being who you are.” He closed his eyes while I fumed, clenching and unclenching my fists.

“Silverton, or whatever your name is, the creature who did this to you, is it involved with Lynx?”

“Mm,” he replied without opening his eyes. “I believe so, but my investigation was interrupted by the beast. I have people following him, but of course, he’ll disappear. He always does. I think it’s the person who infected you as well.”

“You didn’t go alone?”

“No, I took Henrick.”

“After you had him drug me.”

“Mm. You aren’t limping anymore.”

I bared my teeth at him and then spun around and left before I decapitated him with something very dull. He was so infuriating. He hadn’t even apologized, but what did I expect from the biggest monster in the world?

Chapter Eleven

I slept terribly, but at least I had Lynx for company. How could I stay here knowing who he was? But he was my official ‘protector,’ so where was I supposed to go? Anywhere. But I wasn’t going to run away until this beast Silverton was so obsessed with was captured and brought to justice. Or killed. That would be fine, too. Did he really think it was tied to me? That thought made me shudder.

I got up early, feeling completely unrested but still wired with nervous energy as I walked inside the kitchen, looking over at the couch where I’d left the monster. There was no sign of him or the blanket I’d tucked him under. I flinched at the memory. I had to be tough, hard, strong, or he’d just push me over. I couldn’t be making things cozy for him. I was a terrifying werewolf. I needed to act like it.

I nodded firmly as I got out the flour and sugar. I wasn’t going to give him any more gentleness or care. After the third batch came out, I was feeling more comfortable in my skin.

“Mm. These look good,” Silverton said from behind me as he reached over my shoulder and grabbed a cookie.

I whirled around, holding the rolling pin, but I couldn’t hit him when he’d been injured. And his eyes were so startling, all the shades of violet and lavender, with specks of deepest purple.

He smiled and put the cookie in his mouth, the whole thing, while I sputtered in outrage and a stupid awareness of his bare chest and the brawny musculature beneath

his stapled gashes. He had so many scars on his chest and shoulders, arms, more scars than I could count.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his injuries too tight, because it had to hurt, while he rested his cheek against my hair.

“What are you doing?” I gasped, trying to wriggle away from him without making his wounds worse.

“Thanks for the cookie, Delphi. It’s delicious.” He rubbed his cheek against my hair like I was some kind of pet, then picked me off my feet as he straightened and squeezed me tighter.

I kicked and dropped the rolling pin while I tried to get a good position to push against him. I couldn’t touch him without hurting him more. “Put me down! Did you have a mental break? I’m going to bite you if you don’t...”

He squeezed me tighter, and for a second I couldn’t breathe, then he put me down and gave me the sweetest smile a monster ever gave a girl. “You can bite me if you’d like. I won’t mind at all.” He raised one arm and pointed at a long line of bite marks. “It won’t be the first time.” Then he winked at me.

I stared at him, then at his arm. Yes, those were my teeth marks from so long ago when he’d held me with that arm and injected me with the other. “Oh. I didn’t...” I stumbled back, into the chair he held for me so I sat at the counter where I’d been trying to feel so in-control. I stared at him, panicked and horrified.

“It didn’t hurt,” he assured me with a slight smile.

“Of course it hurt. Why would you say that?” Was he truly mental?

He shook his head. "I should say that pain doesn't bother me. You're feeling guilty about it. Don't. Your teeth are charming. You could bite me all day and it would be a delight."

I shook my head. "Who are you? What are you? Elves aren't that massive and brawny, and they are incredibly sensitive to pain and other things. Are you part ogre?"

His smile became slightly flirty. "Ogre? No. I'm a full-blooded elf, but I take after my father. You know how the night elves are."

I stared at him. "Night elves?"

"You haven't heard of them?"

"I've heard of them. The night court, right? You're from the night court? That's what someone said, that you were a night elf, but it didn't register." I licked my lips. The night court was supposed to be full of those bred to war, less sensitive to violence and other trauma, so they could defend their people without the usual psychological scarring.

He smiled in delight. "Yes. My father is from the night court. That's why I left, because he executed my best friend. It's true, she was a murderous spy, but I was young and innocent and didn't understand that sometimes you do things you don't want to do for the sake of the greater good."

"Greater good? Is that how you justify the atrocities you commit?"

"Usually, but in your case, I just didn't want to let you die."

It was like a dagger to the chest. "Why not?"

His smile tightened. “Well, that’s what the monster wanted, for me to kill you, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Also, the world needs people like you. Pity your type dies so easily. It’s the ones like me that last the longest.”

“So that’s why you were irritated that I wasn’t some investigative reporter, because I wasn’t living up to my potential after you bothered to keep me alive?”

“It was no bother, and no, I just wanted to make sure that you were happy. If you weren’t happy as a werewolf...that would bother me.”

“So I can bite you, but I can’t be unhappy.”

“You can do what you like.” He smiled slightly. “Except for die.”

I rolled my eyes and then paused as his words registered. “Why would the monster want you to kill me?”

He studied me for a long time. “Do you remember that pretty elf at the party the night you were infected?”

I stared at him, frowning at that horribly beautiful face. I raised a hand and pointed at him. “But it was a different face.”

“Yes, it was a different face, but it was still me. I was at your school, trying to track down the origins of a potion that did some very interesting and illegal things.”

“Lynx? They have this monster on a leash that they can use for something like that?”

“Or one of the members is the monster. You were adorable. I thought from the first time I met you that you should stay far away from me and anyone else from the House of Mercy or the monsters we hunted.”

A wave of ice cold dread washed through me from my head down to my toes. “The House of Mercy? You aren’t from the House of Mercy.” They were the most terrifying secret order in the world. If you heard anything about them, they’d erase you.

“I’m actually current head of the order. You look pale. Do you need a glass of water?”

I stared at him and shook my head slowly. “You aren’t an assassin. You wouldn’t let me die. That’s the opposite of an assassin.”

“I’m currently head of the House of Mercy, so I’m not technically an assassin anymore, although I will kill a monster if it happens that way. You aren’t a monster.”

“I’m a werewolf.”

“But I took very good care to make sure that you were a nice werewolf who could control your instincts, so I’d never have to put you down. It was a lot of effort, which you know, as you were there.”

I stared at him while my heart beat faster and faster. “Are you joking?” I whispered.

“Hm? No, the more torture the werewolf experiences during transition, the more control it has afterwards. Harold transitioned poorly, but we pulled him through. He wasn’t as difficult as you, but he didn’t have any gnome blood.”

“The beast didn’t want you to kill me. He wanted you to keep me alive so that he could get rid of the evidence without your interference,” I said, heart thumping, thoughts tangling. “He’s using me, like he used Ridley. He’s using you too. If you don’t think he is, whoever he is, you’re an idiot. And you aren’t an idiot. What’s your plan? How are you going to use me to catch him? I’m in. Whatever it is. Just let me

know what I need to do.”

He kissed my nose, and I pulled back, sputtering.

“What was that?”

“You’re so adorable. Don’t let people use you. Particularly me. No, this is your opportunity to use me. You have everything I have to offer, which, in all modesty, is quite an extensive list of assets. I’m your protector. Whatever you need, however personal, professional, or vengeful, I will be honored to give it to you. Including hugs.”

I blinked at him. “Hugs?”

He gave me a serious stare. “Fifteen years of not having regular hugs will drive a gnome mad. If you weren’t half elf, you wouldn’t have survived the trauma. From now on, I will take the trauma of allowing you to invade my personal space for the sake of your long-neglected mental health.”

I stared at him for another moment of not breathing, my emotions in turmoil, then scrambled to my feet. “You really are insane. Okay. I need to get to work.” I took off without my cookies, barely remembering to grab my bag before I tripped towards the front door. I’d take a bus.

“Miss Delphi,” Henrick said, stepping in front of me and gesturing to the car parked in the circle. “Allow me to drive you this morning.”

“Are you also a member of the House of Mercy?” I flinched and then stared at him, waiting for him to kill me.

His smile only grew more delighted. “Naturally. Did you have someone you wanted

killed on the way to work? I'm sure we could fit it in."

I blinked at him. "Ah. I was joking. You aren't a member of a secret assassination order. Neither is...Cross." That's what the Librarian had called him. I couldn't think of him as the civilized senator that I'd been developing such an enormous crush on. I'd actually found an assassin pretty? I'd told him that? How...I wasn't sure what it was. Humiliating? Terrifying? Ridiculous? Did that mean Libby was also part of the secret order of assassins? I shook my head. "No one I know is. Only an idiot would tell a reporter that kind of secret." Cross was anything other than idiotic.

"If you insist. If you change your mind, let me know." He held open the back door, and I stood there, staring at the goblin in his tidy suit, so different from Cross's lack of shirt and bewilderingly pretty chest. Was he really going to hug me every day? That really would be torture for him. Then again, the head of the House of Mercy could handle torture. Shudder.

Finally, I got inside the car, because there was no sense taking a bus when I was inextricably tangled with this mess. Cross had told me who he was, because he wanted me to understand exactly where I was. Which was standing in the jaws of doom, where I'd been from the moment the monster had targeted me to distract Cross. It shouldn't have worked. If Cross was so good at doing whatever he needed to do for the greater good, then he should have pursued the monster and left me to my inevitable fate. It was a miracle that I'd survived turning, in spite of his efforts. I wasn't a great asset to the world. Was I? Maybe he thought I'd become the next great female Alta. I shook my head because if that's what he thought, he was an idiot. He might be insane, but he wasn't stupid.

"Your new laptop is beside you," Henrick said.

I glanced at the wrapped box on the bench next to me. "I never ordered one."

“I took liberties. As the Senator’s girlfriend, it’s my privilege to take care of such things for you. Anything else you need, personal, professional...”

“Or vengeful, yes. I already heard the spiel. It makes no more sense now than it did then. I feel like I’m in a very bad dream. The senator’s girlfriend?” I made a face while my stomach churned. I hated him. He was still unnaturally attractive, but that feeling was hate. He’d tortured me so horribly. Because he didn’t want a monster to win? Because he had more ego than sense? I’d spent years with the questions gnawing at me, and now they were all as viciously demanding as ever. There was no reason that would justify his torturing me, particularly when he was a trained killer.

“I believe you have an event to attend with him this evening.”

I gritted my teeth and opened the box. Three hanks of gorgeous yarn tumbled out onto my lap. For a second I froze, before I shook my head and pulled out the laptop. I wasn’t getting distracted by yarn. I wasn’t a kitten. I turned on the new, cutting-edge laptop and accessed my files while we drove. Going through missing persons wasn’t particularly restful, but it was something to do.

He finally pulled up at the office building, and I got out before he could open the door for me. “Thank you,” I said, closing the door and hurrying inside before he could offer to kill someone for me again.

While I was settled in with my research, Mossy came up to perch on the edge of my desk. “Fairies sell things way too easily. And your cookies went fast. I had to hold back or I wouldn’t have been able to interview the whole neighborhood. By the way, no one knew anything about the kitten, but they did say Loren had a boyfriend that came over some nights.” She wiggled her brows at me.

“Loren had a boyfriend? Maybe it was an informant.”

“Handsome, tall, elvish?” Again with the brow-wiggle.

I sighed heavily. “Elves can be informants, and Loren’s part elvish.”

“Sure. You look weird. I thought you’d jump into this with both feet.”

I stared at her, then offered a slight shrug. “I wasn’t ever meant to be an investigative reporter.”

“I guess the senator’s girlfriend doesn’t need anything else interesting in her life. She can just lounge by the pool in some furry bikini and...”

“Mossy!” I glanced around to see if anyone heard her.

She sighed heavily. “One of these days, you’re going to stop hiding who you are, an investigative reporter who gets a thrill at the spray of blood and the scent of corruption.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Now get out of here.”

The rest of the day I spent dragging, except at lunch, when the most expensive restaurant in town brought me a box filled with all my favorite foods. Then I was keenly embarrassed as everyone stared at me, whispering as they gave me furtive glances. Finally, Nanette called me into her office.

“What’s the story between you and the senator? You know that if you can get an exclusive out of him...” She shook her head and cut herself off. “Never mind. You’re the only reporter threats or reason won’t work on. He’s too smart to date anyone who would actually get a story out of it.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. I hated him. I absolutely did, and it would absolutely help

my career, maybe help me to keep my position if the truth about the werewolf came out. I opened my mouth to say something about him, but my conscience raised my its head and I shrugged. “Sorry.”

“At least you’ll be pushed towards more political issues. Maybe you’ll start writing something more serious.”

I gave her a wan smile and left the office. I spent the rest of the day in an unpleasant daze until Mossy came up to me with a bright smile.

“Your car’s here.”

I stared at her. “I don’t have a car.”

“Come on,” she said, tugging on my arm. “He gave me fifty bucks if I can get you down there in ten minutes. You know that I’m going to earn that cash, even if I have to knock you unconscious and drag you.”

I stared at her, confused while I let her push me into the elevator. “Henrick?”

“Yep. He’s a goblin that was thrown out for bad behavior. Weird that he then became a secretary, right? He has no loyalty or respect for goblins, no ties whatsoever. He’s so cool!”

“Outcasts are cool?”

“Of course they are.”

“Particularly the ones who pay you way too much money for iffy jobs.”

“Iffy?” She shot me a look. “I may not be so incorruptible as you, someone who

won't take advantage of your closeness with a senator to get the inside scoop, even if he dumps you on your lonely butt, but I'm not iffy."

"Sorry, Mossy. It's not that I'm incorruptible, it's just that..."

"Yeah? What's your price?"

"Price?"

"Yeah. To get the inside scoop on the senator, you could command very high prices. I bet the big boss would negotiate practically anything. He's been trying to take down Silverton for ages."

I stared at her as we rode down the elevator in silence. Revealing that Cross was head of the House of Mercy would be quite the scoop. Of course, no one would dare to publish it. They wanted something less lethal, like the fact that he was actually a pureblood elf of the warrior variety, from the night court. That would be enough to get me national coverage. Doing a personal on his habits and tastes would be greeted with an equal amount of greediness. He was very successful at guarding his privacy, but hadn't bothered keeping me at arms-length the second Libby had brought me to his house. Like he didn't care what story I did about him.

I frowned. That was it. I was doing a personal on him. I'd be an idiot if I didn't use this relationship that was forced on me by the most miserably manipulative monster I'd ever met. I mean, I was technically grateful that he'd kept me alive, but I still hated him, and I always would.

The car was there with Henrick leaning against it, looking mysterious behind his reflective glasses. He nodded at Mossy and tossed her the roll of bills, then opened the door for me.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t buy off my work associates in the future,” I told Henrick as he opened the door for me.

“You’ll have to discuss that with my boss. He buys me off.” He pulled down his glasses so I could see him wink at me. If he worked for the House of Mercy, then Cross owned his soul and absolute loyalty. That was terrifying. I got inside without another word, but I didn’t have time to really stew when he pulled up at another building not far from my work and then got out to open the door for me.

“You’ll be spending the next few hours at the spa before you go to the event with the senator.”

“Will I?”

He shrugged. “The boss thought you might be able to use some relaxation. Actually, I suggested it because your current grooming isn’t up to the standard of most women he dates.”

I sputtered. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your brows are a little thick. You could use a cut and color, some more body in your hair, and your makeup isn’t the most flattering.”

I stared at the goblin, who must know I was a werewolf. “Do you want to die?”

His sharp teeth flashed before he gestured me towards the doors. “Enjoy yourself. Please. Also, if you ever wanted to kill me, I can recommend several...”

I walked away quickly before he could finish that sentence. I was trying to forget about the House of Mercy thing before my head exploded.

The spa was the finest in Singsong City, with fairies and elves who knew exactly how to make me forget about all the things I desperately wanted to forget.

By the time I was groomed up to Henrick's exacting standards, I felt more human, less werewolf. Then I walked into the dressing room and stopped when I saw the rack and the blue gown in shimmering diaphanous fabric that said money and magic. There was a card pinned to one strap with my name on it.

I opened and read the message.

I apologize for Henrick. You were perfectly lovely before the spa. He uses insults to manipulate. It's a bad habit that I will continue to try breaking. Please accept the dress as an apology. Wear it now or sell it for yarn money. Yours, Cross

That was unexpected. Oh, he was manipulating me with flattery and apologies. Wait. He could apologize for Henrick telling the truth about my grooming issues, but not for torturing me? What was wrong with him? He was the head of one of the most notoriously dangerous and slippery orders in the world. I really didn't want to know what was wrong with him. Absolutely not. I just wanted to know what he liked for breakfast so I could write a light exposé and get more notoriety out of him. And photographs. He said I could have anything I wanted.

I took the dress off the hangar and pulled it on over my perfectly smooth skin. The fit was heavenly, and my reflection when I looked in the mirror was shockingly stunning. I looked like a voluptuous star of the night, not a reporter. I licked my lips while I considered how likely it would be for me to turn wolf or get too much notice.

It was done. Cross was my protector. And I would get my interview.

I left the spa and climbed in the car, inhaling sharply when I slid into Cross in the backseat.

He stared at me, taking up the middle of the seat and not scooting over.

“I’m going to do an exposé on you,” I said quickly and bumped him over. “Move, please. You’re going to crush the gown.”

He blinked and then moved over quickly, giving me room. “I beg your pardon.”

“That’s what you said in your letter. You said I have your resources. So I want you. The exclusive interview you never give. I want twenty-four hours of personal, one-on-one with Senator Silverton, in his mansion, probably take a trip home to Texas, photo ops of you in swimming shorts, fencing, and with your dogs. I’m going to be one of them.”

He stared at me, then narrowed his eyes. “You want to do a fake exposé of me that you’re personally directing to make me look... What exactly do you want to portray?”

“Does it make a difference? You did say I could have whatever I wanted.”

“No difference. I’m just curious if there’s something I can do to help.”

I gave him my sweetest smile. “Really? I’m going to make you look even more desirable and lovable. You’re going to have a sense of humor, and a blind old butler who you’d never force into retirement. He sits on the porch and plays with the dogs while Henrick does all his work for him. People are going to weep. And then they’ll send you packages and propositions. Wherever you go, there will be women fainting for your attention.”

“A cruel fate, but I can bear it. If you don’t mind me saying, you look particularly stunning in that color.”

I looked up at him, startled out of my planning. “Do I? That’s probably true, but I will have to try purples to bring your eyes out. Your beauty is the only one I’m interested in exploiting.”

His smile grew and his eyes twinkled. “As you like.”

I sniffed and pulled out my laptop. I had things to write before I forgot them, outlines of this exposé I was going to do of the reluctant senator. He was going to be in the spotlight until he was positively blinded by it.

“We’re here,” he said as we pulled up at the city hall. I stared at the pillars and then looked at him.

“We’re at City Hall?”

“Mm.”

“I...” I squinted as I ran over the society events calendar in my head. “Oh. This isn’t the Frederick’s Gala, it’s the fundraiser for your party. I don’t come to political events.”

“I see. In that case, we’ll go to the gala. Henrick, we’re at the wrong event.”

I put a hand on his arm while my whole soul shriveled up. “I really hate you. This is important for your senator cover.”

“It’s not a cover. I really am a senator. It was a surprising turn of events. I was in this undercover position as a gambler between various levels of political...”

I pressed my hand to his supple mouth while I tried not to listen to him. “Don’t tell me details, Cross. Don’t tell me anything.” I got out of the car like a devil was after

me, and of course, he was, but he had long legs and caught up before I'd reached the main doors.

He held his arm out for me to take.

I gritted my teeth and grabbed his arm, hanging on tight and thinking about shots and angles that would get me the most bang for the buck. I was definitely doing an exposé of him. I had to do something, and I couldn't do much to sabotage him, but I could do that. And I would.

Chapter Twelve

“When are you coming down?” my mom asked the second I picked up my phone.

I put my arm over my eyes and tried to shut out the rest of the world. I was lying on the lounge chair in my knitted bikini while Cross swam laps in swimming shorts, almost like he wanted me to see him mostly naked. I was eating cookies with Lynx, but there weren’t enough in the world to make everything okay.

“I’m not sure if I can make it.” I winced as soon as I said the words, because that was ammunition to my mother.

Her voice was arch. “Oh. Well, if you can’t leave your boyfriend, I guess Bram’s just going to have to understand.”

I sat up, dropping my phone on my lap for a second before I scooped it up and turned to the side so I wasn’t facing Cross. “What do you mean?”

“The Senator! Are you really dating him?”

“No. Absolutely not. I mean, yes, but it’s not serious.”

“Yes!” she squealed, and I had to take the phone away from my ear. “Your father is looking forward to meeting him! Imagine, you marrying an elf after all this time.”

“Marrying? I’m not marrying him. We’re just casually dating. He casually dates lots of people. It’s not like we’re serious.”

“But if you’re not coming to your own brother’s wedding because you have to stay with him, how can it not be serious?”

I opened my mouth and closed it a few times. Disaster. This was the worst disaster ever. “I mean, I guess I don’t need to stay here.”

“Oh, good! And you can bring him here to meet everyone! I’m so glad we had this little chat. I’ll put you down for the fifteenth. You can stay in your old room. I’ll be sure to change the sheets.” She hung up, leaving me with a headache behind my eyes.

I slumped down, staring at the stone paving beneath my chair.

“Everything okay?” Cross asked from the side of the pool.

I made a point of ignoring him when we were alone together. I hated him. I couldn’t look at him without my chest filling with tightness and anxiety. That’s why I wouldn’t look at him when he gave me his therapy hugs.

I spoke shortly. “I need to go home for my brother’s wedding.”

“On the fifteenth of July. I know. It’s on my schedule. I have a reservation for us in the nearest bed-and-breakfast, as they don’t have any hotels nearby.”

I whirled around to stare at the monster. “No. You aren’t coming with me.”

His dark hair was slicked back, leaving his body looking even more massive and powerful in contrast. “No? But I’m your protector. I suppose I can escort you in a glamour, so no one knows that I’m with you if you’d be more comfortable that way.” He went back to swimming, like that was decided.

I stared at his body moving through the water like a knife through hot butter. “Or,” I

said quietly. “I take you as my boyfriend and let my mother torture you.” That actually had a lot of potential. She’d feel so much better knowing that I wasn’t alone in the world. And if it was a rich, powerful elf, that would be even better.

I kissed Lynx’s head, gave her a bit of cookie and then I walked over to the pool and put my legs in, waiting for Cross to stop swimming so he could see me wave at him. He came over to me, coming up out of the water directly in front of me so his bare chest brushed my knees.

“Yes?” He said it so formally, like we were at a ball only just introduced, not dripping water and shockingly bare-skinned.

“Do you think that you could pull off being a steady boyfriend for me at home?” I gripped the edge of the pool while I waited for his answer, but I kept my face blank. Hopefully.

He studied me thoughtfully. “I can very likely pull off anything. That will be particularly easy as we’ve been living together and I’ve been studying you for a long time. What impression do you want to give? That I’m desperately in love with you and only waiting for you to be ready before I ask you to marry me, or that I’m still considering the implications of a serious relationship and am more interested in seeing your family dynamic to give me more information before I allow myself to become more involved with you?”

I stared at him. “Do you overthink everything?”

“Yes.”

“So you thought about whether you should torture me?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I thought that I shouldn’t torture you. I never questioned that.”

“But you did it, anyway.”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t think about it, so that’s okay.”

“I thought about killing you. I considered it quite seriously, but it never seemed the right time, and then you transitioned and the question became irrelevant. So, which sort of relationship would you like me to cultivate?”

I shook my head while my heart twisted in my chest. He just said it so casually. Torturing me took the same emotional effort as deciding what kind of fake relationship we should have. “No way my dad would buy it. You’re too calculating.”

“Then I won’t try. I’ll just be with you and not try to be anything.” He reached up and pulled me into the water. I barely got the chance to gasp before I had to hold my breath as I plunged down.

I came back up almost immediately right next to him. I grabbed his strong shoulders and dunked him, holding him down while I kicked to stay upright.

I finally let him come up, and he did, but he grabbed me and pinned me to the pool wall while he hung over me, looking gorgeous, wet, and impossible.

“What are you doing?” I gasped.

“It’ll be a good photo,” he said, droplets of water glistening on his lashes.

“What photo?”

“For the exposé. You’ll need all sorts of photos.”

“Not me, just you.” My heart pounding against him as I stayed in that vulnerable position, his eyes going to my lips until they started to burn.

My phone rang, and I turned and scrambled out, bumping him because he wasn’t giving me enough room, but he didn’t back away, only followed me out of the pool, grabbing his towel while I grabbed my phone.

“Hello?” I answered, drying off.

Nanette said, “Delphi, I need you to get to Union Station. They found a body encased in the cement under the stairs. I know that you’re not actually our investigative reporter, but as long as Loren’s out, you’re up. Got it?”

I froze. They found a body at the Union station? Where Lynx had that constellation symbol? Cue creepy music. “Sure,” I said slowly, glancing at Cross and his ridiculous pectorals. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Great. I appreciate it.” She hung up, and I was left to head for the pool house.

“What was that?” Cross asked, following me with his towel slung over his broad shoulders in a way that I was trying not to notice.

“None of your business. The last time I told you about my work, you drugged me.”

“Ah, so it’s something to do with Lynx. Henrick will take you.”

I shot him a scowl that was probably adorable. “Henrick’s terrible.”

“Yes. Oh, you think he’s bad to you. No, that’s him being warm and caring. I’d send Manny with you, but you make him nervous.”

“He’s afraid of werewolves?”

His eyes widened. “Certainly not. Gnomes. Apparently, they’re dangerously adorable.”

I rolled my eyes and hurried to get dressed, but Cross grabbed my wrist and swung me around so I came up against him, wet, bare-skinned, horribly aware of his strength and beauty and my own weakness.

“I haven’t hugged you today,” he said before he pulled me against him, wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me tight.

I growled and bit his shoulder, and although it wasn’t hard enough to draw blood, it should have made him at least whimper.

He ignored me.

“Cross, I hate you. I hate you touching me.” At least I hated that I didn’t hate him touching me, which was even worse. I craved his hugs, like I really had been going mad without any physical contact for the last fifteen years.

He said in a put-out voice. “I’m aware, but it’s my duty for the sake of your sanity. I’d have one of the others hug you, but Manny is out, which is a pity because he’s the most naturally snuggly of all my assistants. Henrick is a goblin, which means that he’d probably stab me in my sleep if I suggested something so shocking. Sadly, I’m the only one with the stomach for doing whatever needs to be done.”

Like torturing me. I bit him again and drew blood that time. Cross finally stopped

hugging me, looking down his long nose at me before he turned and walked gracefully back towards the house, leaving me with my heart beating too fast, hating him more than I'd ever hated anyone, but at the same time, the wolf rumbled in the back of my brain how sweet and delicious he was. Hugging me was torture for him, and no one else was allowed to torture him. In fact, no one else was allowed to touch him ever again. Stupid wolf.

Henrick drove me to the old Union Station, but he didn't say anything, just looked smug. Of course he did. His drugging skills were stellar. He should be very proud of himself. Hateful monster. Maybe I would hug him, just so he'd stab Cross. My wolf growled, making him glance back at me for a moment. No, my wolf was only going to torture one person with hugs. The thing about him forcing me to accept his hug therapy was that my beast could easily break his hold and bite off his head if I really hated it all that much. Which he knew. Hateful monster. All of them.

When we got to the Union Station, the street in front was blocked off, and a group of officers were holding back the curious crowd.

I got through easily, smiling at the police officers I regularly fed cookies.

"Delphi, this is Detective Saito. She'll walk you to the body. We haven't gotten through the spells yet. We're waiting for the specialist," Lieutenant Joss said, giving me a professional nod before gesturing at the small woman with a confident smile and purple streaks in her dark hair. She smelled like sushi and trouble.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." I turned to give a shy smile to the young woman. She seemed very young to be a detective, but Singsong police officers didn't tend to last long. "Hi, detective Saito. Can you tell me how you found the body? It was behind the cement?"

She nodded at another blonde guy wearing a custodial gray uniform. "He was

assigned to patch the crack on the wall under the stairs, but as he was putting on the mortar, the wall collapsed, and he saw the gap beneath the stairs, and then the body. You can interview him while we wait for the spells guy.”

“Thanks.” I gave her another smile and was distracted by the scent of sushi while we walked over to the custodian. I was so hungry. I should have eaten more than cookies for lunch. If gnomes needed hugs, they required pastries as well as cookies.

I smiled at the custodian. “Hi. I’m Delphi. I’m covering the story for the paper. Have you worked here long?”

He looked between us and nodded, smiling easily. “Five years come August. Never found a dead body before, though. I wonder how old it is. It could be centuries.” He wiggled his brows for some reason, maybe because finding a really old dead body was more cool than a recent one.

“I guess it could. Did you notice how long the cracks in the plaster were there?”

“There are always cracks. That’s life.” He sighed heavily and then grinned at me and Detective Saito, feeling like this was a flirtation opportunity instead of a life or death investigation.

I gave him a return smile, but kept mine sad and serious. It wasn’t hard. Someone’s body was sealed in a bag only a few feet away. “So true. Do you remember who noticed that the cracks needed patching? Was there a constellation drawn on the wall near the cracks?”

He shrugged. “A guest reported the cracks. I don’t know about a constellation. It was something, but I don’t really do stars. I’m more into barbecue. Do you like to grill? You look like you’d bring an appetite, not like some of these girls who don’t know how to enjoy their lives, to really dig into pleasure with relish.” He wiggled his brows

at me. Apparently, he liked my gnomish curves and wasn't afraid to show it.

I stared at him. Cleared my throat. I really disliked the way he was looking at my body, like one might look at a grilled steak. There's a fine line between appreciation and objectification. This guy crossed it without hesitation.

Henrick stepped in front of me and smiled at the custodian, showing many of his sharp teeth. "She barbecues with her boyfriend, the senator. Miss Era, the magic specialist has arrived. If you and the detective are finished questioning this person..." He made 'person,' sound like the worst insult.

Okay then. That wasn't awkward at all. Weren't goblins supposed to be close-mouthed in the extreme? No wonder he got thrown out.

I smiled at the custodian. "Thanks for your help," then hurried back over to the black-wrapped body where a woman in a yellow protective suit was working over it with a wand that puffed out sparkling dust.

"Magical, right? I think she does it like that just to drive actual magic users crazy, but who knows?" Detective Saito said, frowning at the specialist.

I nodded, watching the woman do her work. I could feel the bindings on the wrapped body tighten until it released with a snap. She reached down and opened the black bag with a gesture and a loud unzipping sound. The plastic parted, and there was Loren's slack face and dead eyes. So dead. So very, very dead.

I stumbled back, horrified and stunned. The smell didn't help, the caustic chemicals mixing with decomposition. How could anyone have done this? And why? Why would you kill someone and then put them under the stairs just a few yards away from where she'd been investigating the Lynx connection? If she hadn't been investigating Lynx, why would she have had a cat with that collar?

“Isn’t that the other reporter?” Henrick said, frowning down at her.

I took photos while my stomach pitched and tossed, mostly from the smell, but also seeing Loren so dead hit me where the werewolf couldn’t block it. Finally, I couldn’t take any more and ran to the public restroom. I breathed through my mouth and tried to think happy thoughts while I crouched in a stall. It didn’t work. Loren wasn’t missing, she was murdered. But how did she end up in the hollow under the stairs? It seemed unlikely that the wall had just spontaneously fallen in. No, it felt planted, so it would be found by me specifically. Why? How did the Lynx relate to the beast? There had to be a connection that involved Cross.

I pulled out my phone and called him.

He answered after seven rings. “Hello?”

“Cross, Loren’s body’s under the steps where the Lynx constellation was marked. I was meant to find her. I mean, that’s how it feels, but why? What does any of this have to do with me?”

“Take some deep breaths. We’ll discuss this later. You’re already a werewolf. The beast can’t hurt you.”

“If he infected me, death or pain isn’t the problem. I can’t anticipate this kind of madness. Why would he...” I gasped a breath. I really was hyperventilating. I forced myself to take deep, even breaths.

“I sent Henrick to find you. He should be there any second. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“Not for Loren,” I whispered.

He sighed heavily. “You got a positive ID?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ll go back. I’m fine now.” My stomach twisted.

“Delphi, don’t push yourself.”

“I’m fine, Cross. It’s not like you to worry about my delicate feelings. I just called you to keep you updated. This monster is your obsession, not mine.” I hung up, wiped my forehead with the back of my hand, and went out to face the mirror and pull myself back together. Henrick didn’t come in. When I went out, he was in the circle of people around the body looking concerned. When I met his eyes, he looked disturbed on a deep level.

“Miss Era. They want you to look at the body again. I’m here in case you get faint or something.”

“That’s very considerate of you, but I’m sure I’ll be fine.” I took a deep breath before I stepped closer, getting around Joss’s figure to get a good look at the face again. I stared at the woman I’d never seen before. No, I did know that face, the blonde hair that I’d taken for Loren’s, but it wasn’t her face anymore. No, this was one of the missing women from Golden. I stood there staring at the face that wasn’t Loren’s, while my mind spun around in a tight little spiral of madness.

“Yes, I can give her a positive ID,” I said and pulled out my laptop. I pulled up the files with pictures and went through them quickly and pulled up the woman. “She’s one of the missing women I’ve been researching. Not Loren, my co-worker, but she does have some similarities. I was mistaken at first.”

“Mistaken?” Henrick grumbled.

No, she’d been glamourised to look like Loren, but now she looked like this other

woman. This body had definitely been planted just for me. And I'd thought Cross was psycho. This is why I was a society reporter. This exact thing. It was like that time I'd spent two years tracking down the wolf who infected me, took down him and his pack one by one, only to find out in the end that he hadn't been anywhere near me when I was infected. Futility, thy name is Delphi.

"You'll have to take DNA samples and run them across this other woman," someone said.

Detective Saito frowned at me. "Someone's taking women you're doing research on, and now she was put where you'd find the body? Sounds like a psychopath that's targeting you. Do you have protection?"

I laughed a little too hysterically before I patted Henrick's shoulder. "Sure. I've got protection. It's probably a good thing that I'm going to be out of town for a few days." Was I? I wasn't going to the office. Now would be a great time to do that exposé on the senator.

She nodded soberly. "Yeah. I'd hate to see you on a slab. If you have anything else come up, give me a call." She handed me her card and then gave me a taut smile. "Stay safe."

I laughed again like that was so funny, and then turned and left the site, slipping through the people with Henrick keeping everyone from touching me. It was almost like he was worried I'd accidentally get injected with something that turned me into a werewolf again.

The goblin opened the door of a car and I slid in next to Cross. I stared at him and then climbed on his lap and wrapped my arms around him, breathing in the spicy carnation scent beneath his woodsy shaving cream. He smelled so good, a world away from decomposing corpses that changed faces.

He held me close, large arms swallowing me up, so I felt safe for the first time since I'd found a rabbit on my doorstep.

I closed my eyes and relaxed against him until all the stress had drained away, and I remembered him holding me in that cell so many years ago, his arms tight, like he could personally defeat the monster under my skin if he gave me enough hugs. He'd been doing it even then, giving the gnome hug therapy, because gnomes needed hugs. And he couldn't let me die.

That's when I realized that I was on the lap of Senator Silverton, the evil elf I despised. I stiffened up, and he immediately unwrapped his arms and put me on the bench beside him, giving me a look with those violet eyes.

"It wasn't Loren, but one of the missing women?" he asked mildly, not mentioning my sudden snuggle.

I nodded. "The one she had on file."

"Interesting. Let's go out for dinner. How does sushi sound?"

I winced. "Expensive. Also, I'm not sure if I can keep anything down. Also, it will make me smell like a werewolf."

"Perfect. I know just the place."

The drive to the restaurant was quiet, which was good, because I was trying to organize the facts in my head, but they kept unwinding into an image of Loren's face in that body bag. Was it a warning? A threat? Or was someone just really looking forward to seeing me have hysterics?

"You're thinking too much," he said, taking my hand and squeezing it.

I stared at his large hand, beautiful elegant fingers tapering perfectly, curled around mine. He was getting better at holding hands. “What do you suggest that I do instead?”

For a moment I stared at him, and he studied me, the evil elf that I’d snuggled of my own free will only a few minutes before. What would it be like to kiss him? I’d forget about everything. I’d drown in him and never recover. If he offered, I might take him up on it.

He released me, grabbed a box on the floor, and handed it over.

Oh. Right. Kissing him was completely off the table. What was wrong with me? I hated him, didn’t I? Yes. But I also liked hiding in his arms. He was right. I needed hugs. Maybe I should find a nice werewolf to mate with so I could snuggle all the time.

I unfastened the ribbon and lifted the lid to find a pretty pale purple yarn and a pair of knitting needles. “It’s your eyes.”

“You were going to exploit me, yes? What better way than in a fluffy sweater? It’s cashmere,” he added, like I wouldn’t know.

I knew. It seemed like the only thing I knew, but cashmere and I went way back. I pulled out the needles tucked underneath the yarn and started with a slipknot. After a few rows, my mind settled, and I was able to breathe normally for the first time since I’d seen Loren.

He pulled out his phone and started taking notes, sending messages to people, and in general, not focusing on me like I was a bomb he needed to detonate. Of course, he could detonate bombs and people. He was the head of the House of Mercy. He could do anything.

“Do you understand why this is happening?” I finally asked, still focused on my knitting. As the head of the secret assassin’s guild, he should understand something. I’d take any crumbs of sanity he could give me.

“I have guesses.”

“Well? Why would someone put Loren’s glamour on a missing girl’s body? Is it a clue from a psycho killer, like she’s next and I have to find her before he kills her? Why would someone target me? Or are you the target and I’m just a lucky bystander? Cross, please tell me something before I go insane!”

He cleared his throat. “I have been hunting this monster for many years. I actually thought that you might be the beast, but it was only the first time, wasn’t it?”

I looked up from my pretty purple cashmere. “First time?”

He gave me a slight smile. “The rabid wolf who was collecting females to turn, to mate to his pack, and expand his empire. That was you, yes? You did it very well, picking off one member at a time until you ended him and saved all the women he’d collected. And then you disappeared. It was only a few months later that I heard whispers of another beast, a true monster who hunted wicked wolves. I thought it was you as well.”

I shivered. “You know about my experiment with vengeance?”

“Vengeance? You were saving helpless women. Although after that it was debatable whether the beast destroyed more than it saved. There was a lot of blood in those earlier cases, sometimes innocent blood getting mixed up in the slaughter.”

I winced at the idea of carelessly spilling innocent blood. I still felt sick enough about killing the monsters who wanted to enslave females to build a werewolf army. “That

wasn't me."

"I know. Your claws aren't large enough. I wasn't sure until that night when I measured them. I didn't think it was you, but I couldn't be sure. Pity I didn't think to measure your claws when I had you in my cage."

I snorted a laugh. "Yes, pity. Perhaps you had other things on your mind. Wait, all this time, for fifteen years, you thought I was out there killing people? But you're an assassin who kills monsters. That's your house specialty, right?"

He smiled slightly. "You are very well-informed. Yes, but I made an exception for you."

I frowned, because that sounded personal, like he cared. I wasn't going to entertain such a nonsensical notion for a second. "When did the beast start working with Lynx? What's the tie? Who is the beast?"

He cleared his throat. "Lynx first came up on my radar when it was linked to a series of terminally ill patients who disappeared. It was suggested that they may have used those patients for experiments. What else would a science guild do with people who were going to die, anyway? It's almost ethical to give them experimental treatment that no one who wasn't at risk would take. Other than that one whisper of suspicion, I've heard nothing of Lynx."

"You think that maybe Lynx had something to do with the beast? Maybe it's one of those terminally ill patients?"

He smiled and leaned back, visibly relaxing. "I like the way your mind compiles data. The beast is larger than a war-beast such as the Alta. You're terrifyingly huge, but you're still petite compared to the beast. I had the fortune of getting up close and personal with the beast the night you stumbled in on me in my kitchen, and there

wasn't anything natural about it."

"And a secret science guild may have something to do with its unnatural size? You think they did experiments on the beast?"

"The beast may be an original founder of Lynx, who decided they needed an arm that could enforce, but lost control, or didn't. I don't know. I only know that its home is Singsong City, and has been for over a decade."

I frowned at him. "How do you know that? I've never run into any beasts until Ridley moved here from Golden."

"Exactly. Singsong is the only place the beast has meticulously not targeted. Monsters that stay in business keep the blood far from their doors."

I nodded and refocused on my knitting. "All that time, you really thought I was dispensing vigilante justice?"

"Mm. Not exactly vigilante justice. It was more bloodlust that needed to be sated, but was directed by some form of conscience. Ergo, the victims had to be worthy of death. Don't you crave blood and violence?"

I gave him a look. "I'm part gnome. I crave cookies, chocolate, and yarn. What about the kitten?"

"The kitten. Yes, well, I have no idea. It could have been a test. The beast had to keep the kitten alive to prove that they hadn't lost it to the beast, but why did Loren have it."

"Assuming that the beast is under the control of the Lynx group."

“Yes, assuming that.”

“That is a lot of assumptions. Why would the Lynx group want me to find the body?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. I dislike not knowing quite passionately.”

I elbowed him. “That’s an elf for you, only passionate about knowledge.”

He looked at me with those beautiful violet eyes and a slight smile curved on his mouth. “I am also passionate about gardening.”

“I beg your pardon for not realizing the depths of your passion. Really? You like gardening? I haven’t ever seen you working on it.”

“I garden at night. I’m a night elf, you know.” He elbowed me back, but gently.

“Ah. Now I understand. That’s why you focus on white blooms and scent. That makes sense.” I sighed because that was the worst pun ever. I must be stressed. I only punned under stress.

He spoke low, seeming to focus on his phone. “I was very impressed when you brought the tree back to life at college. Don’t you feel the urge to garden?”

I blinked at him while a forgotten ache gnawed at me. I’d almost forgotten to be sad about losing my Elven magic when I became a wolf. I mean, I could imbue knitting with some Elven spells, but the natural magic was buried. “It was difficult enough to use Elven magic with the gnome in the way, but with the wolf...” I shook my head and refocused fiercely on my knitting.

He cleared his throat and changed the subject, like a well-mannered elf would do. “It seems that the monster hates me, so he’s toying with you, since I find it so

disagreeable, but he's not going as far with you as I'd expect, almost like he doesn't want to destroy you. It's likely someone who knows and admires you, but not enough to entirely mitigate his hatred towards me."

I hugged my knitting to my chest, horrified at the thought of being stalked by an obsessive beast that was more terrifying than the Alta before I resolutely returned to my purl row. "I hate you too. Did you force him to transition into a monster as well?"

"I doubt it, but there are other reasons to hate people. My work in the senate steps on a lot of toes."

"Not your allies."

"Depends on whether my allies are corrupt. My different roles have different goals, and I play my roles methodically."

"So you're a terrible ally."

He flashed me a smile. "How lucky that you'll never know. I'm your protector, not ally. That includes all the pieces of myself."

"Including assassin extraordinaire. How lucky for me. And you'll keep me in cashmere, so I should be doubly grateful."

"And sushi." He raised a brow, almost like that was flirtatious.

I shrugged. "I can't eat a lot of sushi. It makes me smell like a werewolf and ruins the effects of my cookies."

"That is a pity as I've already ordered an entire boat. I suppose I'll have to take it to Libby if you can't finish it."

I growled at the thought of him giving my sushi to someone else, then I pressed my lips together, pretending like that hadn't happened.

“No? Then I suppose you'll have to smell like werewolf until it wears off.”

The restaurant was Piscerie, the finest restaurant outside the city wall, not that a lot of other reputable places were directly on the river.

Cross took me to the outdoor patio where general seating could be had for much less money than a private room. I felt self-conscious being with Cross, because as soon as he stepped out of the car, he became the politician, warm, sweeping the crowd with a familiar smile like he knew and was friends with everyone here, before he gave his arm to me and let his smile become more intimate and interested.

I had to force myself to smile back at him, because seeing this side of him just made me want to stab him with my needles. Good thing I'd left them in the car.

“Here we are,” he said, pulling out a chair for me.

“Thank you, Senator,” I said demurely as I took my seat, making sure to beat my lashes at him for an extra second.

A waiter brought out a sushi boat the size of the table and smiled at me before leaving us to it.

“Senator, it's so good to see you here,” a much older woman said, coming up to our table. I blinked before I realized it was Leticia Marin. “And you,” she said, turning to me with twinkling eyes. “Is this the second date you've had with the senator?” She'd spread the gossip like wildfire. The senator, who never dated any women more than once, had gone out with the gnome-elf reporter twice! Oh the shock and horror!

I stood up quickly. “It’s a pleasure. Are you here alone? Would you like to join us?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to interrupt your time together. Anyway, I’m waiting for Zephin. You know, he’s thinking of delaying the ball. You should encourage him. He’s got a soft spot for you.”

“Everyone does,” Zephin said with a slight smile as he came up on Leticia’s right and raised her hand to kiss the back of it. He turned to look at me and Cross, calculation in his eyes. “Yes, you should come to my office tomorrow to convince me about the party. Say, two-thirty?”

I smiled sweetly. “That would be perfect. In other news, I’ve convinced the Senator to give me an exclusive.”

A sharp whistle broke my attention, and I looked over to see Loren standing there with a gleam in her eyes.

I gasped and grabbed Cross’s shoulder. I’d just seen her dead, wrapped in plastic. He was on his feet immediately, his hand around my waist to hold me up.

Cross laughed, low, smooth. “That’s right. Nothing political, but Delphi’s interests are always more personal.” He pulled me tight and pressed a kiss to my temple while I stared at Loren and my heart threatened to shatter on my ribcage. Was this a glamour? Was all of this a drug-induced hallucination? How in the world was Loren here in this restaurant instead of dead or being held in a cage somewhere? Had she never been missing? Then why did I have her cat?

Chapter Thirteen

“M r. Clay, can I get a minute?” Loren said, smiling at Leticia broadly before returning her attention to Zephin Clay, our boss’s boss. “It won’t be long. I just need to get clearance for a sensitive issue regarding a case I’ve been covering. I’d like to go to Golden and do some more digging there, but I’d like the cooperation from your west coast offices.”

“Loren? Are you back from your family emergency?” I asked, sounding faint. I cleared my throat and tried to rally. It didn’t help that Cross was still publicly embracing me far too familiarly. Or maybe that did help, but I didn’t want it to.

Zephin Clay was the only one who seemed to notice the shocking physical contact between me and Cross, likely because he was the most elfish in the group. Except for Cross, which means that he realized how intimate he was being, and in public. I couldn’t push him away without it turning into a thing. The last thing I wanted was a scene in front of my boss’s boss.

Loren waved a hand airily. “Yes. That’s all cleared up now. Thanks for covering for me while I was gone, but seriously, a pack war? That’s what you got from that mess?” She gave me a pointed look and then shook her head, tsking.

“Well,” Leticia said, frowning at Loren. “You can’t expect a society reporter to do your job for you.” She sniffed and turned. “You two enjoy your evening. Don’t let business disturb either one of you.” She gave Cross a stern look before smiling at us both with that twinkle and leaving us alone once Mr. Clay and Loren had gone in the opposite direction.

I collapsed onto my chair while my brain threatened to explode. “Loren’s not dead.”

“Or she’s a reanimated corpse, or a golem, or a...”

I shoved a sushi roll into his open mouth because I couldn’t process any of that.

“No, that’s Loren, back on the case. Good. It’s not my problem anymore.” I started eating sushi. I’d almost forgotten how delicious sushi was to my werewolf. She wasn’t particular, but this sushi was absolutely the best you could get. I had no trouble eating the entire boat while Cross ate something else that looked almost as good, only vegan. He was an elf, after all, although I’d heard that night elves fed on the hearts of their enemies.

He was so handsome. No, handsome was the wrong term. He was more dynamic than that. My wolf wanted to lick him, taste him, take him somewhere dark and close and snuggle. Of course she did. From the beginning, when she’d started coming out of my skin, when she’d bitten him, it hadn’t been vengeful, more possessive. And now he was feeding her sushi, taking care of her, like he’d given me those hugs this morning and brought me yarn, to take care of my gnome. My elf was harder to win after she’d been betrayed and tortured by him. That’s what the real root of my hatred was, the elf. Elves don’t forgive easily. They don’t trust easily in the first place, but if you lose that trust, it’s gone forever. Not that I’d trusted the masked stranger, but I had liked the pretty elf. My elf had found him extremely compelling, which my friends had teased me about, because I was too shy to approach him, until the end, when Mr. Clay told me where he was.

Clay’s name seemed to come up a lot when I considered all the times I’d run into Cross. Was that really just a coincidence? He was an old friend of my father’s. Not that my father was close with any elves, but the thought of Zephin Clay turning me into a werewolf was beyond ludicrous. He was calculating and shrewd, as all elves were, but he wasn’t a psychopath.

“Are you finished already?” Cross asked, smiling at me warmly.

I stared at him blankly. How could he put on that warmth so easily? He was probably a psychopath.

I stood up. “Yes, thank you.”

He took my hand and swung it slightly, casually as we walked out, the eyes of everyone on us, including Leticia and Mr. Clay. He gave me a nod and a pointed look, reminding me of our meeting tomorrow.

“Do you want to go with me to Texas for a few days?” Cross asked. “Someone could cover for you while you work on your big exposé.”

I stopped while my heart pounded. A few days away from trying to not look like I wanted to stab Cross in public would be so great. Also good for my career. And getting away from corpses. “Yes. A few days out of town would be very nice.”

“You could skip your meeting with Clay.”

“Could I?” I glanced over at him. “Is he at odds with both of your identities or just the political one?”

“If you don’t want to smell like a werewolf, it would be better if you didn’t see him right away. Also, I have more than two identities, Miss Era.” He held the car door open for me and I climbed in, took out my knitting and tried to block out the rest of the world. My wolf wanted to curl up on Cross’s lap and snuggle. He’d fed me so beautifully. He deserved some appreciation. My elf wasn’t in the same mood. I didn’t appreciate his willingness to be objectified for my career. That made it far less satisfying. And I didn’t like him telling me that I shouldn’t see my boss. Of course, he was right, but it rankled.

“We could go tonight,” he said, glancing at his phone, then at me.

“Tonight? You’re joking.”

He gave me a slight smile. “The joys of having a private jet.”

I winced. “You want me out of town for a few days, or are you feeling the need to lie low?”

“I don’t like the way you were played, first the body and then Loren herself showing up like that. I don’t like how vulnerable you are here.”

I frowned at him. “But the only reason you agreed to be my protector was to capture this beast. If I’m vulnerable, I make a good target.”

His eyes narrowed and anger flashed in them. “On the contrary, Miss Era. I don’t throw away assets. Good targets only seem vulnerable, but must, in reality, be the strongest, most capable of us all. Even then, things go wrong, and bad things happen to those you’ve sworn to protect.”

“And you did swear to protect me in front of the Alta and all those people. Too bad.”

His lips twitched. “Yes, too bad. Henrick, airport,” he said with a slight smile as he looked at me. “I’ll make sure your clothing choices match my eyes.”

“My clothing doesn’t matter. I’m not the one being exposed.”

His smile became slightly more genuine. “But Miss Era, I only agree to opening up to the public if I’m protected by my committed relationship to the respectable society lady who can soften the assault.”

I stared at him, my heart sinking. “You won’t let me do an exposé?”

“Of course I will, but it has to be a couple’s story. Otherwise, no one would believe that you weren’t blackmailing me.”

“Or I could just make up whatever I liked.”

“Naturally, but the photos are what are going to sell it.” He held his phone out to me so I could see a picture of me and Cross together at the political event. I looked enchanting, confident, like a politician’s perfect wife at the side of the man who was looking down at me like I was his whole world.

I turned away from that nonsensical image. “Ah, the devoted husband. Another role you’re disgustingly adept at playing. Don’t you ever sicken yourself?”

“Every day. Husband? I’ll have to watch that, not look too respectable too quickly, or no one would believe it. Perhaps they would. We did know each other at school.”

“It was love at first sight,” I said drily.

“Absolutely. You were trying to bring the tiny sapling back to life after one of the careless boys fell over on it. Your magic was very beautiful.”

I blinked at him, my stomach lurching. It hurt for him to mention my magic so casually. I used to love plants like my brother loved cheese, and my magic had been part of me, like a limb I’d lost that when the wolf devoured me. “You mentioned it. Why would you bother remembering my magic?”

“I remember a lot of things,” he said with a flash of his violet eyes that made me want to stab him with my knitting needles. He remembered torturing me but still hadn’t bothered to apologize.

I wrinkled my adorable nose at him. “It must be quite unpleasant to be you.”

“Quite.” He smiled slightly and went back to his phone.

Somehow, I didn’t stab him.

The plane was small, but luxurious.

“Wow,” I said, looking around at the pale blue and polished wood that made it look like a fancy Elven parlor instead of a jet. “All I need is Lynx, and I’d be complete. Oh! We can’t leave the kitten,” I said, whirling around to face Cross, who was a step behind me. I backed up when I realized how close he was. He smelled so nice.

“Manny will bring her. You’re such a conscientious mistress.” He kissed my forehead while I blushed and sputtered.

“I’m not a mistress.” I pushed on his chest and felt the flex of his muscles before I pulled my hand away as if I was burned.

After that, I fell asleep on the plush couch while he gave me room, doing business on his phone and laptop while I let too much sushi and the movement of the plane lull me to sleep.

The helicopter to the sprawling Tex mansion was also more relaxing than what I got once we walked inside. People were everywhere, arranging lighting, getting ready for the photo shoot like this was a tv show.

I followed close behind Cross as he led me to a room down a long black-and-white checked hall, where a guy in a white lab coat was unzipping a familiar black body bag.

I grabbed Cross's jacket and jerked him back. "What's going on?"

"A few things," he said easily. "Melville, this is Miss Era. She's going to take notes while I do the autopsy."

I stared at Cross, then at Melville, the cheerful blonde man. "Like Moby Dick?"

His smile brightened. "Exactly. If you're doing it yourself, what would you like me to do, sir?"

"We need some dogs for the photoshoot. We'll start first thing after we take care of business. Is Harold here?"

"He'll be here tomorrow. If not tomorrow, the day after. I'll go find some dogs. Nice golden retrievers?"

"No, something dark and dramatic that looks nice with my eyes. That's the theme, you know."

"I see."

He left me with Cross and the body bag, which was unzipped so I could see the poor missing girl's face.

"I think that Loren wanted to accompany her body back to Golden," I whispered, unable to look away from that face.

"Yes, she did, but happily, we got it first. You don't mind taking notes, do you?" he asked as he took off his jacket and pulled on a pair of plastic gloves.

I swallowed hard. The smell was not pleasant, but I wasn't going to show him my

weakness. “No, sir.” I sat down on a stool, pulled out my laptop, and opened a new document.

I looked up to find him studying me.

“Miss Era, your eyes are much lovelier than mine. Yours are the earth, bark fresh kissed by rain, and deep, rich, delicious chocolate.”

I stared at him, lost. “Beg your pardon?”

“Your eyes are so much lovelier than mine. You are much more appealing than I could ever be in absolutely every way.”

Okay, now I was really lost. “Did you hit your head? Hyacinth and wisteria, lilacs and violets, are all prettier than brown, Cross. Stop stalling. Let’s get this done so we can focus on the photoshoot.” Right? Because that was so much more important than dead girls.

“Some day, you are going to recognize your own brilliance.” He stuck a needle into her eye deep enough to get her brain.

I gasped and my stomach clenched, threatening to unleash the sushi boat. Ew. Ew. Ew. I was not enough of a werewolf to be okay with seeing that, hearing the soft suctioning of the needle, but he could do something so horrible after he gave me a clumsy compliment. He was definitely a psychopath.

He spoke with perfect calm. “I’ll begin with taking tissue samples. I want to see what they did to her before they killed her.”

“Good thinking,” I stuttered while my stomach flipped. I typed, ‘taking tissue samples,’ and then went into detail, noting every other place he extracted samples.

Then, after he put all those little vials into an under counter refrigerator, he started cutting her up.

The scent wasn't decomposition, but chemicals. She'd been treated with magic and something else before she was zipped into a body bag.

"What is that smell? I don't remember that from biology class," I said.

He inhaled and then bent over her eye and spread her pupil. "Excellent work noticing the peculiar scent, Miss Era. Would you mind taking that tray of samples out to Mel?"

I could leave? "Not at all, Senator," I said and then hurriedly picked up the tray and walked out the door. I stopped just outside the room, because something about his inhale struck me as off. It was probably nothing, but... I put the tray carefully on the ground and then turned around and pushed open the door to find Cross beneath a very animated blonde, only her eyes were dead, face blank, but she was definitely killing Cross.

No one got to kill him except for me.

I shifted past the adorable wolf and straight to my beast in a confetti of my clothing. With one lunge and a powerful snap of my jaws, I bit off her head. If she wasn't already dead, that would have done something, but as it was, I ripped off her arm next, then her knee, and after that, there was nothing but pieces left of her.

I pinned Cross against the counter, slobbering down at him, snapping my jaws and licking my teeth to try to get the flavor of the possessed girl out of my mouth.

"I need to analyze her remains," Cross said with a slight smile on his beautiful face. And those eyes. I had to taste them.

I licked him, a long, slobbery licking that would hopefully clean all the dead girl off him. His eyes tasted like the rest of him, delicious. Carnations. Mine. After that, I turned and pounced on the dead girl, and then proceeded to show the remains just what I thought of them coming to life and touching my elf.

“Okay,” Cross said, face dripping with werewolf saliva while he stood there, kind of frozen in place. “I guess you’ll take care of her remains instead.”

The door burst open and Melville came in with three other people who stopped abruptly when they saw me. They weren’t afraid, but wary, and each pulled out a variety of weapons that would do a lot of damage. A big, bearded man moved through the others. When he saw me, he growled and nodded a greeting to me. Oh. He was a wolf.

“Harold. You’re early,” Cross said, still frozen and covered in slime.

Harold smiled at Cross before turning back to me. “Did you kill her well?”

I growled at him. “Already dead. Animated death is not killable.”

He raised his brows. “You’re very eloquent for a beast.”

I straightened slowly until I towered over him. I shook my head and shifted back to human, then stumbled into a counter while Cross stepped in front of me, shaking out a lab coat to wrap around me while he blocked me with his body so no one else would see me in my furless glory. I shook my head again while I put my arms through the sleeves. I’d been a werewolf for over fifteen years. Random nudity was just part of the glorious package, but I still wasn’t used to it, particularly other people seeing my beast. No, I made a point of keeping my wolf and beast under wraps. No one else ever got to see, but here in Cross’s compound, everyone knew what monster I had under my skin.

“Why don’t I show you to your room?” Cross said, pulling my coat closed and snapping it beneath my chin.

My teeth chattered as I said, “They let you take her. They set you up to be killed by that undead creature. Are you so delicate that a feeble zombie would kill you? No. So why bother?”

He frowned at me, sober, serious, the head of the world’s most dangerous order of secret assassins. “I don’t think they meant me to take the body. You’re right, it’s not an effective method of killing someone like me. Even if you hadn’t come back and so heroically rescued me, I would have been fine while I examined the evidence. They didn’t even plant an explosive in her.”

I took a step back while embarrassment washed over me. “The evidence. That’s what you’re doing, why you didn’t stop her right away. I destroyed evidence that you were trying to collect?” That’s the only reason he wouldn’t have destroyed the monster immediately. Of course it was. I really was an idiot.

He raised a brow, a moment of considering how to be polite and save my feelings without lying. “It would have been convenient to get answers out of her once I spelled her securely. I can often get answers out of animated dead, depending on what magic fuels them, but I’m not sure whether this would be one of those times.”

I swallowed hard while nausea churned in my belly. “Of course. My apologies for interfering with your business.”

“It’s not just my business. It’s yours as well. I should have told you what I was doing instead of sending you away without explanation. You’re too intelligent for that.”

I winced. If I were so intelligent, I wouldn’t have ripped apart a possible witness. I was so ashamed. I wanted to slink away under a bush and hide there forever. The

yard had so many bushes, both around the house where everything was meticulously maintained and further out, where it blended into wild areas with a stream running through it. I couldn't hide because we had to do a photo shoot. The house was set up, but Cross's hair was still slicked back from my werewolf saliva. He also had several scratches from the dead girl.

"We'll do the shoot tomorrow morning," I said, edging away from him. "You should shower before you go to bed. For a very long time."

He smiled but still looked puzzled as he gave me an elvish bow. "Tomorrow then. Thank you for your assistance, Miss Era."

I left the room before I could burst into tears or something else equally embarrassing. My beast was out of control. Cross had so much Elven magic. Of course he'd be fine with the zombie girl. And if he wasn't, why was that my problem? Maybe I couldn't kill him, but did I have to protect him so stupidly? Yes, I did, and I hated myself for it. Everyone here was a killer, and so was I, if I wanted to be honest. I'd killed that wolf and his pack members. And that zombie girl. If she'd been a live human threatening Cross, I would have killed her then, too.

Didn't I hate him? Yes. I was so angry at the monster who'd tortured me for so long, holding me so close while I buried my teeth into him. But at the same time, no one else had ever held me so tight, even if he was the one injecting me with agonizing substances that brought my skin back together again and again, he never left me through all of it. So maybe I also felt some gratitude. My wolf considered him hers to protect, to bathe in her noxious saliva until he drowned in her affection. Hopefully, he didn't understand beast instincts, but what were the odds of a monster assassin not understanding something so basic?

I shook my head. My beast wasn't me. He knew that.

“Miss Era?”

I turned to face the bearded wolf, who was looking at me with golden eyes and an impassive face. He had his wolf completely under his control, instincts locked and loaded.

“Yes? Harold, isn’t it?”

He nodded, but didn’t smile. He wasn’t the sort to smile, to exercise his facial muscles nearly as much as the senator. “I can direct you to your room if you’d like.”

I hesitated. “Actually, would you mind answering some questions?”

He stiffened up. “I’m not at liberty to disclose anything about our order.”

I smiled and shook my head. “Not about the order. Finally, someone sensible enough to not offer their services to assassinate somebody! It’s about being a werewolf. I’ve avoided werewolves for fifteen years since I got turned, except for that time I hunted down a pack and killed them all.” I winced. “Sorry, too much information. Anyway, I wondered if I could ask you some questions about controlling the beast.”

He nodded slightly. “I was also turned, but my mate helped me through the transition. You didn’t have anyone to help you?”

I shrugged. “Just Cross, but he didn’t stick around once I wasn’t actively turning. That is, he unlocked the cage, and I ran. I probably should have stopped to ask some questions, but I wasn’t in the right head space.”

He stared at me blankly for an extra beat before he blinked. “Cross thinks he knows everything because he can read, including transitioning a werewolf.”

“Well, it worked. I did transition, and for a half-gnome, I guess that’s something.”

He spoke slowly. “That’s something, all right. You want to know how to control the beast? In what way?”

“Every way,” I said, gesturing broadly. “In situations like that, with the dead girl attacking Cross, I need to be able to think through it, to hear Cross when he tells me he needs her alive before I rip her apart.”

He rubbed his thick beard. “Huh. Well, there’s no way to do that without actively training your beast in combat situations. Instincts will only take you so far, and they will always lose your fight for you against someone with control.”

I sighed as I thought of the Alta, handing me my patchy pelt. “Yeah. I definitely have that experience. I also need to be able to lose against someone I don’t want to displace. I don’t want to be the next Alta Manada.”

“No? I don’t blame you. One thing. If I train your beast in combat, you’ll also need magical training. That half-gnome, elf, you’ll need to work those pieces of you along with the beast, or the beast will end up being the dominant one in your triad.”

“Triad?”

He shrugged. “Training in the House of Mercy isn’t casual. You should think about it. Cross has time before the next political season, so you could spend it here, putting the pieces together while he does his real job, but you’ll have to talk to him about it. See whether he’s okay with you being trained in his House without being one of his soldiers. Unless you want to join...”

I stared at him, my stomach twisting at the thought of killing intentionally. I’d done that before, but it had been so futile. I’d killed the wrong wolf. Not that he wasn’t

evil, but did he deserve to die?

“Right. That’s a good point. I guess I was thinking that it would be an easy five-minute lesson or something, but of course it would take more than that to get my beast in a rational state of mind.” I groaned and put my head in my hands. “I’m so stupid. Sorry.”

He exhaled a long breath and put a warm hand on my head. “Not stupid. Overwhelmed. Most people who come here for the first time are terrified. Instead of wasting time on fear, you’re asking to be trained. That’s smart.”

“Harold, what are you doing?” Cross asked, walking down the hall towards us, his frown directed at his hand on my head.

He patted my head again before he withdrew his hand. “Talk to him,” he said to me before he turned and walked away without answering his fearless leader. I watched him walk away and then had to look up at Cross, craning my neck annoyingly because he was standing too close to me.

“Talk to him?” Cross repeated, frowning at the top of my head which was so visible to him. He smelled like my beast, and she loved it.

I took two steps away from him. “Tomorrow at breakfast, if you don’t mind.”

He smiled sharply. “How mysterious. I will try not to force information out of Harold in the meantime.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he needs to practice resisting torture. You’re so good at it.” I turned and walked away, but the second I was around a corner, I shed the white coat and shifted into my adorable wolf, running down the hall and around legs until someone opened a door to outside, and then I leapt out, escaping my fate until

tomorrow. Maybe I'd keep running and never stop. A humming let me know before I stuck my nose into the paralyzing invisible wards that surrounded the compound. I couldn't escape unless I put some serious effort into it.

No. I was done running and hiding. I needed to master the beast, and I couldn't do that unless I faced it.

In the morning, Henrick found me curled up under a bush, and after giving me some lovely sausages, he led me to my beautiful bedroom suite in cream and sky blue.

"Time to get ready for Photoshoot day." He winked and wiggled his dark brows, sharp teeth white against his green skin.

It started in the breakfast room, which was all flocked paper and blue china, with the table tucked in a bow window that overlooked a pond. A swan glided by outside the window. No, this wasn't ridiculously over-the-top at all.

"You didn't sleep in a bed last night," Cross said as he sat somewhere between a lounge and a sprawl, buttering an English muffin. He looked like an indolent Elven prince who knew how to relax, not manipulate countries from the shadows. I tried to focus on the swan instead of Cross, but he was even more ridiculously over-the-top than the live backdrop.

"This is what you eat for breakfast? Too generic. Henrick can do better," I said, collapsing on the chair opposite him.

He reached over, grabbed my wrist, and pulled me around the table and onto his lap. I landed with a gasp while his strong hand slid up my back, pulling our bodies together until we were chest to chest.

"Time for your daily hug. If you protest, you can summon your beast to tell me all

about it. I haven't had a bath yet today. Why didn't you sleep in a bed last night?" Cross asked, brows drawn together in disapproval.

"You didn't sleep at all. Does it matter where I sleep?" I pushed against him while my heart beat faster, but his hands were very strong, and he wasn't letting me go. I definitely wasn't summoning my monster when she'd probably pin him down and show him affection even more clearly than yesterday.

"Your safety is my responsibility. That means that I need to know where you're sleeping and that it's secure."

I sniffed. "Your entire compound is incredibly secure. I singed my whiskers on your ward. And this isn't a hug, it's a cuddle. Torturing yourself won't make up for torturing me and..."

"Say cheese!"

I turned and got a flash in my eyes as Henrick took the photo. I shook my head. "Try again. This time, you're trying to catch the moment when my adorableness starts to rub off on him. That's the purpose of this photoshoot, to adorabalize Senator Silver." Was it? I couldn't remember anymore. What was the point of anything? No. I didn't have time to be depressed today.

"That's not a word," Cross pointed out, but it wasn't a persuasive argument.

I smiled adorably up at him and channeled the gnome. "If you want me in these, then it's going to make me look like the world's most marriageable mutt."

"You aren't..." Cross began, but I cut him off by stuffing a muffin in his mouth.

"Pictures, Henrick. We're such an adorable couple, me trying to fatten him up, him

trying to look gorgeous in the face of buttery carbs. Do you have it?" I looked over my shoulder at the goblin.

He nodded, but had a funny expression on his face. "I got it. Any other ideas of how to adorabalize the senator?"

"Later, we'll go to the local yarn store and bury him in yarn while I look poignant. Then I'll teach him how to knit. He'll need to learn to knit, because otherwise, he'll never wear another shirt. That reminds me. Do the photo again, but this time, without a shirt. You can doctor the pics to get rid of his scars." I started unbuttoning Cross's white shirt.

He stared at me while my hands trembled, but I ignored them. "This feels like vengeance, only twisted beyond recognition by your inability to be unkind."

I frowned at the buttons. "I'm sure if I spend enough time with you, your influence will assure my eventual success."

"I apologize. I should have told you that I stole the body instead of surprising you with it. I thought you'd be pleased, but I didn't take into consideration your delicate nature."

He apologized for that, but not the torture? "I'm not delicate," I snarled as I finally ripped the shirt open because the buttons weren't working.

He pursed his soft lips while his chest flexed beneath fresh scars and still-healing wounds. Why was he so broad and muscular? "I've seen your wolf. Just because you have a vicious beast that can rend someone limb from limb doesn't mean that parts of you aren't equally as delicate."

Delicate? I could kill someone with that wolf as well as the beast. It's because I

looked so harmless that made me so dangerous. I snuggled into him and tangled my fingers in his hair. “Picture, Henrick. I want lots of options when I decide which direction to take this ridiculous farce. Cross, I want to train my beast in the House of Mercy without becoming affiliated. Is that possible?”

The camera flashed again and again, while my heart ached, my stomach churned, and I deeply regretted my life choices.

He cleared his throat. “Train your beast?”

“Also, my elf and my gnome. The triad must be balanced, I always say. Harold said I needed your permission, like you’re in charge or something.”

“Mm. Or something. It will take time to bring back your Elven magic.”

I winced. Thinking about what I lost hurt. “It’s not possible.”

“Of course it’s possible. You’d have to garden with me.”

I pulled away, staring at him in horror. “You didn’t say no.”

He smiled, and it was a horribly smug smile that made me wish I could stab him with a million knitting needles. “I am delighted by the prospect. Hm. Who can we bring in to train your gnomish side? I know just the gnome. He’s an outcast, as all members of my order are, so you’ll have to put up with his rudeness.”

“Perfect. Another outcast gnome. You’ll have to split your time between hugging me and him, for our mental health, naturally. I’d offer to hug him, but no way I’m putting another gnome in close contact with my wolf.”

“Your wolf isn’t contagious,” he said, although he started frowning. “Still, for the

sake of safety, I should be the one to give you hug therapy. He's the reason I know hugging is so essential. He's completely hardened to all physical contact and will cut off your nose if you try. It's too late for him."

"I'm sure if you are more persistent..."

He shook his head. "On second thought, without affiliation won't work. It'll take months to train sufficiently for your beast to be under control, and in that time, you'll be familiar with my members. I was going to put a spell on you after we spent a few days here, so you'd forget faces, names, scents, etc. but after months of familiarity, the spell would be stronger and have dangerous side-effects."

I stared at him, my mouth agape. "You were going to put me under a spell that messes with my brain, and you only just mentioned it?"

He gave me a beatific smile and put a muffin in my mouth. "I trust you with my secret identities, but my associates are under my protection."

I chewed the delicious thing, hot blueberries bursting on my tongue. "I guess that's out then. Too bad. I was really looking forward to gardening with you." I rolled my eyes. It was a stupid idea in the first place.

"We have members of the house that aren't assassins. Some report to me about societies that they're close to."

"You mean spies? You'd want me to spy for you? I'm a society reporter. I report everything I learn to the public. And I don't affiliate with any secret societies or members..." I'd been living in Singsong City for a long time. I'd been there through the dark days when the Undercity was run by demons, and more recent when the real estate prices shot up when all the elite wealthy moved back. I knew everyone in polite society, and I knew that a lot of them had secrets. I didn't go looking for anything

that wasn't polite, because that wasn't my job, specifically because I didn't want anyone to uncover my secrets, but they were there.

He squeezed my hand. "Miss Era, you are closer to Clay than anyone else I can think of. I have been curious for some time about what secret societies he dabbles in. Then there's Leticia Marin. Did you know that her nephew is a mafia boss in Apple City? What events is she orchestrating behind those lovely garden parties?"

I gaped at him. "Keep Leticia out of this. You're suspicious of everyone."

He brushed my nose with his, sending a shiver of awareness through me. For a moment it struck me, how close I was being held by the strong, sensationally delicious elf of my dreams. Why didn't I hate that more?

"I am suspicious of exactly the number of people who are suspicious. Do you agree to be allied to the House of Mercy as long as I am its head?"

I bristled and crossed my arms, sitting up so I was barely perched on his knees instead of being sprawled on him, surrounded by his muscular arms. "If I don't agree, you're going to spell my mind?"

His violet eyes glimmered. "Yes."

"That's not much of a choice."

"You won't remember what you forgot."

I pushed on his chest, but his pectorals flexed under my palms and I pulled them back like I'd been burnt. "I don't want to spy on my friends."

"If you weren't a spy, but you became aware of a situation where someone was going

to do something that would harm innocent people, would you report it? Of course you would. You wouldn't even let Zephin Clay, close family friend, get away with torturing kittens."

"So I'd just live my regular life, only report to you if I happen to stumble on a drug ring?"

He smiled. "Think how fun that will be. We'll go to political parties and then afterwards we can talk about everyone there, who talked to who, who was allergic to shellfish, who seemed suddenly more than comfortably wealthy, like they'd just gotten a fresh infusion of illegal funds."

"Illegal funds? I thought you were only interested in hunting monsters."

"So it's settled then. I'll arrange the usual bindings after breakfast." He gave me a blinding smile that made me feel like I was falling off the edge of a cliff. No, like he'd pushed me off the edge of a cliff.

Chapter Fourteen

“N o one has your way with difficult people,” Nannette said, trying to lure me back to the city before I had to go to Bama for my brother Bram’s wedding.

“I’m still working on my big article. It’s taking more time than I thought.”

Actually, I was kneeling in the garden next to Cross, trying to commune with the sapling between my knees. For four hours. After that, it was knitting with Marv the Gnome Cross had brought in while Lynx worked hard to tangle all the yarn. Cross would also be there. For four hours. After that was working the beast with Harold. Cross would be there too. He wasn’t the charming Senator Silverton here. He was the Head of the House of Mercy, which means that I saw him at his core. His core was tireless, meticulous, perfectionist, and demanding. In my particular case that meant he saw clearly what the possibilities were and would push you until you reached them.

I’d been sleep deprived and physically, mentally, emotionally drained for the last three months. But I was starting to see progress.

I focused on the sapling, breathing in the air, feeling it vibrate as I tuned in to the magnetic pulses around me, the music that wove through natural magic. I sank my fingers into the soil and pushed the roots deeper. You didn’t focus on growth up, but down. Build the roots and the branches would flourish.

“You could send a photo, a little teaser for when you give me the article.” Nanette’s voice was harsh against my nerves, making the beast stir.

No. I had to maintain the beast's peace, or I wouldn't be able to touch the Elven magic. It would be much easier without the call, but of course the call's purpose was to help me work with jarring, irritating distractions. Like Cross himself wasn't enough.

"Mm. I'm still working on all the details, like whether I want to publish in a larger paper first. I'll let you know."

She sighed. "The senator's rubbing off on you. I suppose it's good that you're learning to be a bit more clever."

Cross flashed me a look with those intent eyes. What would I do with Nanette's offhand insult?

I focused on the sapling, relaxing against the wolf as I cleared my irritation. The roots strengthened, thickening as they pierced the earth, down, out, spreading, growing, securing to the earth before it shot up and out, growing, thickening as quickly as I could without losing the balance between the roots and branches.

The trunk was spindly, a quarter inch, as it shot up a foot, then two.

"Thank you," I said calmly, maintaining my focus with the precision Cross demanded.

She laughed. "You sound like an elf. He really is rubbing off on you. Don't let him make you too proud. A society reporter has to know how to make everyone else feel like they're the stars."

I closed my eyes and felt the tree roots, listened to their hypnotic song as they spread beneath me. I was going to start singing with them in a minute.

“The Senator always keeps me humble,” I said with a slight smile.

She laughed and hung up, leaving me with my work. I sang from my core, a song that wasn’t anything close to as beautiful as an elf or as merry as a gnome, but it was my voice, meeting the tree’s song, and that’s what mattered.

I sang with the perfect tension between my stomach and my throat, working the strings of my vocal cords like the instruments they were. I was.

I felt the tree nudge my knees and opened my eyes to see that the trunk was over a two feet across with branches that stretched two stories high.

My voice gave out. I stayed there, panting, resting my forehead against the trunk while the familiar exhaustion and physical weakness left me limp.

“What are you going to do about the exposé?” Cross asked, resting a hand on my back between my shoulder blades. His strength soaked into me, gentle, warm, filling me with his magic and power as he did after every exercise I attempted. Otherwise, I’d have to wait a week before every training session. He had reserves of strength and power that I’d never dreamed someone could have. And he never fully tapped out. Without his personal assistance, I wouldn’t have been able to achieve more than the barest accomplishments, like singing a flower into fuller bloom, never something like this, turning a seed into a tree in a matter of minutes. I would have said it was impossible before I started working with Cross. He knew what it took to bring out someone’s potential. Basically torture.

I glanced over my shoulder and grinned at him. “What will the bindings allow?”

“Anything that isn’t related to the House of Mercy. Why are you smiling? You must not have worked hard enough.”

I giggled a jolly laugh that was tuned into my gnome. I turned and put my hands on his cheeks. I pressed against his iron will with all the softness and joy I could imbue into that touch. I watched his eyes soften, relax as he was wrapped in an echo of my happiness and well-being. He didn't have a lot of either on his own. He was most content when he was communing with his garden at night, but that wasn't very cozy. He needed more coziness in his life, and I'd been force-feeding it to him the way he forced hug-therapy on me.

"I'm just looking forward to my vacation from torture. Bram's wedding, you know. And then back to work, being a beacon of cheerfulness and contentment to all around me. I'll have to find a cute apartment and fill it with yarn."

He mumbled, "You will be safer at my house. I'm still your protector."

I shook my head, smiling at the adorable elf. He was so soft and snuggly from my gnome magic. He could definitely resist it if he wanted to, but he let me practice on him. When I first started, I could barely give him a buzz of contentment with all of my effort, but now it was almost easy.

His eyes closed, lids relaxed as he gave in to the cozy. Holding that feel-good aura, I let the beast stretch out of my left hand until my claws were curved around his pretty throat. I wasn't quite touching his skin, and he was still relaxed, unaware of the threat.

"I can protect myself," I murmured as I caressed his skin with my claws.

His eyes popped open, and the cozy was gone, replaced by cool calculation as he considered his position; at my mercy.

He finally smiled, slow, devious. "And think how much easier it would be to lure the beast if you weren't hiding behind my walls. We'll still be dating, as far as your

exposé is concerned, correct?”

“You’re asking me? I thought Henrick was in charge of our relationship.”

He slowly slid his hand in mine, the clawed beast palm which was so much larger than his. “Henrick is in charge of my senator reputation.”

“And I’m dating the senator.” I curled my claws around his hand, pricking his skin without breaking it. My beast pushed against me, wanting to come out and take more of him. I relaxed into the beast, using my gnome contentment to flood it with delight at that touch. It was enough.

“Mm. Have you ever considered dating authentically?”

I’d wanted to date the elf I had such a big crush on in college, but there wasn’t anything authentic about him. I pulled the beast back and was left with Cross’s skin against mine, my softness matching his cool, slightly calloused strength. I tugged on my hand until he released it. “Yes. Once upon a time, I considered dating the most fabulous gnome in existence.” I sighed dramatically. “He was jolly, sweet, and obsessed with cheese. Obviously the perfect man. But alas, it was never meant to be. I went to college with a broken heart, sure I would never love again. And here I am. A triad of unlovableness to this very day.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Cheese?”

I snickered and stood up, tugging him up with me. “But here I am, part of an assassin’s guild, where everyone is as unlovable as me. Misery loves company, so we can all be miserable together.”

He stood too close, so I had to crane my neck to look up at him. “I’m not miserable when I’m with you.”

What did that mean? I blinked at him. He'd sounded almost sincere. Cold, sure. Factual, of course. But also sincere. He was a hard man who did hard things, but did that mean he should be miserable?

I smiled brightly while my heart pounded faster. "You're trying to tell me that you don't love my company? Too bad. You're already my plus-one for the wedding. And I expect you to play the part of love-sick beau with enthusiasm."

"The enthusiasm of an elf."

"So basically no emotion whatsoever, but you will tolerate me and my siblings."

"I will soak up the warmth, happiness and love that I've had to live without in my cold, lonely existence. I will try not to resent it too much." He gave me a slight smile before he turned and headed towards the house, leaving me with my new tree, the breeze whispering around the trunk and leaves, like the echo of his voice, but he wouldn't ever say what I heard on the wind.

I shook my head and let the wolf block out my elf. The wolf was unashamed of her obsession with Cross, but my elf wouldn't ever forgive the monster who still hadn't offered an apology for those months of torture. Particularly since he was the one she'd crushed on so stupidly in the first place.

I woke up the next morning with Lynx curled up next to me, in a glade next to a running stream, which was my favorite outdoor spot. It was filled with a variety of small flowers that weren't conventionally beautiful, but smelled delicious, spicy, like Cross's carnations.

Speaking of, Cross was leaning against a tree trunk beside me, eyes closed, seemingly asleep, but he never slept. I stared at him, studying the way the first morning rays hit his skin, bringing it to life with a luster you found in pearls, not flesh. He wasn't

wearing a shirt, and all of him was a beautiful living sculpture.

I blinked and looked down at the fabric draped over me. He must have put it over me when he found me naked during the night. Rude. He should avoid me when I was naked, like a proper elf. How long had I been human? No idea. I needed one of those talismans that you could use, so your clothes shifted with you. Or I could hang around with elves like Cross who didn't notice my nudity. No, he clearly noticed, or he wouldn't have covered me with his shirt. He just didn't like it. Doubly rude.

"You're sleeping outside again," he said without opening his eyes.

"You're wonderfully observant. Have you ever thought of starting a career based on your amazing talents?"

He opened his eyes, and the sunlight brought the violet specks to life. "The plan is to go to your brother's wedding today."

"I know. That's why I slept outside. I'm going to miss it."

He smiled slightly. "Do you want to hear about the woman's lab results?"

He smiled over the creepiest things.

"She has a name."

"You've never used it."

I shivered. "No. Once someone dies and then comes back to life, names seem too small to capture the horror. What were the results? I mean, if you can tell me. You tell me too much."

“You’re bound to me. I can tell you anything. That is, anything that you can personally handle. Such a delicate triad. She was altered in more ways than undead animation.”

I leaned forward. “How so?”

He furrowed his brow in a frown. “Genetic mutation. Her brain was developed in the areas where magical ability develops. She started out human, but it looks like they were seeing how much more she could be turned into.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and exhaled a long breath. Increasing natural ability would be huge in absolutely every magical circle. “That’s Lynx’s priority? Making super werewolves?”

“Super everything. It tracks with your wolf, your magic, all of it being more than you had before you were infected.”

I grabbed his hand. “You’re telling me that I’m a test tube baby?”

He blinked at me, mouth twitching. “Of course that’s what I’m telling you. Not that an experimental drug was used on you that has completely unknown side-effects. You were the first beast they made.” His jaw tightened. “They’ve been watching you, building on your survival to push further. The beast was in Singsong City, because that’s where you were.”

There were watching me? Creepy. Goosebumps ran up my spine, but I only tsked. “Seriously? Where’s my paycheck? Test subjects should be well paid.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m nervous about going back to the city. The beast’s been playing a game for a long time, but it’s getting more twisted, sick, personal. Your safety is not optional.”

I poked him. “That’s why you trained me so hard. The beast won’t see me coming until it’s too late. You only became my protector to use me as bait.”

He gave me a seriously annoyed look. “You are under the strangest misapprehensions, Miss Era. You’ve never been bait. You never will be.”

I batted my lashes at him. “You say the sweetest things.”

He stood up and started walking towards the house, his bare back a beautiful sight to see. “We’ll leave after breakfast. I hope that you got enough photos of me being adorabalized.”

“How could I possibly?” I muttered, watching his back flex and pull. Was he intentionally looking that gorgeous just to make me want to kill him? No. I really did have an extremely good selection of pictures to use for my article. Pity most of them were tangled with me. How could I publish photos of myself where I looked completely in love with the man?

I took a deep breath and rolled to my feet with Lynx snuggled against my chest. If we were leaving after breakfast to go home, I had things to do.

I made cookies for the first time since we’d gotten to the compound. The kitchen was weirdly empty without the dozens of people hanging out like usual. Maybe there was a big job going on somewhere that I didn’t want to know about.

“What about hugging?” Cross asked me as he had his lumpy shake for breakfast and I rolled out snickerdoodles.

“My mother will hug you a lot. My brothers probably will too, and it is a competition with them to see who can hug the hardest and longest, so you’ll probably have to reciprocate before it gets weird. Although you’re an elf, so you could probably stand

there and look like an idiot while they have fun at your expense, and no one would think anything about it.”

He cleared his throat. “I actually was referring to you. If I should be cuddly with you.”

“Oh.” I stared at the cookies I was working on while my stomach twisted uncomfortably. How cuddly did I want the evil, vicious, manipulative monster to pretend to be? Very. Think of the torture. I flashed him a smile. “I’m so glad you asked. I am so cuddly, the most cuddly of all my siblings. They’ll think it’s so weird if you aren’t my first choice of chair, as well as being wrapped around me like a loufa every time I bake cookies. Which will be every day. And we’ll be staying with my parents. You’ll probably sleep with one of my brothers. They all snore and snuggle in their sleep, but you’ll get used to it.”

He nodded soberly. “I haven’t killed anyone in my sleep for years, so it should be fine.”

I turned to look at him, frowning darkly. “Don’t you dare put my brothers in danger!”

He kissed my nose, bending quickly so the shock of contact had me pulling away and scowling at him. His smile was very slight. “I would never dare. I will be on my best behavior.”

“While you’re sleeping? No, you don’t sleep, even here behind walls that should make you feel safe.”

“I sleep often enough, Miss Era.” His brows creased. “I should call you Delphi.”

“No, you’d call me Delphinia. An elf wouldn’t ever shorten something so exquisite. That’s what my father says, and I’d hate for him to be disappointed in my first and

probable last Elven suitor.”

He tilted his head as he studied me. “Delphinia? It is exquisite. And I have permission to use your name?”

“Yes, senator. You’re supposed to be my boyfriend.”

“Then you will call me Cross.”

I shrugged. “Omar would probably make more sense.”

“It’s actually Omarsus, but Cross is easier to remember.”

I squinted at him. “You don’t like your name? But Omarsus is so delicately majestic, like a flying fish skittering over the top of the water in the moonlight.”

He wrinkled his pretty nose. “Yes, that is the literal translation. Your elvish is admirable.”

“Passable, not admirable. Do you have any other notable names lurking behind that pretty face?”

“Several. Silvaniustro is one of them.”

“Ah, the Silverton has roots. Moonlit woods, but the ending has a slightly ominous tinge to it. Some kind of death in the wooded moonlit clearing?” I frowned at him as I went over the origins.

“Not passable. Notable, or you wouldn’t notice that tinge of death. Miss Delphinia, you are the most finely educated fluff reporter I’ve ever met.”

“High praise indeed. Stop distracting me from my snickerdoodles. That’s what I should call you.”

“As you like, Miss Delphinia.”

I pointed my rolling pin at him. “It’s begun. You say it exactly like my father does, rolling the ending bits, so it sounds like there are five extra R’s.”

“It’s a lovely name,” he said innocently.

“Mm. Like Omarsus Silvaniustro.” I twirled every R and L, giving the U’s an extra emphasis.

“The fish of moonlit death. Not quite as lovely as yours, but the way you say it makes up for it. I’ll make sure everything is ready for the trip and meet you out front.” He left the kitchen, leaving me frowning over his name. Elves didn’t hand over their actual birth names casually. Of course, he would have to tell my father his origins if he wanted to be considered an actual suitor. An actual fake suitor.

I shook my head and focused on my cookies. Everything else was too complicated for me and my triad.

The trip wasn’t very long, but it was in the style you’d expect from a wealthy senator. I knitted the whole way in purple cashmere. Bram’s fiancé’s sweater was already finished and wrapped in paper I’d hand printed from plants around Cross’s compound. A gnome would appreciate such things, handmade, hand spelled, more time and attention than money.

Cross spent most of the flight on his phone. On the back roads of Bama, Cross drove, putting his phone down like he was focusing on the current mission.

We went over a bump and bounced alarmingly in the large black car.

“This is the wrong vehicle for these roads,” Cross said with a frown.

“It’s fine. Unless the bridge is washed out again. But then we’ll just call for someone to come pick us up. It’s not really on the beaten path. Come to think of it, the whole village is off the beaten path. My parent’s house is in the boonies.”

“Mm.”

“Exactly.” I kept knitting, mangling my project, but it didn’t matter, since it was for him. Not that I’d ever give it to him, but my gnome wanted to wrap him in coziness he could keep forever for giving me so many hugs. Ridiculous gnome.

Finally, we pulled up on the edge of my parent’s fenced front garden. It was twilight, and the fireflies were dancing in the flowers, the pale daisies catching the last light while the scent of jasmine hit me with nostalgia.

I stood there, took a deep breath, and then the front door burst open, spilling warm golden light out on the cobbles.

“Delphi? You actually came?” That was Pennwick, my younger brother who was the tallest, and wanted to be a researcher like my father. He vaulted over the fence and then hit me, knocking me back into Cross before he tried to suffocate us both with his long, brawny arms.

“Delphi’s home!” he cried, picking me up and dancing me around in a circle while I laughed and squeezed him back.

“You’re still a lunatic. How did you get so tall? Papa must be so proud.”

He kissed my cheeks and then put me down before turning and looking at Cross with all the cool aplomb of a snobbish elf.

Cross held out his hand, wearing the warm smile of a perfect politician. “How do you do? I’m...”

Penn ignored his hand. “Senator Silverton. Yes, we know who you are. The question is, do you think you deserve my sister?”

Cross’s smile faded. “Never. But she tells me that I’m very pretty.”

Pennwick squinted at Cross and then grabbed him in a hug that made Cross positively squeak, which was very satisfying. Unfortunately, I was looking at him and didn’t notice my other brothers sneaking up on me.

They grabbed me and lifted me in the air with the cries of true barbarians.

“Fen and Hook, ugh! Put me down!” I said as they carried me towards the house on their shoulders, bouncing every step, but not in time, so I was bumped and jostled more than the car over the road.

“Delphi’s home! Delphi’s back! Now we’re going to make her crack!” Fen sang in his booming baritone.

“Boys! Put her down this instant! Do you want to scare away her beau?” my mother said, coming out and waving her apron at them.

Penn picked her up and tossed her onto Fen and Hook with me, so we bumped heads.

“Delphi!” she cried and grabbed me in a hug, not worrying about being dropped while our precarious group veered around the bird bath in the garden. They were

taking the long way to the front door.

“Hi, mama. It’s nice to see you,” I said, but it was muffled, because she’d pulled me into her bosom.

“And you really brought your beau. Boys, put us down! We need to greet Delphi’s beau properly.”

They ignored her and kept dancing and swaying until we made it through the low doorway and into the main hall.

My father was standing at the foot of the curving wooden steps, looking tall and elegant, because he was an elf. He cleared his throat and my brothers let my mama and me slide down to the floor in a heap.

“Delphinia,” he said with a slight smile. “It is good to see you, my dear.”

I threw myself at him, because I hadn’t seen my dad for far too long. He caught me in the expected hug, swung me around and then set me on the floor gracefully before turning to focus on Cross, who stood just inside the door, behind my pack of brothers.

“Senator Silverton, it is a pleasure to have you,” he said with a nod to Cross.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Cross said, beginning the battle of manners that only elves understood.

“Enough politeness,” my mother said, grabbing Cross’s hand and dragging him down the hall, towards the kitchen. “You’re too thin, both of you. I’ve prepared my famous fig jelly that you’ll have on some of Penn’s bread. He’s the best bread-maker in seven counties. Delphi, come along. You’re going to tell me all about how you met. Erasmus, are you coming or will you hide in your study?”

“I have a few things to wrap up,” my dad said with a slight bow. “I’ll join you shortly.”

My mother waved a hand dismissively and then pulled Cross closer as she hugged his arm and looked up at him as adorably as a gnome could. “Then I’ll have you all to myself!”

“Mama, we have to challenge him before the hayride,” Fen said, tugging on the thin ends of his long mustache.

“Challenge him for what?”

“Well, weapons, mostly,” Hook said, glancing sidelong at Cross. “Do you duel?”

“Not regularly, but I don’t object to it,” he said and then was forced into a chair by the fire before my mother perched on his knees and beamed at him, her finest gnomish beam, weaving her magic of coziness thick and heavy.

I wrinkled my nose at her for being so familiar with Cross. I’d never sat on his lap like that.

“Delphi, stop that sour face. He doesn’t mind, do you?” she asked, her bright gaze at him.

He blinked at her, then turned to me. “Are you comfortable, Delphinia? You could take my chair.”

I sighed and then gave in to the inevitable and sat on Cross, leaning against his chest so my mother could rest her back on my side, forcing some distance between them.

“So, tell me how you two met,” my mother said, clapping her hands, delighted with

our pile-up.

“We met at school, but I forgot about it until recently,” I said, glancing at Cross.

He smiled at me with warmth that left me glowing in spite of myself. “I never forgot about you. I remember the lecture you gave the elf who broke that sapling so carelessly about the need to preserve, protect, and never use one’s magic selfishly or wastefully. You were very eloquent.”

“She gets that from me,” my mother said, and then broke out in gales of infectious laughter. “Penn, do you have the bread and jam? Don’t eat it all before Senator Silverton gets a chance to taste it.”

“You may call me Cross,” he said as he took the pretty plate with hand-painted flowers around the edges from my brother.

“Cross? What is that from?” my father asked from the doorway. I hadn’t noticed him, but apparently he’d decided that he wanted to hear the story of our fateful meeting.

“Where is it from?” I asked, thinking about it. “Your friends call you Cross, but you really aren’t that bad-natured, particularly for an elf.”

“I am Kilmaran Rosanthius Omarsus Silvaniustro,” Cross said with a deep head-nod to my father that had to make do because any further formality would leave me and my mother on the floor. “The initials spell KROS.”

My father studied Cross with a flash of intensity that made me worry. “Silvaniustro, from the night court?”

“Mm. You’ve heard of it?” Cross said, his tone slightly cooler than before.

“Naturally. I’m Angustia Erasmus. Your father escorted me out of elfland when I was exiled.”

Cross cleared his throat. “You’re that Erasmus?”

My father looked coolly disapproving.

“Wait,” Penn said, pointing at Cross. “Your dad escorted my dad out of elflands? Is he a soldier or something?”

“Something,” my father murmured, giving Cross a very interesting look. “Something like the high lord of the night court. Bred for violence and darkness.”

The kitchen was suddenly very quiet while I felt a fluttering of protectiveness for Cross. I put my arms around his shoulders and snuggled into his neck while he stayed in the same position, like my father’s extremely unkind words didn’t affect him.

“Congratulations, Cross! You won the good manners game!” I kissed his cheeks, first one and then the other. “Come to the car with me to get all the stuff. We’ll be back,” I said, dragging Cross out of the kitchen, past my dad who was looking at my hand gripping his wrist.

“He can handle whatever I say,” my dad said in a low voice, slightly amused.

I bristled at him. “Of course he can, but he shouldn’t have to. Come on, Cross. Don’t say anything, just look pretty.”

Chapter Fifteen

The hayride was magical, rolling through fields while flocks of startled fireflies flared up around us and the stars fell overhead. My brother had wanted his wedding on the biggest shower of the year, just so the hayride would be magical without using any magic.

I was sitting next to Cross on the bench, holding the reins because he had no idea how to drive the ponies that pulled our wagon. We'd dropped off the last little kid and were heading home when I nudged him.

"Your dad's an elf lord? What was my dad exiled for?"

"Yes, and using his magic unethically."

"My dad used his magic unethically? Impossible. Now I know you're lying."

"He went through a rough patch after he lost his family in the great war. His magic is still bound."

"You really believe that. Unreal. Tell me more about your elf lord father. And mother. Did you really run away from home? Why did they let you go? Aren't elf children precious and rare?"

"Yes, I don't know, and yes."

I squinted at him while the ponies tugged on my reins. "If you didn't want to talk

about your origin story, why did you give my father your real name?"

"It's traditional to do so when courting. I could have given him another name, but it would have to be somebody's, and my looks, my size, they are distinctly Silvaniustro."

"Now you're a traditional elf? Then why can't you drive a pony cart? Come on. You can't go through your life not knowing how to do something so essential." I handed him the reins and the ponies immediately stopped moving. It's like they could tell they were dealing with a novice.

"Now what?" he asked.

I looked up at him and then at the ponies. "Now, we get out and stretch our legs. Do you know the dance of the fireflies?"

"You're messing with me."

"Maybe. Still, the ponies are going to sit there being fat and lazy until we show them that we don't care."

He raised an incredulous brow. "This is the psychological warfare you wage each time you take a pony?"

"Basically. Come on, Cross. Oh, make sure to apply the brake on the wagon wheel, or they'll take off once we're immersed in the dance."

He sighed and then followed me down, fiddling with the wagon wheel for a moment before he came towards me where I bent over in the field, taking off my shoes.

"Do I have to take off my shoes?"

“Only if you have a secret streak of gnome. So, the dance is a basic Elden Flawry, which if you’re really an elven lord, you would know. Of course, there are some differences, but not really noticeable for the male.”

“That’s a lot of lifting you up and throwing you in the air.”

I laughed and spun around like a gnome-elf who lacked grace and earthiness. “I can tell this is going to be a disaster. I always wanted to have a disaster in a beet field.”

“Indeed,” he said and then threw a handful of dust into the air, and suddenly, everything was music. The rush of wind, the shifting ponies and the creak of leather, and all the glorious fireflies, everything was in perfect time that matched the beating of my heart.

I stared at his shadowy form as he started moving, grace, beauty, and danger as he turned then took my hand and pulled me into the dance. My father wasn’t ever forceful, but Cross’s dance wasn’t the same as my father’s or my brother’s. His hand held mine with a firmness that moved into flirty territory as our palms slid together and apart.

The picking me up and throwing me didn’t happen. He picked me up by the waist, raising me up high, but instead of continuing the arc, he stopped when we were eye level and held me like that, my pounding heart against his chest, his hands pulling me against him far too tight.

“Did you forget the dance?” I whispered when it seemed like I’d been staring at him for too long.

“I haven’t done this since I was a child. There was no throwing. What if I throw you too hard and break your neck?”

I laughed breathlessly while the song of his night magic sang in my ear. “Then you should probably put me down.”

“But you’re barefoot, and might step on something disagreeable.”

I cocked my head and studied him. “In that case, we should definitely stay here all night, just like this.”

“Don’t you think I’ll get tired?”

“Of course not. You’re an elven lord. You were born for this.”

“I’m not an elven lord. My father is not what I am.”

“The lines of nobility come from the strength of their magic. If you have the magic, you have the nobility.”

“Your father’s magic was very strong. His house was noble.”

“You’re subtly saying that I’m the one who should be holding you in the air during this brilliant dance. Don’t tempt me. You would make such a pretty pet. My beast would throw you, too.”

He slowly lowered me to the ground and headed back to the wagon, leaving me standing there, staring after him and his abrupt abandonment. It’s like he didn’t want to think about dancing with my beast. That made two of us. Two out of four wasn’t bad. I quickly pulled on my shoes and followed him.

He waited by the wagon, then lifted me up to set me on the bench, like it was still part of the dance. “Your strength came back to you?” I asked, waiting for him to release the brake and swing up beside me.

“If I were courting you in earnest, we would stay in that field all night.”

The ponies were walking, slowly at first, then picking up speed. “But you’re the best at playing a part, so why did you stop dancing?”

“I’m not sure how to play the part while maintaining a respectful distance.”

“Ah. That does sound difficult.” I patted his knee. “Don’t worry. We couldn’t spend all night in the field, because my brothers would come and find us. Did you meet Bram? He’s the worst. He’d sit and talk to you until you were desperate to escape. You’d say anything, just to stop. The. Talking.”

“He sounds like a truly ominous figure.”

“Absolutely. Do you want to try to drive the ponies again?”

“I suppose I should learn something so essential.”

I handed over the reins and then put my head on his shoulder. They were just the right height, and broad, firm, no boniness in sight. I closed my eyes and let the music sweep over me that still trailed from his magic. What a strange, subtle spell for an assassin to learn: how to make the night into music. He was like that, though, particularly at night in his garden. He was music in the night.

When we reached the barn, my brothers were there, including Bram, the oldest.

“Delphi,” he said warmly, pulling me off the wagon and into a hug. “You’re too skinny. Go inside while we help your Cross with the ponies.”

I stared into those warm brown eyes. “Be gentle with him. He’s an elf.”

He snorted and set me on my feet. “He’s got to prove his mettle. He can’t do that if we’re too easy on him.”

I glanced at Cross where he’d swung down and was examining the leather reins. “Will you be okay?” I asked, but I wasn’t worried about my brothers being too rough. If he was a night lord, bred for brutality, they might be in danger from him. Of course they were. He was the leader of the House of Mercy. And to think I’d tried to get him to dance with me in a beet field. What was wrong with me?

Cross took me in his arms while I was still feeling like an idiot, pressed a kiss to my forehead, and then released me, so I stumbled back. “Good night, Delphinia. Dream well.”

My brothers chortled and elbowed each other. “Oh, he’s smooth. Delphi’s blushing!” and, “What kind of dreams make you blush that hard?”

I turned and left the barn before I killed all my brothers. Or Cross. He was playing the role of suitor, but not too much because he didn’t want me to get confused, but I was anyway. I hated him. But sometimes, I almost liked him, too. There was nothing more dangerous than liking someone who could hurt you that much.

The next day was spent cooking and cleaning and avoiding my mother’s subtle observations about how beautiful Cross’s babies would be. Happily, she never said that while he was in obvious hearing distance. Even my father helped with the dinner preparations, which was convenient because no one peeled root vegetables as quickly as he did. I think that was the basis for my mother’s romance.

Finally, everything was set on the tables in the orchard, the cherries heavy in the trees above the dozens of long tables draped in fruit and flowers. Bram had been building them for the last six months along with the rough metal chandeliers hanging from all the lowest branches.

It was breathtaking, and standing on the side, greeting the guests with the rest of my family was less awkward than I expected, mostly thanks to Cross who was available at a table so my mother could point at him when she said my name, so no one thought I was the pathetic outcast who couldn't get a date because no gnome would ever be with a female taller than him.

The most awkward moment was when Bram's best friend growing up came along and gave me a big hug that lasted a little longer than it should have. He was handsome enough for a gnome, all jolly, brawny, with a healthy tan and full thick hair, but I didn't register it the same as the last time I'd seen him. He wasn't more handsome than Max or any other attractive werewolf that I wasn't interested in dating. The most appealing thing about him was the cozy world he would build with whatever happy gnome he settled down with. My pool house was adorable enough for any gnome. If only it had an oven. Not that I was moving back into Cross's pool house.

When we sat down and began the long process of eating, toasts, and breaking out in spontaneous song and dance, Cross leaned closer to me.

"Are you all right?"

"How difficult do you think it would be to put an oven in the pool house?"

His brows raised over his stunning violet eyes. He was so out of place with all the gnomes, like my father, the two oaks in a grove of plum trees. "I've never put an oven in a pool house, so I can't say. I don't imagine it would be much more difficult than putting in a regular kind of house. That's what you're thinking about at your brother's wedding? Not that it would be nice to marry a jolly gnome and have the world's most adorable wedding beneath the cherry trees?"

I glanced around to make sure no one was listening to us. My mother was talking to

her sister loudly about the proper seasoning in mulled wine. My father was on her other side, discussing a new propagation technique for asparagus with our closest neighbor.

“No. Such dreams are vain. Didn’t you know that a gnome can’t marry a woman taller than he is?”

He looked at me incredulously. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not. The only gnomes who have a different opinion aren’t the cozy kind who live in the same place for fifteen generations.”

“And what other kind would you have? That is strange to me.”

“I know. It’s like the werewolves all over again. I’m so adorable, and I cook. Who wouldn’t want me?” I grinned at him and patted his arm. “Is that really all you want in a wife? Adorableness and cooking?”

He shot me a look, guarded, almost like he’d remembered that he was head of the House of Mercy and might have to assassinate me at some point. “Absolutely not. I want kindness and cooking. Adorableness is an added bonus.”

I snickered. “How lucky for you to have found everything you want and more. We might as well go ahead and have a few babies for my mother to show off.”

“Absolutely. I think that the purpose of babies is so that grandmothers can exploit them.” There was an edge to his voice that I didn’t understand.

“Well, what else would you do with them? They’re like kittens. You don’t think that Henrick will eat Lynx, do you?”

“Of course not. Maybe we should have brought her with us.”

I elbowed him. “Aw, you miss her. Too bad. She’s mine. You’ll have to get your own cozy kitten.”

“You have a cat?” my adorable cousin Fera asked, as she passed behind us, putting a hand on my shoulder and giving Cross a flirty smile. My beast wanted to rip off her face, but I focused on feeling cozy and contented.

“Delphinia and I have a cat, yes,” he said with a cool smile that she should take as a rejection.

She grabbed a chair on another table and pulled it between us, bumping my chair as she tried to get closer to the fascinating elf. She leaned over the table so her cleavage threatened to spill out. “So, are you two really together?”

My mother leaned over the table to glare at her niece. Her voice was loud, piercing. “Fera, do you want me to rip out your hair? No? Then don’t stick it between my future son-in-law and my daughter. You know how hard it is to get anyone to date her.”

The orchard was so quiet that I could hear the bees buzzing above us while the whole neighborhood stared at me.

“I have a very easy time dating her,” Cross said smoothly, voice charming, persuasive and absolute. He stood, towering over Fera, then took my hand and forcibly removed me from my chair, then led me to the space where the musicians were standing around, waiting for the dancing to start.

“Play,” he ordered them, and they obeyed, starting a reel that was all bounce and no grace. Cross didn’t know that it wasn’t supposed to be graceful, because he poured it

on, dancing with me the dance he'd messed up the night before. Today, he seemed to know just how to throw me, which was lightly, and how close to hold me, which was not close enough. It wasn't a dance where you switched partners, and for a long time, we were spinning and moving together. For once I felt as graceful as a real elf, because Cross was twice as graceful as one should be, and made every one of my movements perfection.

"You're very good."

"Yes. Elf lords are notoriously good dancers," he said as he led me around in a circle.

"You're supposed to compliment my dancing, not brag about being an elf lord."

"There is no one else I'd rather dance with."

I squinted at him. "That was not a compliment."

"Of course it was. I only want to dance with the best dancer, who is the most beautiful woman, with the kindest character, who makes the best cookies."

"You could just say you like my dancing. All that extra stuff just makes you suspicious."

"I like your dancing, Delphinia," he said with a slight smile, apparently amused by my stubbornness.

"Thank you for rescuing me."

"I feel that I was rescuing Fera. It would be a pity if your mother ripped out all her lovely hair."

“Mm.” I smiled up at him and spun with a little too much energy, but it didn’t matter because he was exactly where he needed to be when I came out of it, to lift me and toss my lightly a few feet away, always keeping a light yet firm grasp on my hand.

We spent the rest of the evening dancing, causing a lot of gossip. As in, how shocking that Delphinia really did have a suitor and it wasn’t just my mother’s wishful thinking. I stared up at Cross during a slow dance that was as close as it could be and still remain respectable. Pity Cross wasn’t really my suitor. Of course, a real suitor wouldn’t be able to play the part so convincingly, because they’d be stuck on logistics, like what in the world to do with a gnome, elf, werewolf. Cross was slightly confused, and he was a professional.

“You’re thinking about an oven again,” he said, eyes glimmering mysteriously in the moonlight.

“I’m thinking about how good you are at playing the perfect suitor. If you’re looking for a new career, once the glow of politics wears off, you should seriously consider escort to the strange and unwanted.”

His jaw hardened. “It is strange how you could feel unwanted.”

“I don’t feel unwanted. That’s how good you are. Take the compliment, Cross. You earned it.”

“Mm. You are extremely provoking.”

I beamed up at him. “Thank you. You see how easy it is to take a compliment?”

“It wasn’t a compliment, but you take it anyway. You are extremely provoking.”

“Mm.” I laughed and hugged him for a second before I pulled back. “You are a

surprisingly good sport. I'll try not to provoke you any more than is necessary."

"I would appreciate it. It would be a pity if I forgot that I was the perfect suitor and became determined to prove how wanted you are, very publicly."

"Ooh. That sounds positively scandalous. You're a senator, you know."

"Am I? Well, we must avoid scandal. Unless we are unduly provoked."

I leaned against him, resting my cheek on his chest, listening to his heart beat. "I am full of all kinds of remorse. Imagine provoking a senator, unduly. I'm not sure I know what that word means."

"More than is necessary, acceptable, or reasonable."

"Now I'm certain I don't know what it means. Willful ignorance, you know, is the hallmark of a truly well-bred gnome."

He sighed heavily and leaned over me so I could feel the stir of his breath against my hair. He felt wonderful, smelled like the most delicious shaving cream mixed with all the purple blossoms imaginable, particularly irises and grape hyacinth. Delicious.

The music stopped, and for a moment we stayed there before he released me and stepped back, leaving me unsteady without the extra pair of legs I'd been relying on. He bowed to me low and then offered me his arm.

I smiled as I took it, forgetting that we were only playing a part.

Chapter Sixteen

The wedding was simple compared to the dinner the night before. The small church was bursting as everyone crowded in, waiting for the bride to come down the aisle. Zephin Clay sat in a side aisle with a few of my father's other Elven friends, sticking up in the crowd of gnomes. Cross blended in slightly better since my brothers transitioned to the truly short gnomes.

Bram stood at the front, adjusting his tie nervously, his eyes slightly wild until the music started, and the doors opened. Gloria wasn't fussy, and neither were her dress or flowers. She looked like she owned the dress instead of the dress owning her, and her confidence and self-assurance were exactly what Bram needed to help him relax.

"She's beautiful," I whispered.

"Mm." Cross squeezed my hand and for a moment, I felt like a part of my family instead of an outsider. He made me feel normal, safe, like I belonged.

Bram read his vows, fumbling on the words as he gazed earnestly at his sweetheart. And then my skin started to itch.

I frowned down at my hands where my beast's claws were pressing against the pads of my fingers. No. This wasn't happening. I was in control of my beast, truly. I could willfully shift one nail or just my head. There was no way that I'd lose control, particularly not in the middle of the wedding. I looked up at Cross, desperate, and his eyes narrowed back at me in concern.

“I’m not feeling well,” I whispered while my eyes watered and the urge to shift into a beast grew as irresistibly as the need to sneeze in a dusty room. I had to leave, now, in the middle of the ceremony, with my brothers sitting next to us, blocking the aisle.

I pressed my lips together and started climbing over their knees while my beast flexed under my skin. I kept my face down, hoping that no one noticed anything weird going on as the bones shifted.

When I hit the aisle, I ran, ignoring the looks I got as I raced out and burst into the bathroom. My beast exploded, ripping through my lovely dress and shedding the humanity and the civilization, and leaving me shuddering and panting on the tile floor. What was wrong with me? My beast never came out like that, even before I learned to control the triad. I shuddered again, my spine snapping as my beast filled up the bathroom, stretching and flailing, my limbs all over the place, slapping the tile painfully. I tried to breathe steadily, but the beast wasn’t just the beast, it was sick, convulsing, out-of-control. I couldn’t lose control, not here, not now, but I did anyway.

“Delphi?” my mother asked, opening the door.

“Don’t come in!” I growled and scrambled for the window, my claws sliding over the slick tile.

“Dear, are you sick?” she called through the crack.

The window was high and small. Could my beast fit out of it? I grabbed the lever and ripped it off the frame. I stared at the small piece of metal stupidly. I’d broken it. I tossed it over my shoulder and clawed at the frame, leaving deep runes in the metal.

“Don’t come in,” I growled again, trying to get the stupid window to just open. My beast’s claws weren’t dexterous enough, and even if they were, the latch was broken

and...

My mother's gasp had me turning to stare at the gnome, who stood with slack mouth, hands limp at her sides, her purse on the ground, the contents spilled over the tile.

My dad was behind her, visible through the open door. He came in and closed the door behind him, frowning coldly at me.

"Don't move," he commanded, and pulled out a gun.

Seriously? He's going to shoot me? And why would he be carrying at Bram's wedding? I almost laughed. Everything was so ridiculous. And impossible. "Let me explain," I rumbled through my distended jaws. "It's me." Could they understand that garbling?

My mother's face was still blank with horror and shock. Werewolves were death to gnomes. Also, I'd let her think werewolves kidnapped me out of my school to keep me with those other poor women.

My drool was getting all over the place, drool that might infect them. I turned and lunged for the window, clawing my way through and breaking out the frame while I scrabbled my feet, trying to get purchase on the wall.

A gun went off, and I felt a burn through my back before I came out of the window, tumbling headfirst into some very prickly rose bushes. I gritted my teeth so I wouldn't howl from the pain and frustration. It was still before noon, and people were starting to leave the church. I'd missed the end of the wedding. I wanted to cry, but werewolves don't cry.

No one could see me. I had to run far away and never come back. Except that Cross already knew what I was. And he could fish the bullet out of me. He'd been sleeping

in the barn, so that's where I'd go.

I limped a run, holding to the shadows as much as I could, calling on the mystery and confusion of my elf magic to help camouflage me as I raced, leaving the shredded dress in scraps behind me. My beast was fast, even if I was bleeding heavily from the chest wound. My dad had shot me. He hadn't waited to see if I was a threat, just shot the werewolf because all werewolves are evil and dangerous, deadly dangerous to gnomes. That last bit was true. If I'd infected my mother, she'd be dead. I never should have come and put all the other gnomes in danger. I trusted myself, my control, but I'd lost it in the middle of the crowded wedding. I was so stupid!

I finally got to the barn, found the darkest corner behind a pile of hay that smelled like Cross, and crouched down to wait. While I waited, I reached back, claws extended, and dug into the flesh until I found the huge bullet and ripped it out. There was so much werewolf blood, but I kept it all in the corner so it could be washed down easily. Eventually, the beast subsided, and then it was gone, leaving me in tatters of my pretty floral dress. I crouched there, barefoot, arms wrapped around my knees while I felt my back knit slowly together. It hadn't been a silver bullet. At least that was something.

"Delphinia?" Cross murmured from outside the small stall where I crouched.

I sighed shakily. "Hi."

He moved into the stall door, a tall shadow in the back reaches of my parent's barn. "You left a trail of blood."

I whispered, "My dad shot me. He didn't ask questions, just shot me right in the back. I think he might have hit my heart. That would explain how much blood..." I took a shaky breath, but I didn't stand up. I was just going to stay in a crumpled up pile for the rest of my life.

“I don’t think that they know it was you,” he said carefully. “If you’d like to get cleaned up, you can?—”

“Pretend like I’m not a monster that puts all their lives in danger by existing? No. I’m going to tell them. They can write me off as dead and I won’t have to pretend to be normal. Win-win.” I sobbed once before I got myself under control.

Cross came in, shut the stall door behind him and moved slowly towards me before he crouched so our knees touched. I pulled away, because his suit was going to get ruined, like my dress.

“Delphinia, you aren’t putting them in danger. You weren’t ever going to hurt them, and you aren’t contagious. I know your blood, your transformation, and it’s not communicable.”

I looked up at him, frowning. “That’s what you think, but my beast is experimental. Who knows what I really am? You were so stupid to eat that brownie.”

“It wasn’t stupid. It was the best brownie I’ve ever had. It would be worth dying to eat your baked goods, but death was never an option, and neither was werewolfism. You can’t infect me, no matter how many times you bite me. You’ve bitten me a lot of times in the past, remember?”

I put my face down on my knees, because I didn’t want to remember, the pain of shifting, the betrayal of him, injecting me with horrible poisons that made me so sick so I’d transition slow enough to stay alive, to stay in control. “It doesn’t matter. My dad shot me.”

He carefully put his coat over my back, his touch so gentle, careful. “Elves are heartless and cruel. Do you need a hug?”

I looked up to glare at him. “No. I don’t need you to get your suit dirty coming down to my level. I don’t need the cruel, perfect, pretty, delicate elf to condescend to the messed up, disgusting monster you made me when you wouldn’t let me die.”

He pulled me into his lap, sitting on the dirty boards with me pressed against his chest, his head bent over me as he stared into my eyes. His eyes were dark, intent, his killer mask in place. “Cruel, absolutely. Delicate, not remotely. And you are so far from disgusting, the idea is laughable. You, Delphinia,” he murmured, brushing my cheek with his fingertips. “Are absolutely delicious.” He smiled slightly, a dangerous smile that made me gasp, and then he lowered his lips to mine.

The shock of contact went through me like lightning, but instead of pulling away, I wrapped my arms around him and dove into that kiss, into his strength, the taste, the feel of him, like he was a new skein of cashmere yarn, only better.

He tasted woody, how you’d think an elf would taste, but with this sweetness that was maddeningly addictive. I pressed against him until his back thumped against the wall of the stall as he lost his balance, and then we fell over sideways onto the pile of straw. I whimpered as the movement tore my barely healed flesh.

“Delphinia, are you all right?” he asked, trying to straighten away from me, looking concerned.

I stared up at him while my heart pounded. He was my protector. He would try to protect me from everything, even the wounds in my heart. Although the literal ones too. He couldn’t really want me. It wasn’t possible, and yet, I needed to feel wanted.

“Cross, can you pretend to want me for a while longer?”

“I am officially, unduly provoked,” he said, and then he picked me up and placed me squarely on the pile of straw on his jacket and then he covered me, wrapped his arms

around me, and kissed me with his whole soul.

It was the perfect meeting of two mouths wrapped in a tangled embrace, hunger and passion sweeping away all the hurt and misery, drowning me in bone-melting pleasure. I was lost in him, completely, absolutely, deliciously lost, when the light came on, and someone cursed.

I wrapped my arms around Cross's neck and held him tight. Maybe whoever it was would go away.

"The blood trail leads here," Bram said in a low voice. "Do you think it ate the ponies?"

Cross stayed very still on top of me, and then his lips moved to my jaw, and then the side of my neck, and my eyes fluttered closed while the sensations drowned me.

Penn answered, "No, they're still here, sleepy, fat, oblivious."

"If it really got Delphi..." Bram's voice was tight. Penn didn't answer while I fought with the guilt, thinking that my brothers were worried about me, but my dad had shot me. I'd tried to explain, but no one wanted to listen. If they were really worried about me, they wouldn't shoot.

Cross's lips found my shoulder, which had no annoying fabric blocking his delicious mouth. His hand smoothed my arm while his lips moved back up to my neck. I shifted underneath him, rustling the hay until I froze.

I couldn't hear Bram or Penn. Had they left the barn? They'd left the light on. I was starting to relax when the stall door burst open and I found myself facing down another gun, but Bram was holding it this time.

His eyes widened in shock, and Penn grabbed the gun, moving it away from us.

Penn started to smile. “You’re okay? Did you hear that there was a werewolf sighted at the wedding? Dad shot it, but... You don’t care. You two crazy lovebirds.” Penn tried to shut the door, but Bram hit it, knocking it back open.

“What’s wrong with you, Delphi?” he grumbled, hands on his hips as he glared at me, Cross, and me again. “You’re just going to stay there in that position? Don’t you have any decency?”

I looked up at Bram from my position covered by Cross who had one hand beneath me on my back, no doubt to put pressure on my bullet wound, and also, to keep my brothers from seeing that I wasn’t wearing anything but his jacket. I rose up on my elbows and Cross shifted his weight off me while he studied me, a question in his eyes. The look in the elf’s eyes was more intense, more bare and soul-wrenchingly real than anything I’d ever seen in him before. He didn’t care that Bram was there, or that we’d been caught in a compromising position, or that the world was burning and everything was lost. He wanted to know what I wanted, whether to proclaim that I was a werewolf, or if I wanted to use him to help them believe I was the same sister they’d always known. Whatever I needed, or wanted, that’s what he would make happen.

My heart thrummed, and I felt like I was burning, filled with an unquenchable fire that would devour both of us.

“You left in the middle of the ceremony,” Bram continued, sounding hurt. “Is it morning sickness? Did this pasty pansy get you knocked up? If he did, you’re getting married yesterday.”

I winced. “This is ridiculous. Cross, I need to tell them the truth.”

“No, you don’t. They don’t deserve the truth.”

I smiled at him and touched his cheek. He was so pretty. “Bram, Penn, I’m a werewolf. My beast came out during your wedding, and that’s why I left. I’m not pregnant with Cross’s baby.” So humiliating to have to say that out loud, although who would blame me? Not my mother, that’s for sure.

Bram’s face was kind of humorously shocked. “You’re not a werewolf.”

I tapped on Cross’s shoulder, and he finally rolled off me, leaving me in his jacket and the tattered remains of my dress.

“Delphi, your dress! What did he do to you?”

They weren’t going to understand unless they saw the wolf staring them in the face. I shifted into my adorable wolf and climbed out of my dress. I hopped on Cross’s lap and snuggled against his chest, trying not to notice the way my brothers were staring at me, their faces going various shades of purple as they worked through their extremely strong emotions.

“This isn’t real,” Bram finally said to Cross, his face pale, horror written all over him.

I crouched against Cross, trying to disappear. He smoothed over my fur, scratching behind my ears and making soothing noises. “Yes. It’s real. Your sister survived transitioning into a werewolf over fifteen years ago. She’s not capable of infecting anyone, and her beast is fully merged with the rest of her. There is no danger to you.”

“She’s tiny,” Penn whispered. “Can I touch her?” He reached out a hand, but Bram slapped it down.

“Don’t be an idiot, Penn. You don’t pet werewolves.”

Cross held me tighter and stroked my fur, clearly demonstrating that's exactly what he did.

"But she's so cute. And if it's Delphi, I'd rather be a werewolf with her than not be able to touch her." Pen frowned as he ducked under Bram's arm and came into our already crowded stall. He hesitated, then slowly touched my paw. I blinked at him while he slowly smiled.

"You have the same eyes," he said, and patted my head with more confidence. "Fifteen years as a werewolf? You should have told us sooner. Mom's going to have to find some good werewolf recipes."

"Penn, gnomes don't turn into werewolves. They die," Bram said, hotly. "If she's a werewolf, she's dead to us."

I flinched and burrowed my head under Cross's armpit. He smelled delicious, like elves sweat moonlight and rainbows. Of course he did.

"Don't say that, Bram," Penn said while Cross held me more tightly. "You're hurting her feelings. She didn't ask to get turned into a werewolf. Did she?" he asked Cross.

"No," he said, voice sharp. "She didn't ask to survive, either. She'd rather die than be a werewolf, but she didn't die, so you'll have to deal with that tragedy," he finished, standing up, and bringing me with him so I was tucked against his chest.

"Where are you going?" Bram demanded, blocking the door.

"I'm going to take her inside so I can treat her bullet wound. It seems she was shot."

Bram's eyes went big and then guilt was written all over his face as he tucked the gun away. "Dad didn't shoot Delphi."

Cross made a noncommittal sound. “You should go tell your wife that everything’s fine. If you’d like to say that Delphi’s sick, that would be better than announcing she’s a werewolf. She’s worried that she’ll lose her job when the truth comes out.”

When, not if. I shook my head and leapt out of Cross’s arms, grabbed a folded blanket in my teeth and shifted back to human. I winced as the pulling skin and muscles tore at my bullet wound, then wrapped the blanket around myself, shivering from the loss of blood.

“I shouldn’t go inside. They’ll be frightened,” I said, gripping the blanket tight.

“I don’t care,” Cross said, eyes hard. “I’m treating your wound even if I have to knock you out to do it. Do you want me to carry you, or Bram?”

I glanced at Bram, then shook my head. “I can walk, but it’s not necessary to?”

Cross picked me up and started out of the stall, past my brothers like they weren’t there. “The blanket’s a bit itchy. I apologize,” Cross said, his beautiful eyes conveying a world of apology.

Penn snorted. “It’s not your blanket. If we knew Delphi’d be using it, we would have given you better blankets.”

Bram scowled at Penn. “She shouldn’t be in here with him. Who messes around in the barn when they’ve been shot?” He scowled at Cross. “We’ll have to see what father has to say about this.”

Cross gave him the icy look of a trained assassin. “He shot her. I don’t care what he says. His opinion is absolutely irrelevant.”

The idea of facing my father had me shrinking against Cross.

He brushed my hair with his lips and murmured, “He won’t hurt you again. I swear it.”

“Of course he won’t hurt her,” Bram blustered. “If you’d bothered to tell us you were a werewolf, no one would have shot you.”

“That’s true,” Penn said, nodding as he followed us out of the barn. “Not that I blame you, Delphi. I wouldn’t want to tell mom that I’d been infected, either. I hope she doesn’t cry.”

“Of course she’ll cry,” Bram muttered. “Her precious daughter got turned into a?—”

“If you say anything that hurts your sister,” Cross ground out, “I will personally make certain that you regret it.”

Bram pressed his lips together, and Penn nodded, all of us heading towards the house where the first aid kit was.

I closed my eyes and turned my face into Cross’s neck, trusting him to protect my heart from the inevitable storm of fear and grief we were headed into.

Chapter Seventeen

We spilled into the warm, cozy kitchen, teapot steaming, cat curled up on the chair next to the stove then pushed down the hall, too many people for the narrow space.

When we burst into my father's study, he was leaning on the mantle, book in hand. It was on werewolves. How fitting.

"What's this?" he asked with his customary calm.

"We caught him with Delphi." Bram said, looking thunderous.

Penn shoved him. "That's not why we're here. We need the first aid kit. Delphi's been shot."

My father dropped the book to the floor with a thud as he stared at Cross in consternation and then his eyes met mine, and there was a world of emotion I couldn't read, welling in those dark eyes.

"I'm fine," I whispered, clinging to Cross and the blanket.

"According to my research, a werewolf will survive a bullet to the heart, unless it's silver," my dad said in a clear voice then turned to look at the gun on the desk, and the silver bullets spilled out over the gleaming mahogany surface.

I inhaled sharply, which pulled on my wound. "Are you going to shoot me again?"

“No,” Cross answered for him, then nodded at Penn. “The first aid kit, if you’d be so kind. Your father wouldn’t be so foolish as to attempt to injure someone the lord heir of the night court has declared under his personal protection.”

Bram muttered, “Is that what you call what you were doing in the barn?”

“Is she? Under your protection?” my father asked, ignoring Bram.

Penn snorted and headed across the room for the cabinet underneath his books on Elven lore. “Delphi’s bleeding out, so let’s talk about who’s protecting her? That’s ironic. Dad, you should clear off your desk so Cross can put her on it. Bram, go get a soft blanket for her, and a pillow. If mom finds out you guys were arguing while Delphi’s bleeding, she’ll kill everyone.”

That seemed to be the motivation they needed. My mother could be terrifying, and my father wouldn’t ever want to disappoint her. Also, he probably didn’t really want to kill his only daughter. He cleared off the desk, sweeping everything into drawers in a mess he’d have to be meticulous about later while Bram disappeared and returned shortly with a blanket he arranged.

Cross tightened his hold on me for a moment before he lowered me to the desk and then pulled down the blanket so he could see the damage.

“You got her in the heart,” Penn said, sounding horrified. “Are you sure she’s not going to die?”

“Penn, go get some boiling water,” my dad said and then rolled up his sleeves and went to his healing elixirs cabinet.

I closed my eyes, because the strain of not knowing whether or not my father was going to shoot me again had taken all my energy.

“That’s right, relax Delphinia,” Cross said, putting a large hand on my head while his other trailed lines of healing magic over my skin.

I think I passed out, because the next thing I knew, I was being tucked into my bed by a pale and exhausted-looking Cross.

I frowned at him and touched his forehead. “You’re pretty even looking like a bloodless corpse.”

He smiled slightly and raised my hand to his lips. “That’s my line. Rest, Delphinia.”

“Only if you do.”

“I intend to.”

“In the barn with an itchy blanket?” I shook my head and patted my bed. “We were already caught in a compromising position in the barn. Our bed is made. Now we must lie in it.”

He frowned at me and then I tugged on him hard enough that he sat on the bed, looking confused how that had happened. I pulled him all the way down and linked my arm over his shoulder and spooned against his back.

“Now I can rest knowing that if my dad tries to shoot me with a silver bullet, you’ll block it,” I said, closing my eyes.

“Why didn’t you say you wanted me to block a bullet in the first place? I can definitely do that unconscious. I’m afraid that my healing talents are much more scant than my killing talents. One of these days you’re going to have me do something I’m good at.”

“Blocking bullets? Playing suitor? Researching werewolf law?”

“Mm. I am also very good at buying yarn.”

I smiled and let the scent of him, flowers, and moonlight, lull me into a sense of safety and contentment.

I woke up the next morning with birds singing, the sun shining, and everything right with the world. Cross was sitting up, careful not to wake me.

“Good morning,” I said.

He froze and cautiously turned to look at me, studying my skin tone and eyes. “Good morning.”

I sat up and pulled the blanket up so I would stay covered. “You look nervous.”

“Mm. I slept defenseless in your father’s house. That bodes ill.”

“Does it? Why?”

He sighed heavily. “I waved my title around like an arrogant idiot.”

“Ah, an elf thing I’m too normal to understand. We’re going home today. Don’t worry about whatever subtle meanings you may have communicated with my father. He’s married to a gnome. He’ll let it go.”

“Mm.”

He gave me a slight bow and then left the room, closing the door behind me so I could have some privacy, or so he could have some privacy. I shouldn’t have made

him sleep with me, but I'd been too tired and out of it to think clearly. I got dressed in some nice jeans and a pretty blouse with lace around the collar, and packed up. I was still moving slow, probably because of the blood loss. It took time even for a werewolf to regenerate.

I grabbed my suitcase and went out into the hall, having to step over vines that spread over the hallway, hanging from the ceiling all around my door. Hm. Looks like my dad had grown a protective barrier to keep out my mother. That was interesting. And worrisome. What did that mean to my elf father?

Hopefully, we could leave before I found out. I went downstairs, put my suitcase against the wall, and headed for the kitchen. I opened the door to the scent of onions and something bloody that my gnomish mother would never cook. Liver? My mouth watered, and I took a step closer to the stove.

"Good morning," my mother said cheerfully, hefting the cast-iron skillet and swinging it towards the table. She dumped the grayish slivers of meat and onions onto a plate and beamed at me. "Sit down and eat. I've got some giblets as well, marinating on the stove in bone broth. It's supposed to be very nourishing."

I walked to the table and sat down, feeling numb and weird. My mother definitely knew I was a werewolf. "You know."

"Of course. Also, your father did blood work on you, and you aren't contagious. I was so irritated when he insisted on waiting for the test results before he let me see you. After he shot you! Poor dear." She ruffled my hair with her gentle fingers. Like I was still her daughter.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and stabbed the liver, glancing up at her for permission.

“Go on. You’re still too pale, but for being shot in the heart, you look wonderful. There are definitely some advantages to being a werewolf. And how nice that your elf doesn’t mind.”

I licked my lips. “He’s not really my elf.”

She smiled at me. “Of course. Eat your breakfast.”

That ‘of course,’ told me everything I needed to know about her thoughts on the matter. To her mind, Cross was my elf, and we were as good as married. Insisting that we weren’t would do absolutely no good. So I ate my breakfast, and it was exactly what my wolf craved and never got. I wanted to whine and wag my tail at my new favorite person. I should be baking cookies and camouflaging my scent, but I’d do that later. After we got back to town.

I ate more than I ever had in my life, and finally, I stood up. “Thanks, mom. I really can’t eat any more.”

She pulled me into a hug, coming up to my chin and squeezed me tight. “My poor dear girl. The next time disaster strikes, you tell me. You don’t run away and hide from your family. Understood?”

I squeezed her back. “Thanks, mom. But I’ve done all right on my own.”

“Hmph. Well, I suppose so, but you would have done better with our support. I could have been sending you care packages that you could actually eat.”

“Mom, I can still eat cookies.”

Her eyes brightened. “Really?”

“Of course. I can eat anything a gnome, elf, or a wolf can eat.”

“Still, I should have known better.”

“Delphinia,” my father called from the doorway. “Could you please join us in the study?”

My mother patted my shoulder. “That’s right. He wanted to speak to you before you left. He’s been having a long discussion with your elf. Probably wants to tell you the details, your dowry, his settlement, that sort of thing. Run along.”

I stared at her and then turned to run towards the study. I was going to grab Cross and then get out of there as fast as possible.

“For honor’s sake, you must marry my daughter,” my father said to Cross, like it was the obvious solution to a problem.

I stopped abruptly in the door to stare at my dad in horror. “Beg your pardon?”

“He must marry you for your honor,” he explained, like that was an explanation that actually explained anything.

I sputtered. “We weren’t even together, not like that! Even if we had been, this isn’t the medieval ages.”

My father smiled slightly. “But he is an elf. Things must be done the right way.” He turned to Cross. “For the sake of your name, your house, she will be your honorable bride.”

Cross shook his head. “I won’t force her to accept a title that I’ve personally abandoned. You know my blood, my nature, but I have no ties to that family. I left

that behind long ago.”

“And my daughter? Do you not care if her honor is besmirched?”

I snorted. “I’m a werewolf, dad. Whatever honor I had died when I was infected. Stop. Cross is my protector. That’s enough. More than enough.”

He shot me a look and then turned to Cross, looking extremely confident. Cross didn’t. He looked more irritated than anything. “You will marry my daughter.”

Cross’s eyes were hard. “I will never allow you to force her to accept someone she merely tolerates after you push her into that vulnerable position. I expected better from you.” Cross’s voice was cold, icy, absolute.

My father cocked his head. “You won’t allow me? You sound like a lord.”

“Never. If that’s what you’re looking for, connections to a house, you are absolutely mistaken in me. I have no house, no people, no family.”

“On the contrary,” my dad said levelly. “You are now permanently connected to me and my family through my daughter.” He turned to me. “Do you not understand what a protector is, Delphinia? You are his vassal if he doesn’t make you his equal, his bride, his mate.”

I pointed a finger at my father while anger grew in my chest. “If he doesn’t make me? You’re the one trying to trick someone into marrying me, dad. I get that now you realize that I’m a werewolf, and that reduces the pool of gentlemen willing to take your daughter off your hands, but you can’t dump me on Cross, just because he agreed to help me find the monster who turned me in the first place. We’re working together. That’s all. We aren’t compatible long-term.”

“No? Why not? And don’t tell me why he doesn’t want to be with you. You tell me why you wouldn’t want to marry the handsome senator who doesn’t shrink away from you, even knowing what you are. Tell me, Delphinia. What do you have against him?”

I stared at my father while tears stung my eyes. I didn’t want to tell him, but the truth was already out. I raised my chin. “Honestly, I hate him. I don’t want to marry someone who can do whatever is necessary no matter how much it hurts someone. He’s the one who kept me alive while I was transitioning. He tortured me every day to keep me alive. He’s a pretty elf, but I still hate him.”

“Do you? And that’s why you held him while you kept him in your bed?” my father asked with a slight tilt of his head. He smiled suddenly. “Very well. If you hate him, I will not push the matter.”

I stared at him, suspicious of his sudden acceptance of things. “Thank you.”

“Thank you. He wouldn’t tell me what your reservations were, but now they are very clear. He kept you alive when his nature is to kill those who threaten peace. He is your protector, and you owe him your life. It is appropriate that you are his vassal until you have repaid your debt.”

I stared at him and wanted to beat my head against something. “Okay. Well, it’s been so good to see everyone. We’ve really got to get going so we can make it home before dark.” I gave my dad a delicate hug that he returned with surprising strength.

He kissed my hair and then whispered, “I am sorry that I shot you.”

See? Even my dad could apologize for shooting me. Was I going to cry? I pressed my trembling lips together and pulled back to smile at him. “No problem. It was a very good shot.”

“I was trying to hit your spine and your heart, but I didn’t get both. That is good, or you wouldn’t have been able to run, and someone probably would have cut off your head.” He frowned suddenly and sank into the nearest chair, a wingback near a bookshelf. “That took years off my life, Delphinia.”

“What were you doing with a gun at Bram’s wedding, anyway?”

“I saw some tracks earlier in the week. I suppose it must have been you.”

I exchanged glances with Cross and then patted his shoulder. “Could you show me these tracks?”

He sighed heavily. “No. I erased them since I didn’t want to worry anyone.”

“Of course you did. Who wants to worry about monsters when there’s a wedding to plan?” I gave him another hug and then grabbed Cross’s hand and pulled him to the door. “Well, we’ve got to get going. I love you!”

I turned into the hall and then stopped when my way was blocked by Bram. He looked from me to Cross and then grabbed me in a hug and squeezed me tight, holding me for a long time. His neck was right there where I could rip it out if I wanted to, and he’d let me. I smiled and squeezed him back.

He wheezed and put me back down. “Werewolf strength, huh?”

“Next time, we’ll have to wrestle. And I won’t hold back.” I grinned at him while he smiled back at me. Then I was surrounded by Fen, Hook, and Penn.

“You’re really a werewolf? How did you survive transitioning?” Hook asked, interested in the theory of it.

“We’ve got to go,” I said, laughing, making my way down the hall. My mother came out of the kitchen, and then it was a real crowd. She’d brought with her containers of food, so much food to help me heal and strengthen my wolf.

Everyone was there, even my dad, on the porch, waving and laughing while we got into the lovely black car and drove away.

I frowned as I turned to look back at my family. “He let it go too easily.”

“Yes. Don’t worry. No one’s going to force you to marry me.”

I glanced at him, taking in the perfect proportions, the strength and grace. “Yes, well, that’s a relief.”

He flashed me a smile. “And your family knows what you are, but loves you anyway. Yes, it’s a relief.”

I wanted to rest my head on his shoulder and tangle our hands together. Instead, I sank into my seat and watched my childhood world go by.

Chapter Eighteen

I waited in the white chair outside Zephin's Clay's office; the space surrounded by immaculate plants on white shelves. My knitting was in my lap, hands busy, mind wandering. I had the exposé neatly in the file on my computer after I'd gone over it diligently the last few days. It was the subject of my article that occupied my mind.

Things hadn't been awkward back at the pool house, mostly because I never saw the senator. He was busy with work, all the different kinds of work he did, and I understood that, really, but at the same time, it was strange not to see him at least twelve hours a day filled with torture and hugs. I had a few apartments to go look at once my big article was finished, but I wasn't excited about it, not when I already felt the lack of Cross so poignantly.

"Delphi, Mr. Clay will see you now," his lovely elegant Elven secretary said with a soft smile.

"Thank you." I smiled back at her and stood, tucking my knitting away and picking up my computer bag. "Thank you for seeing me," I said once I entered the large office, the theme modern, but the empty space broken up by a few pieces of priceless art. It was interesting that Clay was such a forward-thinking elf instead of like Cross, with his traditional paintings in his classic house.

Clay stood and came towards me, smiling and holding out his hands. "Miss Era. It is such a pleasure to see you. I never got a chance to talk with you at the wedding. How is Bram liking the married life? It seems just yesterday he was crawling around in the mud eating bugs."

I laughed and shook my head as I let him take my hands. He pulled me into a hug that ended with a kiss to both my cheeks, a cool brush of his lips that felt like water and peace.

I was surprised by the kisses. Although they were nothing to a gnome, they were positively shocking to an elf. I stared up at him, confused. The last time I'd hugged him was after I killed the wrong wolf. I came to ask him to give me a job, trying so hard to look civilized in my stolen clothing. When he'd agreed to find a place for me at his Singsong paper, I'd hugged him spontaneously. He'd been stiff and horrified, breaking out of my grasp as soon as possible.

This time, he pulled back with a slight twitch of his nose. "You've already gotten back to work, taking the responsibilities of others?" He tsked. "You should do something about the scent before you see the senator. His senses are much sharper than mine."

It was my turn to step out of his arms, drowning beneath a vast wave of embarrassment. I'd made cookies every morning for three days and hadn't channeled my werewolf once. And I still smelled like a wolf? Why didn't Cross say anything? "I'll be sure to take a big bubble bath before I see him. Speaking of, I have the exposé on Senator Silverton that you asked for."

He raised a brow, tilting his head slightly. "Indeed? Are you certain that's wise? It might jeopardize your position with him."

I studied him while the need to rub cookies all over my body tangled with my confusion about what kind of position he thought I had with the senator. "It seems like the right step to take for my career," I finally said. It's what anyone else would have done.

"Yes, but the Senator won't appreciate you using him for your advancement, unless

he intends to use you in return. Perhaps your personal position is more valuable than your career.”

My stomach twisted. More humiliation. What personal position would a gnomish-elf have with a senator, pureblood elf like Cross? Not a respectable one, that’s for sure. I laughed lightly and turned to look out of his beautiful window, looking out over the golden wall and the river. It was a beautiful view. “I see. You think that I’m too gullible to take advantage of my situation? I’m not. Senator Silverton is perfectly capable of handling my article and his career, like I am capable of handling mine.”

He laughed, melodious and mellow, before he gestured me to the chair across from him. “And you are as grown as Bram. I’m proud of you. To think how far you’ve come from the shy little mouse who asked me for a job, to this.” He nodded at me and took a seat while I took mine.

“Well, it’s only a society piece, but it’s going to get a lot of interest. Shall I forward it to you?”

“Please. I hope you don’t mind sitting here while I go over it.”

“Of course not. I brought my knitting.”

He smiled. “Yes, you always have your knitting.”

I sat there with doubts plaguing me as he went through my article. It didn’t take him long, and I didn’t bother getting out my knitting, not when I wanted to see his expression as he read my piece. Then again, he was an elf, and the most emotion he showed was that he raised a silver brow once he was done. “Interesting angle. I’m not sure who benefits from the message that Senator Silverton is secretly a gnome at heart.” His gaze was calculated, cool, as an elf should be, but it made me feel defensive, like my stupid exposé wasn’t up to the standards of real reporters.

I raised my chin. “Well, my mother will like it.”

He smiled slightly. “She’d like anything if she thought there was any chance he’d marry you. You made him look approachable, trustworthy, and genuine. You certainly do have talent if you were able to turn someone like the Senator into that.”

“He’s always been perfectly respectable.”

“And now he’s approachable. No, beyond approachable, absolutely trustworthy, and that’s all you. So that’s what he’s getting out of the situation. It’s an equal trade.”

“You’re very cynical, Mr. Clay.”

“I am, Miss Era. As a personal friend, I feel the need to inform you about the senator’s dramatic backstory.”

I blinked at him. Was he going to tell me that he was secretly the head of the House of Mercy? What then? Would I have to kill him? No, I’d just report him to Cross and Henrick would do it. No, I’d kill him better and faster. Henrick would have too much fun with Clay. He’d never see me coming and wouldn’t feel a thing.

I smiled brightly. “You make it sound so exciting. Do tell.” I gripped my bag and hoped that he wouldn’t. I was bound to tell Cross anything that would put his guild in danger.

“His father is the Lord of the Night Court in elfland. That doesn’t mean much to you, since your father left all his ties with nobility—of which he had very few—when he left. But as heir of the Night Court, our senator has obligations which he cannot escape, no matter how far he runs. He will be bound to a full-blooded noble Elven female and have the next heir. It is ingrained in his blood, in his nature. Your mother may consider the senator an eligible match, but it isn’t possible. Perhaps he himself is

unaware of the obligations he can't escape. They have allowed him his freedom for longer than I would have expected. He may think that he can?—”

I cut him off before I died of embarrassment. “I’m not interested in marrying the senator. Can you imagine me, a senator’s wife? I’m just enjoying the company of a very handsome man while I get a story out of him that will benefit my career. It’s already lasted longer than I expected. I have no regrets, no expectations, and no interest in settling down to be a darling little wife, however adorable I am.”

He laughed and gave me a warm smile that I’d never seen on his Elven face. It made him much more handsome than ninety-eight percent of the men in my world, lighting up his eyes so you could see the green, and giving him a softness that his chiseled features rarely had. “Far more than that, my dear Miss Era. You have your mother’s warmth. It doesn’t seem like much to some, but it brought your father back to life, gave him his sanity, made it possible for him to find happiness in a world that has so much darkness. Combined with your Elven grace, you are irresistible.”

I went very still while I studied my father’s old friend. That was as clear a declaration of interest as elves made. It was much clearer than the usual subtlety, but he must think I was too gnomish to understand elvish manners. He was probably right. I finally broke out in a light laugh. “Mr. Clay, you are too kind. I can’t tell you how much I’ve appreciated you keeping my job secure all these years.” Yes. Work. Let’s focus on work.

He waved a hand dismissively. “You’re good at what you do. If you wanted to run the paper, or a television broadcast network, I would be delighted to help you learn what you need to know.”

Oh. My. Elf. Now that I was the Senator’s mistress, happily selling my body and soul for favors, Mr. Clay was eager to get in line. Could I slap him? No. You don’t slap elves, you’d just cut your hand on their sharp cheekbones. Also, I was pretending to

be a worldly reporter who knew how to take what she wanted without any regrets or misgivings. I had so many misgivings. All of them.

Mr. Clay was powerful, in the field I'd chosen, and stunning if you like ageless sculptures of perfection.

"You're too kind. I'd better get back to work."

He held out his hand to shake. Again.

I hesitated before I took it in a cool grip of an elf who had no idea how to hold hands.

He covered our hands with his and smiled warmly. "Thank you for coming in. I'm proud of you, Miss Era. I hope you can make it to the zoo masquerade tomorrow. You are the inspiration for it."

Because I was so wild. Or maybe that was this surreal encounter. I let him usher me out of the office, feeling like I'd been hit by a hurricane.

When I got home, I should have done something useful, but instead I lay on the floor in the living room off the kitchen and played with Lynx. She was getting so leggy. We basically ate snacks together. What a strange conversation. He was an old family friend, but how well could anyone really know someone who had lived hundreds of years? Maybe I should call my father to ask about him. I wouldn't ever consider dating him. However he looked at me, to me, he'd always be my father's friend, an aloof elf who I owed gratitude for giving me a job when I was uneducated, traumatized, and frankly, a mess, but definitely not romantic material. And he'd offered to help me climb all the way to the top. As if I hadn't turned down every opportunity for advancement for the past thirteen years.

"Manny, I'm making a soup with this bone my mom sent home with me. If I don't

make it, she's going to come here and make it herself. Sorry to invade your kitchen, but it's better than more gnomes." I looked around the kitchen, and no sign of the ogre, so I started a soup with the nice enormous bone that would build up my blood. My mother texted me recipes every day, and I had to send her pictures of what I was eating, or she probably really would invade Singsong City, rampant werewolves or not.

I checked Cross's number while I had my phone out and then texted him before I could change my mind.

Will you be home for dinner tonight?

It took three minutes for him to answer. "I am home. I was in the library," he said, coming in behind me.

I whirled around and felt all flustered and idiotic for no good reason. Maybe because he was a startlingly handsome elf, looking like moonlight pouring over a field of violets. "Oh. That's nice. Your exposé is going to come out tonight on tv. I thought you'd like to watch it while eating. It's a nourishing soup. With a bone. Is that not vegetable-based enough for you?"

He smiled, but it was a cool, aloof, Elven smile. Good. I'd had enough weirdly warm smiles for the day. "The night court eats meat. I trust that your article will be as brilliant as always."

"It will be more brilliant than usual, considering the subject I had to work with." I gestured at him and then realized how flirty that would have been for an elf. Good thing I was a triad of awkwardness instead.

"Mm." He came over to me and started helping me with dinner, glancing at my recipe once or twice as he peeled carrots and chopped onions. I also did things, but I was

distracted by him being in the kitchen, taking up space, so much space that I seemed to bump into him every time I turned around. I'd gotten so used to being with him all the time, and then not seeing him for three days, now it was weird to have him so close, particularly after Clay reminded me how much I stank like a werewolf, and how much better Cross's senses were than his.

It would be better when I wasn't living in his pool house, expecting to see him every day. Except that would also be worse.

"Cross," I said, pausing next to him while he leaned against the counter, looking in the soup pot like it was missing something.

"Mm," he said, giving me a glance with those violet eyes that made my knees weak.

What was wrong with me? I licked my lips. "Clay was weird today."

He straightened up, face expressionless, but he was giving me his full attention. "Do you have something to report?"

Oh. This was his 'head of the house of Mercy, I'm ready to kill someone' face. "He knows that you're an heir to the night court. I was thinking, he's always been there when I had my beast come out. You don't think it's him, do you?"

"Zephin Clay the beast who infected you?" He frowned in thought. "If you're suspicious of him, why have you been hugging him?"

How in the world did he know that? "What?"

"You smell like him."

I edged away from him. "You can smell a tiny bit of elf through all the revolting

wolf?”

“I like the scent of your beast. I’m a night elf. I’m not delicate like Clay. It’s possible he’s a beast, but it doesn’t seem to suit his nature. I could see him pulling strings behind the curtain as a member of Lynx much more quickly than a beast that enjoyed blood and violence. Perhaps you hugged him to try to smell his beast.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t hug him. He hugged me. It was so awkward. Do you think I should take him up on it? I mean, date him after we break up so that I can investigate him more closely? No, it’s not possible that he’s actually interested in me. Maybe he has a hunch about who you are and wants to use me to get to the truth. That makes much more sense.”

He studied me thoughtfully. “You are truly unaware of Zephin Clay’s personal interest in you? Even Leticia Marin is aware of it. He decided to do a masquerade ball based on your article. He touches you in public, and now hugging in private?” He tsked. “And he knows that we’re dating. That’s not very considerate of him. Does he want me to retaliate?”

I studied him, at the frown that was so heavy. He was an assassin. “How would you retaliate?” I asked, feeling nervous for my old family friend.

He gave me a polite smile. “The senator would give him a set-down in public. I’d call him on his inappropriate advances to one whom he owes protection, and then subtly infer that he doesn’t deserve you after using your skills for so long without proper pay raises. I hope that when you go back to work, you renegotiate your contract. I’d love to help you. I’m a very good lawyer, you know.”

“The senator is too kind.” I put my hand on his arm, not thinking it through until the actual contact sent a bolt of awareness through me. My throat got tight and weird as I quickly pulled away from him. “We actually need to discuss our public break-up. I

hope we can make it as amicable as possible, because I'd like to be friends in the future."

His frown disappeared, face absolutely impassive. "I don't have friends."

I elbowed him. "Libby's your friend. Why can't I be? I know. It's my seductive ways that you elves can't resist. How did Zephin say it? 'The warmth of a gnome combined with the grace of the elf is irresistible.' I'm paraphrasing. Seriously though, I'm safely bound to you, so why can't we be friends?"

He turned to me, looking over my face like he was searching for my nose. The way he looked at my mouth made it tingle and my whole body hit high alert. "Don't you think it would be strange if we broke up so soon after the exposé? People might say that you used our relationship to get a story before you moved on to the media mogul."

I snorted. "No one would ever think I dumped you. It's absurd. People would say that I published the story after we were already on our way out. And I'm not moving on to the media mogul unless you somehow convince me that it's life-or-death, also that I don't have to kill him, because I'm not comfortable killing an old family friend, although if it's between me and Henrick, it should be me because I'm..."

He wrapped me in his arms and pulled me against his chest until my head rested on his rapidly beating heart. "I haven't hugged you for three days. My apologies, Miss Era. I've been neglecting my responsibilities."

I gulped and tried not to cling to him too obviously. "You've been busy. Also, you don't have to worry about it. I'm fine without hugs."

"Then I'm not fine without hugging you. It must be your irresistible warmth and grace. Did he actually say such a forward thing to someone supposedly dating

someone else? I'm shocked."

"Mm." I smiled against his heart. My stress melted out of me like it had never existed. "Elves are too easily shocked."

"Most likely."

"You weren't very shocked the first time you saw my beast, though."

"I was, though. I expected something dainty and adorable to match your wolf, but that beast was at the war beast level."

That's right. He'd been the first person to ever see my beast, including me. He remembered every second of torture, but he still hadn't ever apologized. I dropped my arms and pulled away until he released me and I was left with only the lingering warmth he'd given me. He was much warmer than I was, at least literally.

The timer on my phone went off. Right! The news broadcast. I grabbed his hand, dragging him into the living room so we could watch my exposé unfold. I gestured at the large tv I didn't know how to operate. "Turn it on, please."

It came on like it was voice activated.

"Oh." I glanced at him, and he smiled at me. "Um. Channel four, please."

It switched channels and there was the theme song for the national broadcast station. I grabbed his hand and tugged him with me to the couch, holding it with both of mine, too tight, too hard, but unwilling to let go.

"Is it that bad?" he murmured, squeezing my hand back. "I'd better call Henrick."

“I’m sure it’s fine. I’m just nervous. It’s my first exposé!” I kept staring at the screen while the lovely reporter started talking about celebrity news. Finally, the first picture popped up. The senator was sitting on the floor in a pile of yarn, knitting terribly. I was leaning over his shoulder, fixing his hands, and he was smiling. Not a cool elven smile, but a genuinely delighted smile as he tried to hold his needles right and not tangle the yarn.

The article was done well by one of the most charming news anchors in the world. She was good, delivering the story of the wonderfully warm senator and his recently affianced...

“What did she say?” I asked, grabbing his arm in a death grip and squinting at the screen.

“You’re my fiancé? That’s unexpected.” He was also frowning, but at me instead of the screen.

“Why would she say that? That’s not what I wrote.”

“Well, it makes it more sensational, I suppose.”

“But when my wolf comes out, you’ll have to be on the girlfriend after the girlfriend after me. If we’re engaged, that makes it more difficult to break things off cleanly so we can remain good friends afterwards.”

He studied me for a long moment, then reached out and brushed my hair away from my face. “I’ll have Henrick fix it.”

“But she’s a professional. She wouldn’t make a mistake like that unless...”

Zephin Clay. But why would he change that detail, and nothing else? Didn’t he want

to date me? Then why would he link me more tightly to the senator? Or maybe he was a diabolical monster who transformed into a beast and murdered random baseball players for the fun of it.

I got up and rubbed my forehead, which was throbbing miserably. “I need to go to bed.”

“You should eat first.”

I shook my head and gave him a wan smile. “I don’t have an appetite anymore. I’ll have some tomorrow. Do you mind putting it away for me?”

He frowned as he studied me until he finally gave me a slight smile and a gracious nod. “Not at all. Rest well, Delphinia.”

I woke up from the dream with a pounding heart, sweaty limbs tangled in my sheets. The dream was so vivid and intense, the pain, the humiliation, being this horrible out-of-control monster in a cage, injected with the poison that ripped me apart over and over again. He held me tight when things got truly unbearable. He kept me alive with his affection more than anything. I feared and hated him, but I needed him.

I didn’t want to see Cross. The thought of it made me sick, terrified, but I needed to see him more than I needed to breathe. My whole body and soul ached with the need for him. When I was little, I had horrible nightmares about the monsters in the woods coming for me. My dad would read to me his big botany book until I calmed down. Cross was an elf and could read to me like my father. That logic clicked. I could ask him to read to me, to be the researcher elf.

I got up, wrapped my bright knitted blanket around my shoulders and left the pool house. The night cast strange shadows on the water, turning it into a silver oasis, while the wind sent the leaves skittering above me.

Every step was a struggle. My skin kept shivering and shifting, triggered by the fear, the memories of pain, and the aching need for Cross's arms around me to make everything all better. The backdoor was unlocked, the handle turning easily in my hand, but the hall was long, the house dark and still. He was sleeping. I shouldn't disturb him, not when he'd had to suffer the humiliation of my family so recently, not to mention the unexpected engagement, but I needed him to chase away the fear, to be the person he was instead of the monster he'd been. I needed him now, like I'd needed him in the cage, to hold me and keep me through another endless night. I would die without him. The wolf in the back of my brain whimpered from the aching. It hurt so much.

I went up the stairs and got to the door of his bedroom, tracking it by scent. He smelled of woods, books, and danger laced with vanilla yogurt. Was he eating in bed? How shockingly un-elfen. I stood there for a long time while the fear and need gnawed at me. Everything that terrified me but that I still desperately needed was on the other side of that solid oak door.

I stood there for a long time, the aching coming up against a wall of Elven reserve. An elf didn't interrupt someone's rest. My feet got icy, my fingers stiff curled around the knob when it turned and there was Cross, standing in shadows my wolf eyes could pick apart easily enough. He'd been sleeping. I could smell sleep heavy on him, but when he saw me, his eyes cleared as he came fully awake.

"Delphinia." His low voice sent a shock of relief and pain through me. He was everything I'd been aching for, but also everything I hated. He was everything.

I almost sobbed, because I wasn't all right, but at the same time, there wasn't anything real that could get me here. I pressed my lips together for a moment while I willed my racing heart to calm. "I had a dream from that time before. I shouldn't have woken you up, but I wondered if you could do me a favor." My voice was trembling, weak.

“Anything. You dreamed about...” His brow furrowed. He wasn’t sure if mentioning details would be worse or better.

It would be worse. I spoke quickly, my words tripping over each other from my nerves. I was facing my old enemy, but he was also someone I could trust. “My father used to read to me stories when I couldn’t sleep. The woods of Elysia was his favorite. Do you have it?”

His brows rose. “The woods of Elysia isn’t a storybook. It’s a botanical guide. I suppose that would put anyone to sleep. You’d like me to read to you?” he asked, sounding uncertain.

“Is that too familiar?” Of course it was.

He shook his head and stepped out of his bedroom, closing the door behind him. “Not at all.” Which was a well-mannered lie, but the whole world thought that we were engaged, so what could be too familiar after that?

We walked to the library slowly, me clutching my knitted blanket, him keeping pace with me, both of us comfortable in the darkness only interrupted by the silver gleam cast by the moon over the hall runner.

In the library, he went to the fireplace, lit the kindling, then went to the wingback chair before he hesitated. I bumped into his broad back and almost lost my grip on my blanket.

He turned to look at me, then took the book from the shelf and went back to a wingback near the fireplace. There was another one beside it, smaller, my size.

He sat down and I climbed on his lap. He stiffened up, shocked, but the fear was gnawing on me too much to care. He’d said ‘anything.’ For a moment we sat like

that, him stiff and hard, but eventually he relaxed, turned on the lamp, opened his book, and started reading.

His voice and the familiar Elven words pushed back the fear enough that I could analyze it. It wasn't the dream that had scared me so much, but the fear that had triggered the dream. There were spells like that, spells that would paralyze the victim with fear. I slowly started to relax as he described the mushrooms found in the ash tree, the bolete, dark-skinned and smoky flavored.

I shifted on his lap to get more comfortable, fitting my head into the crook between his neck and shoulder, and slowly felt warm, safe and content.

I was drowsing off when the memory stole my breath. It was so real, so intense. I was in the cage, my cheek against the metal floor. It smelled so bad, like bodily fluids and madness. My back's skin kept tearing apart while my bones shifted, poking through the gaping wounds that never healed entirely. It hurt so much. I'd been there for an eternity, hurting more than you could hurt without dying, but he kept me alive.

I whimpered as he turned me over with his careful hands, the mask he wore with its glinting eye pieces, glinting like the needle in his hand.

No. I blinked the memory away. I was in Cross's library. I wasn't in the cage anymore. I didn't have to hurt and struggle with my wolf. All of that was over. Except that Cross hadn't apologized for it.

A dart of pain went through my chest while anger stirred deep in my heart, in the shadowy recesses where the pain still lingered. The elf still suffered from that betrayal. The night bloomed into song, a melody of violence and fierce anger. Justice needed to be done. He had to suffer like I suffered.

A seed on the windowsill outside the library burst open, threadlike roots growing

soundlessly towards the seam at the bottom of the glass. The song of anger danced in my heart as that seedling grew, slipping beneath the window, breaking metal locks until it rose, and more roots spilled into the room, spreading across the floor towards the chair Cross sat in, his back to the window, his attention on the book and on me.

I took a breath and was back in the cage, back in that moment when he carefully turned me over, barely touching those gaping wounds and shifting bones, but even his gentle touch was agonizing. I looked up at him, at the needle in his hand. It was as long as his forearm. It looked like death. Was he finally going to give me the death I'd pleaded for until I had no words, no voice, no will?

He placed the tip of the needle over my heart as he looked down at me. I tried to smile. Finally. He was giving me death.

In the library, the roots pierced deep into the floor, soundless, while the branches spread, wrapping the chair while roots pierced through the fabric, spreading through the wooden frame until it was there, against his back, over his heart.

The past and the present became one. He shoved the needle deep in my chest while I speared through the chair with the living stake, through his back ribs, shattering them before pushing deep into his chest, into the pulsing heart that was so warm, so strong. Agony. My scream mingled with his as that needle flooded my system with more poison that would keep me alive, agony that never ended.

The past flickered out, and I was back in the library. Cross's mouth opened and blood spilled down his chin as he looked at me with those fathomless indigo eyes. I hurt so much. We hurt together.

I whispered, "Why aren't you sorry you hurt me? I keep waiting for the words that will heal the hurt you left in my heart, but you never say them." I put my hand against his chest and felt the sharp prick of the branch I'd staked him with. It was waiting for

my will to continue growing, breaking his heart into pieces like he'd broken me.

He coughed, swallowed down blood, then touched my face with gracefully powerful fingers. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I don't deserve your forgiveness, but you deserve peace. I'm so sorry. From the first moment I heard your song, you've had my heart. I kept you alive because I couldn't kill you, because I love you." He coughed and choked while his sweet blood filled the air. "A night elf's love is always poison." His eyes grew dim, unfocused, dark lashes fluttering as he struggled to keep them open.

He was dying? He wasn't allowed to die! I swallowed down the pain, the memories that kept twining around me, dragging me into madness and hatred. He'd said he was sorry. And I'd made him suffer, as justice demanded.

I pressed my lips to his while I pushed the tip of the living stake back, slowly so I could knit together the fabric of his heart as it retreated. I kissed him as slowly, agonizingly, the branch slid out of his flesh, coated liberally in his sweet blood. The scent of blood was heady to my wolf, but worrying, like his head lolling against the chair's wing. His heart beat slow, weak, like he didn't want to struggle for life any more than I did.

I growled low in my throat and stood, shifting into the beast. I picked him up and carried him to his bed. So much blood. I ripped off his shirt and licked his skin until it was pearly perfect. He was so pale. So weak.

What had I done?

My wolf melted into me, and I crumpled onto the floor, the vestiges of the madness retreating. I trembled so hard as I curled up in a ball on Cross's bedroom floor. I'd stabbed him in the back, and he'd let me. He hadn't struggled, but he must have heard the song. He must have felt my rage.

I scrubbed my face with my hands to get off the tears, but stopped because they were sticky with so much blood. Tears and blood. That should be the name of a song. He'd let me kill him. Why would he do that?

Love. He'd said love. Maybe he'd also been mad. I started hyperventilating. Losing control was out of the question. The last time I'd lost control during Bram's wedding, I should have realized that something was going on with me, something that I needed to fix. Cross had resources. He could get me the help he needed before I went mad again. Why did he let me hurt him? Why wouldn't he stop me? I could have gone on a rampage, my rage fueling my beast as I slaughtered innocents. Instead, I'd targeted Cross, the one I hated.

One thing was very certain. I couldn't afford to hate anyone. That was the weakness that let in the destructive monster. The elf. We were monsters all of us. And we weren't going to let him die any more than he let me.

I pulled myself up the side of the bed and then flopped over on the mattress, my limbs as weak as the rest of me. I put my cheek on his chest over his heart and started singing in my croaky, tear-choked voice, the song of healing. I wove the gnome coziness magic over that, through that, summoning peace and tranquility, forgiveness and joy. He'd said sorry. I couldn't afford to hate him anymore. Of course, I couldn't love him, either. My triad was so strong. Look at that elf summoning nature to accomplish her vengeance, while the beast waited patiently to carry him away when she was finished. The elf was the scariest. I was completely out of control, every single piece of me.

My tears washed his chest clean while I sang until his breathing steadied, his heart beat surely, and I was more exhausted than I'd ever been in my life. I'd poured my life and strength into him like he'd done to me so many times during my training. He'd turned me into such a capable monster.

I had to get up before I passed out. I had to...For a few seconds I lost consciousness, before I came to with a lurch. I forced myself up and slid towards the edge of the bed.

He wrapped his arm around my stomach. "Stay," he whispered, voice weak but still perfect, pulling me back against him, into his warm embrace.

I closed my eyes while feelings fluttered against my ribcage. His voice was so beautiful, even though it reflected the damage I'd done to him.

"I should go." My voice was so soft, breathless, helpless. Could he even hear it?

"I need you to protect me while I sleep."

Oh. Because something else could possibly be so effective at staking him to a chair. Clearly he was more than slightly unhinged. I should definitely leave, run as fast and far as possible, but instead, I closed my eyes and soaked in the feel of him. I'd run away later.

Chapter Nineteen

His name was Charles Linton, and he owned thirty percent of the electronics manufacturers on the east coast. He had excellent taste and therefore couldn't possibly let me walk away from him until he'd charmed me into giving me his number. He'd also dressed as a shrimp.

I held onto my smile with the skill I'd honed to a keen edge for fifteen years. Unfortunately, I'd gotten out of the habit of subjecting myself to self-important bores in the last few months.

We stood on the promenade above the sloping lawns and the grassy central space where the performers frolicked. Zephin Clay had pulled out all the stops. It was a verifiable circus here, but tasteful, everything bedecked in heady roses while the fire dancers and dancing bears spun and twirled in carefully controlled abandon. The light flickering from sconces lining the promenade added to the feel of carefully orchestrated wildness.

"As the most beautiful woman here, you must know that no man could resist you," Mr. Shrimp said, looking pointedly at my cleavage.

I followed his glance down at the deer costume that wasn't any more revealing than his shrimp outfit, which revealed a great deal of leg. He'd been following me since the train, where he'd sat across from me, telling me all about his business acumen while I tried to be polite because his costume was so embarrassing. That was a bad move. Then again, I deserved to be tortured by the shrimp after what I did to Cross.

I'd woken up in his bed without him this morning, and spent the rest of the day trying not to think about him. I was clearly successful considering the way I kept looking past the shrimp towards the bridge leading to the shadowy train station as guests arrived, searching for the tall silhouette of my landlord.

He'd said he loved me.

I shook my head and focused on the familiar form of Letitica Marin and gave Mr. Shrimp a bright smile as I cut off his long-winded lecture about how smart he was to be able to value my beauty in spite of my apparent lack of expensive jewelry. He was a treasure, to be sure.

"I see an old friend I must greet. Enjoy the evening," I said before slipping around him.

He grabbed my arm and spun me back to him, a frown on his thin face. "Before we've danced? I'd be a fool to let you go."

"You don't let a woman stay or go." Cross stood behind me, melting out of the shadows, looking more lethal than he usually let the senator appear. "Particularly when she's engaged to a very possessive man." He slipped his hand around my waist and over my stomach exactly like he had last night, and then bent to press a slow, lingering kiss to my neck.

My heartbeat skyrocketed, while goosebumps ran over my shoulders and arms. He was here. Finally. And he'd said he loved me.

"I b-beg your pardon!" Shrimp said, still holding onto my arm. "She isn't wearing a ring."

"Do you want him to hold on to you, my love?" Cross murmured, lips brushing my

ear in a way that made me shiver deliciously. I melted against him, forgetting about the rest of the world as he wrapped me in his arms.

It felt like he loved me.

“Like I said, she is otherwise engaged,” Cross murmured, smooth as silk and twice as deadly. No, more than twice, because silk wasn’t very deadly, unless we’re talking about strangulation with silk cords. Doubtless, Cross could manage to kill this person in hundreds of ways with silk. I take it back. Deadly as silk was one hundred percent correct.

Shrimp finally dropped my arm, but his face was twisted into a disagreeable scowl as Cross spun me away from him. Cross kept his strong arm around my waist, but stepped to the side so we could walk more comfortably along the promenade beneath the rose garlands and flickering torches.

“Imagine running into you here,” I said, sounding breathless and idiotic, like I’d been swept away by the most romantic figure imaginable.

He’d said he loved me.

“I think that it was a spell,” he said, voice intent, with a hint of threat that made me shiver. Maybe it was the feel of his hand over the thin fabric of my dress. He wasn’t handling me the way a standoffish elf should. He was being possessive, protective, and aggressive. My wolf liked it so much. Fine. Even my elf thought it was hot. He’d said he loved me even though I’d staked him to a chair.

“The shrimp costume?” I asked.

“The fear spell. The anger spell. The beast spell at Bram’s wedding. You’re being targeted. It could be unrelated to the monster and Lynx, but it’s statistically unlikely.”

I sniffed as I glanced at him in his wolf mask that made him look more dangerous than usual. “You took the time to run statistics? You’re such an elf.”

“Being impaled by a living branch in a library does sound distinctly Elven.”

I inhaled sharply, glancing around at all the masked and bejeweled Singsong City residents who might hear the man at my side’s shocking declaration.

“Senator Silverton, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mm. Miss Era, will you dance with me?”

“I...” The last time we’d danced was at my brother’s wedding. He’d saved me from death by humiliation. And he’d said he loved me. I didn’t know what to say. I just stood there, staring at the most beautiful man in the universe who wanted to dance with me, even when no one else wanted me.

“Delphi, is that you?” Forsythia asked, breaking the spell. She came towards us wearing ostrich plumes with her heavy purple and teal makeup. Somehow, she didn’t look garish.

I smiled and took her hands, but Cross kept his arm around my waist, not letting me go. I liked that so much. “Forsythia! How are you? We only just got back home.” Oh. That made it sound like we were very together. Which we were, at least at that moment, and I’d slept in his bed last night. Was I blushing? Probably, but gnome cheeks were notoriously rosy.

She arched a perfect brow while her eyes glimmered. “I hope you two enjoyed your time away. Now you’re engaged to the Senator. Congratulations!” She took my left hand and gave a pointed look at my fingers before looking up at me, all polite sweetness. “Where is it?”

“I...That is...We aren’t engaged.” My throat felt weird, and I had to swallow twice before I could continue. I didn’t seem to want to tell her that we didn’t have a real relationship. “That was a misprint that needs to be retracted.”

“A misprint? Are you sure about that? Well, in that case, the announcement must be coming soon. Senator Silverton, you’re so lucky to have the affection of our beloved Delphi. No one in the world is sweeter and more charmingly simple than our precious girl.”

My wolf was starting to growl in the back of my mind. She made me sound like a child, a doll, or one of those tiny dogs that wanted to rip out your throat. I didn’t like telling her that I wasn’t engaged. I didn’t like the light in her eyes as she looked at him, knowing he was available. My beast wanted to take her permanently out of the equation as viciously as possible.

I gave her my sweetest smile. “Excuse me, Forsythia, but we were going to dance.” I pulled Cross away, noticing Leticia down the promenade, speaking animatedly in her flamingo mask. She kept taking it off to peer at the man she was with. Was that the mayor or someone dressed up like a butterfly? Did she really have ties to the mob?

A path on the left led to the African display. I pulled Cross into the shadows away from the party, veering around a couple who had come there for some privacy. Making out. How awkward to do that in masks.

I took a deep breath and Cross’s scent was everywhere, hyacinths and wind through the woods with an undertone of spicy carnations. Once we were far enough on the path to have complete privacy, I turned and looked up at him. Those eyes. So soulful and beautiful. He was so perfect. And he’d said that he loved me. After I’d staked him in his chair. Clearly, his confession had been part of the spell.

Oh.

Suddenly, the night didn't seem so gloriously magical anymore. Of course it had been part of the spell that made me lose control and try to kill him. That's why he'd let me.

I cleared my throat. It was time to stop feeling disappointed that Cross didn't love me. What would I do with the love of some fancy lord heir of the night court? Try to kill him. Obviously.

"You think I was under a fear spell? And you think it's connected to my beast coming out at Bram's wedding? That makes a deplorable amount of sense. How would you set up such a spell? Would you need physical contact with me, because if so, I can tell you exactly how many people touched me."

He frowned slightly. "Physical contact could work, but really, you'd just need to set up the spell somewhere a person was walking through."

"Like a trap spell?" Why couldn't it be as simple as counting the people who touched me?

He nodded soberly. "Yes, but you couldn't have been infected by someone who wasn't there. Someone had to infect you at that party."

I stared into those dark, mystical eyes and ached for him to kiss me and make me forget about everything else. I didn't want to think about all that negativity. Someone at the school for light creatures had infected me, a person with gnome blood? Who could be so cruel? "Right. And someone would have had to know where I'd be to set a trap spell. I haven't been many places since we got back, just your pool house and Zephin Clay's office. The suspect had to be someone who wants you dead, and wants to reveal my beast publicly. What would anyone get out of ruining my life?"

He shook his head slightly. "I can't imagine anyone not adoring you. Unless they wanted you to go completely mad at the wedding and infect and kill your family and

friends. That would get attention nationwide. You lost control after studying for months. If that spell had taken you before your training..."

I shivered, and it wasn't because he was so otherworldly gorgeous. At least not all because of that. He really was so pretty, though. "Thank goodness I'm not very good at being an assassin. You were researching that mysterious potion at school, right? Who were your suspects then?"

"Everyone was a suspect. I never made a great deal of progress on the case. In the end, I started to think it's tied to Lynx."

"What about Loren? She's an investigative reporter, but she's also the one with my sweet kitty, the one whose face was on the body."

"She's certainly involved, but whether it's because she's searching for the truth, or whether she's involved in the plot, I can't say. What do you know about her?"

I frowned, trying to dredge up any useful memories that would help me understand her secret nature. After a few seconds of that, I shook my head. "I only know her as a driven reporter who will do anything to uncover the truth. That's the sum total of her personality. That's not very helpful, is it? She did go to my school, though. I don't remember her because she was older. I don't think we were there at the same time."

"But she may have come back for the party."

"I guess so. Who else is a suspect? It has to be someone who's lived in Singsong City for at least a decade, someone I know, and someone who hates you and gnomes."

"Who hates gnomes?"

"Manny?"

He gave me an amused look. “Manny adores gnomes. He wants to cuddle them to death.”

“Ah. Ogres love gnome jam. What about Ridley? How was he involved with those missing girls? What about Zephin Clay? He was there all three times...” I winced. “That’s too big a coincidence for it not to be him, isn’t it?”

“I would say it’s too obvious. If Clay was going to do something diabolical, he wouldn’t stand there waiting for people to notice him holding the bag. He’d be as far from guilty looking as possible.”

I wrinkled my nose at him. “Fine. Who do you think is the beast?”

He shook his head. “If I knew, it would be taken care of.” Of course it would be.

I put my hand on his arm. “What about the idea of using me as bait?”

“No.”

I moved closer to him so I could frown up at him more effectively. “I’m very capable.”

He slid his hands over my lower back, pulling me against him as he bowed his head so I didn’t have to crane my neck. “Three months isn’t long enough to give you adequate training against this beast.”

I sighed heavily. “So we’re supposed to just wait for something bad to happen? Again? The next time, maybe I’ll target innocents.”

“Impossible. That sort of spell can only work with what they have. Your hatred for me was enough to turn you to violence, but you wouldn’t ever harm anyone else.”

I gripped his arms and sighed heavily. I didn't want to apologize for trying to kill him. It just seemed like words were too small to cover the depths of my horrific actions. Still, I wasn't going to wait fifteen years like he had. "I'm so sorry that I hurt you, tried to kill you, caused so much damage. I'm going to look at apartments tomorrow so you don't have to worry about me, but I think your apology helped with the anger. It seems entirely replaced by shame and horror." I winced and wanted to bury my head in his chest.

He smiled as the moon shone over his face, making him glow with otherworldly magnificence. "It did hurt more than I expected when you finally stabbed me in the back, but it was quickly displaced by the comfort and happiness you gave me while you healed me. I'm not sure healing should be so pleasant. I'm tempted to have life-or-death situations regularly so I can enjoy your sweet ministrations." His voice was a low rumble at the end that made my skin prickle.

I smacked his chest. "Don't you dare! I think it was actually the spell messing with your mind. That's why you said all those ridiculous things about a night elf's love being poison." Also about loving me, but I was trying not to think about that.

His eyes were so focused on me, I felt like he was watching each breath I inhaled and exhaled, capturing the vapor tendrils of my soul. "Miss Era, I wasn't under a spell. I spoke the truth as I saw it. A night elf's love is typically destructive. That's why I'm here instead of elfland, running away from my guilt, brought on by love. You are loved by me quite emphatically and have been from almost the first moment I saw you. If you wish to pretend otherwise, I won't speak of it again, but if my love could ever be useful to you, it's yours."

I stared at him while my heart lurched precipitously in my chest. "Love? Since the first moment you saw me?"

His eyes were dark pools of mystery as he slowly nodded. I saw the truth, the

certainty in his eyes. He absolutely thought that he'd loved me from that first time he saw me fixing a little tree.

"Irrational, mad love would make it difficult to kill someone who clearly wasn't going to survive transitioning. You kept me alive because you couldn't help yourself." I spoke slowly, feeling the words, the weight of the truth of them. It hadn't ever made sense, why someone would prolong the pain from what should have taken a day or two and stretched it out to months, but it wasn't because he hated me or liked to watch people suffer, but because he wasn't capable of thinking rationally around me. Love at first sight wasn't an elf thing. They didn't have true mates the way wolves did. He'd been under a spell for a long time, and it had successfully gotten him to forget about his undercover assignment, distracted him from looking into Lynx, and he'd put off really investigating the beast because he thought it might be me.

I sighed heavily as I looked up at the most beautiful elf in the world whose heart had been stolen and given to me, a gnome-elf, who they'd promptly turned into a werewolf, because that first combo wasn't devastating enough.

He frowned slowly, brows lowering over those lovely eyes. "You shouldn't pity me."

I couldn't help it. Poor guy had been tortured by unrequited miserable love for ages. I threw myself into him, squeezing him in the tightest hug I could manage.

He hesitated for a breath and then wrapped me against him, snuggling me like someone desperate for affection. Poor Cross, desperate for affection from a monster like me. And he'd been under this spell for years? How had he not stalked me after he let me out of his cage? That must have nearly killed him to let me wander the earth without him, not knowing if I was alive or dead after he worked so hard to help me transition.

It explained so much, like why he'd taken one look at me on his doorstep and offered me a place to stay without asking for any rent. And why he'd brought all those super powerful creatures to back him up so he could be my protector. And why he'd spent months being there for me, giving me his strength and magic without me having to ask, without asking for anything in return while he trained me.

Back home, how he'd struggled when dancing with me, trying to maintain a respectful distance when he was finally given permission via his role of suitor to get much closer. How do you play a part you aren't playing?

I squeezed him tighter, accidentally summoning my beast until his ribs creaked. Poor Cross, cursed to love someone who hated him. Did I still hate him? How could I hate someone who'd read to me while he let me kill him? He couldn't help torture me to keep me alive. He'd suffered right there with me, maybe more, since his love bespelled soul would hurt even more out of empathy.

"Don't worry, Cross. It's going to be okay," I murmured, snuggling into him. He smelled so good. Could I take advantage of his weakness for me? No. Maybe a little, but I wasn't going to hurt him worse than he already suffered.

I'd take care of this. He couldn't pursue justice while he was tangled in these feelings for me. He couldn't use me as bait. He couldn't focus on hunting down the monster when love was the worst monster of all. How awful to be compelled to love against your will. That was much worse than being compelled to live through a world of pain. I needed to step up and get to the bottom of things once and for all. No more Mr. Nice Gnome. Or Mrs. Nice Gnome. He'd probably marry me if I told him to. For real. He'd probably do anything for me that didn't involve me dying. I had to break his curse and find the monster who had left a trail of dead girls behind before they struck again. The monster wanted to destroy Cross in absolutely every way. I wasn't going to let that happen. Not anymore.

Chapter Twenty

“M r. Clay, your party is exquisite,” I said, smiling up at the handsome elf who was my number one suspect.

He gave me a luminous smile of his own. “You are exquisite, Miss Era. Are we back to formalities?”

I sighed heavily and put my hand on his arm. “It seems necessary after your reporter announced that I’m engaged to the senator. We’re trying to figure out how to get disentangled without it causing havoc to either of our careers. You didn’t give the order, did you?”

He covered his hand and frowned down at me. “I did not.”

“Do you know who did?”

“I could look into it.”

I smiled brightly, even though that didn’t tell me anything useful. Maybe he had been the one who gave the order. Elves didn’t like to lie outright, but if he was a murderous monster... “I’d appreciate that. It has introduced a number of problems. My mother is desperate for me to settle down. How am I going to break the news to her that it was all a mistake? She won’t believe me. She’s so desperate to have grandchildren, so she’ll believe what she wants to believe.”

He blinked twice at this oversharing. “I’m sorry that you’re put in such an

uncomfortable position.”

“Yes, well, it is unfortunate. Will you dance with me? I’ve been telling everyone I see that I’m not engaged, but perhaps seeing me with someone else will help. Or maybe it’ll make things worse. I don’t know. What do you think I should do?” I looked up at him with my warm, sweet, irresistible eyes, begging him to save me.

He bowed. “It would be my pleasure, Miss Era.”

He swept me into a dance, holding my waist firmly while I gripped his shoulder and followed his lead. I wove my gnome magic with as much subtlety as possible. I tried not to notice Cross standing on the edge of the crowd holding two cups of punch I’d sent him to retrieve before hunting down Zephin Clay. Cross didn’t look like he cared that I was dancing with someone else. He was so incredibly good at playing the pleasant, indifferent elf, but all that time, he’d been cursed to love me so foolishly. Poor Cross.

“How long have you been in Singsong City?” I asked, looking up at Clay shyly.

He gave me a soft smile. The gnome was getting its grip on him, softening him up. “I established a base here a century ago, but only recently made it my main residence. Perhaps I felt the need to keep an eye on my good friend.” He winked at me.

Hm. Maybe I was using too much gnome magic. I didn’t want him to actually try to cuddle me. I giggled and felt slightly hysterical. I did not want to play this game with my old family friend. But he was so suspicious. “I’m flattered. How long have you known Nanette? The office was well-established by the time I came to work here.”

“Well, she was one of the first graduates of Songbird Academy, my school, so I suppose it’s been fifty years, give or take.”

“Really? That’s so interesting. Do you make a point of hiring graduates of your school?” Also, I’d had no idea it was his school. He hadn’t meant to make that public knowledge. The gnome magic was turning him into putty in my tiny hands.

He gave me another smile that was almost unnervingly sweet. “Of course. You should have graduated. Your magic was so lovely. It’s a pity you let your trauma hold you back. Not that it isn’t understandable, but should you ever choose to return...”

“Thank you for the offer. You’re so generous.” I batted my lashes at him. “Was Loren there much earlier than me?”

“Not much. She was about your age. Smart girl, but personally can be a bit aggressive.”

I giggled and swatted his arm. “You mean she was chasing you? I can’t blame her. You’re so handsome and intelligent. It doesn’t hurt that you’re also a media mogul. Is that what she wanted to talk to you about at the sushi restaurant?”

He frowned slightly, almost like he was struggling against a compulsion. “She’s been treading in dangerous paths. I’m glad you’ve chosen a more tranquil course for the sake of your safety.”

“Well, Loren always has been driven to find the most salacious copy she can dig up. The more blood and danger, the better. I admire her for that. So, she’s been looking into dangerous people? Oh! The Ridley case. Was there more to that than there seemed? Why would she need to talk to you about that? Do you have a collection of secret files that you don’t release?” I laughed like that was a ridiculous joke, but honestly, what kind of information couldn’t a media mogul who’d been around for centuries dig up on people? Oh, the power to control what became public knowledge. He could announce lies as easily as truth. Is that how he amassed so much power, building up on fear and possibly blackmail? How exactly was he connected to Letitia

Marin and her mob family?

His eyes narrowed as he broke the bands of gnome compulsion and gave me a stiff smile. “You’re sounding more like an investigative journalist than a society reporter.”

I laughed and then sighed. “Maybe it’s time for me to shift careers. Getting tangled up with the senator has turned me into more of a celebrity than an anonymous note-taker. I wish I knew who told the reporter to make him my fiancé.”

“I’ll find out for you.”

I gazed up at him. “Really? Could you maybe make that call right now?” I put all the adorable pleading in my gnome heart in that look.

He chuckled and then shook his head slightly before he led us to the edge of the dancing, opposite where Cross waited with my punch. He released his hold on me, took out his phone, and made a call.

After a brief moment, they answered. The voice was the reporter’s from the night before.

“Rose, this is Zephin Clay. I’m afraid you made an error with Senator Silverton’s story. They’re not engaged. Who authorized you to announce their engagement?” He frowned for a moment before nodding. “The producer? Ah. Thank you. You may be required to give a retraction. I’ll keep you updated.”

He hung up and raised a brow at me. “Someone wanted that particular information planted. Now I’m curious who would go to so much trouble to push your relationship.” He made another call that took slightly longer to answer.

“Yes, good evening. Who persuaded you to push the Senator’s engagement to Miss

Era?" His voice was clipped, short, showing extra aggression as he dealt with whoever on the line needed sternness.

He raised a brow at me and his expression softened slightly. "I see. Thank you." He hung up and shook his head before he took my hand and turned us to look at the swathe of guests there. He stopped when I was facing a group that included Forsythia and Leticia as well as the Mayor.

"Forsythia is using her connections to promote your relationship with the senator. I'd thought she fancied him for herself. Now I'm intrigued."

"Forsythia?" I stared at my old friend, laughing at something Leticia said then gesturing with her elegant hand that held her champagne glass without spilling a drop. "She went to Songbird Academy with me." My heart sank. She'd always been slightly arrogant, looking down on me, but I never would have thought that she'd turn me into a monster and try to ruin my life.

"That's right. The three of you were quite close. What was the other girl's name? She's so hard to remember." He frowned and then his expression smoothed. "I'm sure Miss Mantle meant well. She's always been so protective of you, making sure you had entrance to all the best parties in spite of your own reticence to push boundaries. Your father's name would open many doors with the old families if you cared to use it. Instead it's Era, instead of Erasmus. I suppose you're to be commended for wishing to succeed on your own merits."

"Yes. I'm definitely succeeding on my own merits, not relying on my good friends at all." I put a hand on his arm and gave him a warm smile. "I'm going to go thank Forsythia. I never knew before how invested she is in my success. I'll have to forgive her for announcing my engagement when she only cares about my well-being. Thank you for the dance and for your continuous support." I squeezed his arm and then drifted through the crowd like an elf princess who didn't have a specific goal in mind.

I stopped abruptly when I saw Loren on the edge of the crowd. She didn't come to social gatherings like this, but here she was, looking suspicious. I'd have to confront her later. I continued towards Forsythia, aware of Cross shadowing me on the other side of the dancers. We'd probably run into each other where Forsythia was standing. He was moving with the same indifferent grace I was striving for, but he took the time to be a charming senator to everyone he passed. He was so good at playing the part. How did he feel about all the people congratulating him about his engagement? It must make his heart ache, but he'd never show it. If Forsythia had put a love spell on him, I'd never forgive her. It was far crueler than turning me into a monster, although that had been attempted murder. With my gnome blood, infection was death. How could my oldest friend have done that to me? Not that we were close—elves weren't as a rule—but still. And what about... I couldn't remember the other girl's name. Was that another spell? Was anything sacred?

I walked faster, still smiling and nodding at everyone, even Shrimp guy who gave me an angry look before sniffing and returned his focus a woman in a crow mask and a black feathery cape. Lucky lady. I finally made it to Forsythia a few steps ahead of Cross.

I grabbed her arm and tugged her to the side, where a path led into the jungle display. "Forsythia, I have to talk to you. You'll never believe what Clay told me."

She held back for a moment before she flinched deep down and smiled, letting her little friend lead her into the shadowy darkness before Cross could interfere. I glanced back at him to see the smoldering in his eyes. It was less romantic, more, 'I'm going to kill you if you get yourself hurt.' My stomach flopped at the look. If only he loved me without a spell. Then again, we'd never fit together.

"The senator doesn't like you running away from him. He particularly dislikes you dancing with Mr. Clay," she said the second we were safely in the shadows.

“No, he doesn’t like it,” I agreed, turning to study her. She looked back at me, polite disinterest in every line of her face. She smelled nervous, though. Unhappy. I wove some gnome magic, not right there, but around us, a distinct unease that would make people avoid this area. Uncoziness. Subtle, but effective.

“Why did you announce my engagement to the senator?”

She shrugged. “I want my friend to be happy.”

“You were trying to introduce us at Leticia’s garden party. Why?”

“Like I said,” she began with a bored quality to her voice. “I want my friend to be happy.”

I put my hands on my hips while I focused on the elf, on the singing of the night and the stars past the shadows of the night garden. There was so much life, so many different songs to sing. It took hardly any effort at all to spread vines on the ground behind her. “Thank you. I appreciate your concern. What was the name of the girl in our group at school? I always forget.”

She flinched. Guilt. “She was like that, forgettable. What was her name?”

“Do you know what happened to her?”

She got a haunted look, only for a moment before it vanished. “No.”

“You kept track of me, but not her. Why is that?” I took a step closer to her, hanging onto my smile with difficulty.

She patted my head. “Delphi, you’re so cute when you try to be a serious reporter. It doesn’t suit you, though. Leave that to Loren, and other aggressive people.” She

started to turn away, but I called the vines and they leapt to obey, wrapping her in a blink and then growing solidly so she couldn't so much as shift.

I smiled at her. "I'm feeling a bit aggressive. You were there at the party the night I got infected."

She gasped and struggled against the vines that wrapped around her, pulling at her delicate costume and feathers. "What's going on? Is this you? You're capable of controlling this much of life? I don't believe it. It must be the senator." She yanked against a tendril and I had it twine around her upper arm, pulling her tight against the massive group of vines I'd collected behind her.

"I was infected with something that made me extra strong and powerful, the elf, the gnome, and..." I swallowed. "The wolf," I finally spat out.

She flinched again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You helped me establish myself here in Singsong City. You always had contempt for me, but you made an effort to make sure I succeeded. But why? Were you just watching your little experiment? I know about Lynx."

She inhaled sharply. Ah. She also knew about Lynx. "Stay away from them."

"Them?" I laughed. "You expect me to believe that you're not involved? You were there in the beginning. What I don't understand is why you'd put a love spell on the elf. That was incredibly cruel."

She looked away, focusing on something I couldn't see. She returned her attention to me, and her expression was openly astonished. "No one's coming to save me. What did you do?"

I sighed heavily. “That’s not the question, Forsythia. It’s what did you do? Hm? And why?”

She raised herself as tall as she could in the embrace of the vines and said stiffly, “It was an accident. I was simply checking on the elf you had such a blinding crush on, because that wasn’t like you, and no one else gets to mess with my friends. I was right, too. He was a spy, there to investigate some of the science labs. I tracked him with a subtle spell and then went later to see what was so interesting to him.”

“And...” I urged, as she hesitated.

She looked down at the vines that bound her so thoroughly. “I don’t suppose you’re nearly as defenseless as you used to be. Fine, I’ll tell you. I was in the lab, and I heard people talking about you, like you were a cute little experiment. He was going to use you for some big project. He also talked about another potion that was supposed to make you stronger, smarter, faster, more capable. He specifically said that it wasn’t for you, because your soft sweetness was to be protected and nurtured. I was crouched in that bottom cabinet for two hours until they finally left and I was able to sneak out. Can you imagine me, Forsythia Mantle in such a shocking position?” She gave me a look like I’d falsely accused her of something so ridiculous. I really couldn’t imagine my elegant and appropriate friend stuffed in a cupboard, eavesdropping on someone else.

I frowned, trying to look tough. “How was that an accident? And why did you put a love spell on the elf?”

She sniffed delicately. “I never put any spell on him. You did that all on your own with your charm and sweetness that came out in your song. I watched his face change as you sang until he was looking at you like you were the only creature in the universe. I didn’t like that. You have no idea how many times I’ve had to put an end to men who think that you’re soft, sweet, defenseless Delphi, who clearly can’t say

no. He wasn't like the others. He had more focus, more reserve, more elf blood than all the rest of them. Confident, too, when you were so absolutely not. Could you blame me for wanting to protect you?"

"You're trying to not tell me about the accident. No one's coming, and you aren't going anywhere until you do." I frowned at her and fed the gnomish discontent that kept anyone from approaching. She had several people she was summoning, but I kept them back. They were society people that I wouldn't have pegged as her special friends, but there was clearly a lot I didn't know about proper Forsythia.

She pursed her lips. "Fine. I gave all three of us the potion that was supposed to make us stronger, etc. What I didn't know was that it was mixed with various kinds of infernal creature DNA, such as whatever it was in it that killed Elodie." She winced and her face fell. "I wove a spell to make everyone forget her. You too, but then you turned up two years later in that horrible werewolf den. I was sick, but since I'm just an elf, and apparently infernal DNA doesn't break down my molecular structure, I came out of it none the worse for the wear."

"Seriously? You killed all those women!"

She gave me a disdainful look. "Nonsense. The only person I killed was Elodie, and it was an accident. I don't know what you're talking about, all these women. As if I'd ever stoop to hurting someone intentionally."

"But what about Ridley and the missing women?"

She gave me an impatient look. "I thought you knew about Lynx."

"You're saying that you aren't part of..."

"There you are," Loren said, walking through the shadows like the gnome magic

wasn't there. "Delphi, what are you doing? Did you tie up Forsythia? I should take a picture of that. It's been a long time since I've seen something that made me smile." Her smile was genuine, bright, and very, very wide.

"Loren. What are you doing here?" I asked, taking a step back, glancing at Forsythia who managed to look terribly bored, even bound by vines.

Forsythia said, "You remember Loren, always getting involved in every questionable activity imaginable. She was a science major in school. Isn't it interesting that she switched to working as a reporter for Zephin Clay a few years after she graduated? That was around the same time you started working for him. Such an interesting change of interests."

Loren's smile grew wider somehow. "Forsythia, I should thank you. Some considered experimenting an untried serum on healthy patients unethical. You gave us three test subjects to study, one clearly a marked failure, but two on a spectrum of successes. With your work, I was able to take part in the final trial."

I gasped and turned to face my fellow reporter. "You took part in an experimental trial willingly? To test the same serum that destroyed me?"

She gestured at Forsythia and my vines carelessly. "Destroyed? Improved. Vastly improved. Not that you're particularly bright, Delphi, but you are oh so powerful. He'll be so disappointed that your time has come to an end. He did enjoy watching you progress."

He? There'd been a 'he' in the lab Forsythia had mentioned. What he could there be from my college days? Clay's description matched the 'boyfriend' who visited Loren's house.

I smiled at Loren. "You're the beast. You're the one who killed all those women and

framed Ridley for it. That's why you killed him, to wrap up any loose ends. Why did you kill them? Was it for your experiments, or did you lose control to your monster?" I subtly loosened the vines from Forsythia, hoping that she could get away before the real terror came out.

Loren's face bulged and flexed before going back to her normal dimensions. "I never lose control."

She'd just basically lost control, so yeah.

"Of course you don't. Why did you spell me to lose control at my brother's wedding? How did you do it?"

Her lip curled in contempt. "He's never seen your beast. He needed to know how disgusting you were. How could he want you when I sacrificed so much for his cause?"

"He who? Are we talking about our boss's boss, Zephin Clay? You wanted him to see me as a monster, like he saw you?" That clinched it. Loren was completely nuts.

She snarled at me. "I'm the perfect culmination of all those studies, but he said that it was over, that it wasn't worth the risk, that it wasn't ethical. He watched me to make sure I didn't become a problem. You were this precious jewel to him, but I was a problem? You were the problem, always pretending to be soft and helpless while you tangled men in your coils!"

Forsythia snorted. "Yes, clearly, the person who leaves a trail of dead bodies couldn't possibly be the problem. Be a bit more self-aware, if you don't mind."

Loren bared her teeth at her, long fangs descending for a moment before she pushed them back.

“But I still don’t understand how you put that reveal spell on me at Bram’s wedding.”

Loren spat out, “I set it in the church doorway. It was simple enough, targeting your essence like I did in Zephin’s office. I knew you’d go back to him, even after you stole the Senator’s heart.”

“Clay is her boss,” Forsythia pointed out. “Not that he isn’t disturbingly obsessed with Delphi, but she’s never led him on.”

I shook my head, because the idea of me and Zephin was so bizarre. “Why did you set a spell to make me try to kill the Senator?”

Loren raised her brows, apparently surprised. “I didn’t. It was supposed to make you afraid, to make you run, to get you away from here and never come back. But you tried to kill him instead? Your fear turned to violence?” She frowned. “That makes me almost like you.”

Forsythia snorted. “It would. You’re clearly unhinged.”

“Forsythia,” I hissed at her before turning a reassuring smile on Loren. “I’ve always admired your courage and unflinching determination to uncover whatever’s hidden. Why was your face on the body of that missing girl? Why did you want me to find it?”

Loren smiled, slow and evil. “You weren’t the one who was meant to find it. That was me. It was a warning from them.”

“Lynx,” I breathed.

Distant screams filled the air, sending chills down my spine, particularly when Loren kept smiling, like the screams were expected.

“What’s that?” Forsythia snapped, looking in the direction of the screams.

“A few more successful experiments that Lynx doesn’t approve of,” Loren said, snapping her fingers. “They’ll take care of you nicely. No more adorable Delphi or fabulous Forsythia.”

Glowing eyes suddenly surrounded her in the shifting shadows, then the glint of serrated teeth and a ripple of dark fur.

I backed up until I was almost on top of Forsythia. “What are you doing?” I demanded of Loren. “Is this supposed to be a random wild animal attack? No one’s going to believe it.”

“Of course they will. Everyone always believes what the media tells them, except for a few crazy conspiracy theorists, but they don’t matter. If they get too bothersome, it’s not difficult to erase their memory, like Forsythia did to poor Elodie. Not that I have that skill. Mine is communing with animals. My pets.”

Loren snapped her fingers and a rush of beasts came from the trees. None of them were very identifiable since they were a terrifying blend of animal and infernal. There was creepy intelligence in their eyes as they analyzed their prey and spread out to take us down more securely. Maybe that was Loren in their heads. Controlling that many animals, after she’d turned them into monsters, was pretty impressive.

I gestured my hand and a row of vines blocked their attack as well as Loren. I turned and ripped the vines off Forsythia while she studied me expressionlessly until she was free.

“How long do you think vines will keep them out?”

“They have thorns. Let’s go!” I grabbed her hand and ran towards the wall of bushes

behind us. Once we pressed through them, we came out in a clearing above an animal pen, with a railing to keep anyone from falling in.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Forsythia said, frowning at me in her askew costume.

I climbed the rail and shrugged at her. “If you could make Loren forget about us, that would be helpful.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “Maybe I can. I’ll need to be close enough to her to work on her while her beasts are chasing you. This platform has some excellent shadows.” She gave me a serene smile and then flickered and became unnoticeable, practically invisible. That’s how she’d followed Cross and gotten into the lab without anyone noticing. Tricky.

I nodded at her and then the beasts broke through the vines and poured into the clearing with me.

I leapt off the rail, shifting into my beast as I went, so I landed the twenty feet drop without killing myself. I shook it off and then turned to swipe at the first beast who followed me over the rail. It was a raccoon with a pig snout and a spiked tail. Weirdly cute.

I didn’t want to hurt it. I dove out of the way and then swiped it back, sending it tumbling over with a squeal of pain. Poor thing. Three more creatures came over the edge, falling on me with teeth and claws. I was bigger, but their teeth were very sharp, and they didn’t know they should run away from me. I didn’t want to hurt any of them. It wasn’t their fault that Loren was a psycho.

Seven more came over, then a dozen after that, until I was buried in a mass of fur and claws. Ow, ow, ow! A roar echoed through the night, and then the creatures scattered. I sat up and found an enormous gray beast in front of me, arched back, long tail

sticking out, fur puffed up like a giant, nine-foot fluff ball.

I blinked at it while my mind spun. It looked like an oversize kitten, but how was that possible?

It leapt and clawed exactly how Lynx went after a ball of yarn, shredding bellies before lunging at another target. Okay. The kitten was more special than I expected. Also surprisingly bloodthirsty.

Loren sprang over the rail, but shifted mid-leap, shredding her sensible suit and landing heavy. Heavy was an understatement. She was twelve feet tall and proportionally just that huge.

My beast was such a delicate, cute, adorable creature compared to this molting monster. Loren's beast didn't smell great, either. She was as vicious a beast as she'd been a reporter, and I was a society journalist who avoided conflict. Except when I hunted down evil werewolves. And except when I staked Cross in the library. My beast wasn't as mighty as hers, but I had something she'd never have. Coziness in the face of decimation.

At least I'd die happy.

Except that Cross was in love with me and would be miserable without me. Where was he? Had something happened to him while I was struggling in the bushes?

My beast, my gnome, and my elf strained my senses, but I couldn't hear anything other than distant screams. Was he hurt?

I dove out of the way of Lo-beast's claws, following the exact training Harold had drilled into me every day for four hours for months. Were there any useful seeds I could use? There was an oak tree on the other side of the enclosure, old, elegant,

thirty feet above, but it dropped a lot of leaves and seeds on this side of the fence.

I rolled between the Lo-beast's legs and slashed her right flank before leaping to the side. I made my way in the general direction of the oak, stretching out my song to those beautiful acorns, searching for something with optimal viability.

I barely got out of the way when Loren jumped on me, but her claws brushed my side, barely anything, but those claws were like shovels heaving my blood and flesh out of me. I stumbled to the side and summoned gnomish healing while stretching the elven growing, sinking roots deep, deep, deep, while a tiny sapling shot up. How far was I from that?

"You're awesome," I told myself, because I needed some encouragement.

She gave this horrific laugh/screech that made my beast shiver along with all the rest of me. "I am the culmination of every study done to improve humanity." She snarled, baring her teeth. "He doesn't understand. He thinks that the beast is an unfortunate side-effect, not a beautiful fulfillment of true potential."

I stared up at the monster with absolutely no beauty I could see. "Is that why he sent you away from the office, to hide your beast?"

Her rough growl was worse than nails on a chalkboard. "I had to check to make sure Ridley didn't leave any evidence behind in Golden City, proving his innocence. He didn't." Enormous trails of drool hung from her gleaming teeth. She slurped with her tongue, dragging it all back behind her chompers.

Shudder. "You're the one who left evidence in your apartment. I found the kitten with the constellation on the collar."

She snarled and swiped at me. "He's mine! You stole my creature! I'll never forgive

you for turning her against me!”

She was so fast, and so big. I blocked, but only ended with shredded arms. I stumbled back into the corner of the enclosure, tumbling down the hill to the bottom into the pile of leaves.

My baby tree wasn't big enough to contain that monster.

She crouched on top of the hill, eyes gleaming, ready to pounce.

An enormous ball of fluff hit her from the side, knocking her down and out of sight. I carefully pulled myself upright, sending a fresh wave of bleeding out of my many wounds. Okay then. I'd just sit this one out. My wolf drained out of me, leaving me a cold, shivering elf-gnome. Also naked. Somewhere not too far distant was a party filled with screaming socialites. If any of them saw me like this, I'd wish I was dead. The world grew bleary until I forgot what I was doing. The tree. Right. I focused on the roots, summoning them closer as my blood soaked the ground. My blood would be great if I were a dark sorcerer. Then again, this experimental serum that had turned me into a beast probably had some dark sorcerer in there. Pity I had no idea how dark sorcerers used blood to feed their spells.

I started singing, soft at first, but louder as the night responded, wrapping around me with an ominous undertone that matched my beast and part of my elf that was angry that Cross might be killed by someone else. She was seriously cold. Is that how my dad was before he fell under my mother's gnome spells? Also, how was it possible that Cross wasn't spelled into love for me? That made no sense for him to fall in love with my song without some kind of external push.

Where was he? I sang louder, calling him to me, but also feeding the soil my blood and pain. The roots stirred, growing in strength until with a shriek a tiny ball of fluff came flying through the air to land in the pile of leaves beside me.

The kitten twitched and then lay still. What kind of monster kills kittens? I surged to my feet, my anger and horror fifty times greater than the time Ridley marked my cashmere. I screamed as Lo-beast came flying off the hill towards me. I threw my hands together, and the tree shadowed me, clapping the enormous beast in its branches, pulling it into its core. The beast clawed and snapped, but the oak was alive, angry, and more monster than plant.

I didn't need to control it, not when I'd fed it my anger and my purpose. The tree grew around her, bark coating the fur, branches bursting through her body, coming out in a rush of blood-soaked leaves. The oak loved her blood and reveled in it, groaning and cracking as it drained her life and became a true monster tree, thirty feet, forty, fifty... until I couldn't look up that high anymore.

I searched the dried leaves until I found the limp body of my sweet kitten. I snuggled her against my chest while my heart beat precariously. I'd lost too much blood to stand without weaving. Still, I'd heal quickly, and I needed to get Lynx help.

"Lynx, my precious, you are so brave and cute! What kind of snacks should we get when we leave here? What about sushi?"

I swear, she twitched at the mention of it. I held her tight while I walked on my unsteady legs up the hill through the thick leaves. The main pad had a deep ditch all around that side so whatever was in here couldn't climb up and out. Maybe I could get zoo personnel to bring a ladder. No, they were probably busy with the distant screaming, although that had faded to a low moaning.

"Where are you going?" Forsythia hissed at me.

I paused and looked towards the rail where she stood, mangled peacock feathers dangling down over her right shoulder. "Do you have a ladder?" I whispered back. Why were we whispering when the beast's snarls and the tree's groans and snapping

were still so loud?

She gestured me back the way I'd come, throwing a look towards the far end of the enclosure. "It's woken up, and it's coming."

I stared at her blankly and then I looked into the shadows and heard a growl and a snort. Oh. The enclosure's resident beast had come out to play. It wasn't going to eat Lynx, and I didn't have enough strength to put up a fight, not to mention that it wouldn't be fair to attack an animal in its own home.

I turned and slid back down the hill towards the enormous tree, only a few of the Lo-beast's limbs sticking out while the trunk ran with her blood.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Tell the tree to grow a limb to take you out!" she called.

"Right. Tree," I said, leaning a hand against the slick wood. "Would you please grow a branch for me that can take me away from the animal? It's not the enemy."

The tree took a moment to puzzle out something not being an enemy to destroy and drink their blood before I felt its assent and then a branch snaked around my waist and the next moment I was in the air, high, high, until I was high enough to see the promenade and the bright lights. I also saw chains of darkness threaded with white electricity. Cross was in those shadows. Hopefully not dead. The tree rotated and then the branch lowered me down to the path. Once it released me, I fell to my knees, still clutching Lynx whose little belly was rising and falling rapidly. Good. Not dead.

"Are you okay?" Forsythia demanded, grabbing me around the waist and pulling me to my feet. "I withdraw the question. We need to get you out of here. You can't look like a freshly shifted werewolf at a party like this. We'll take you out the back and I'll

call some friends.”

I shook my head. “I have to see Cross. Something bad is going on.”

“Of course it is, or he would have come to rescue you. There had to be a distraction, or your true love wouldn’t have let you take care of yourself. I’m irritated that you killed her after I bothered putting all those spells in place to make her forget us. I hate wasted effort. Also, she was our link to the secret science cult. Oh well. At least this way she’s safely dead. How long do you think she’s going to scream? It’s really disturbing.” She shivered and pulled me towards the shadows away from the party.

I dug my feet in. “I’m not leaving him.”

She scowled at me. “Look at you! What do you think you can do for him other than wreck his reputation? And what will Zephin Clay think? He cares more about appearances than anyone. He’s going to fire you. You’ve hidden your beast this long, don’t stop now, or talk about wasted effort!”

I took a deep breath and summoned vines to grow up my legs, around my body, encasing me in a full-coverage bodysuit. “I look fine,” I said, smiling through my dizziness. “Sudden costume changes are completely normal.”

She gave me a flat look. “If you’re going out there, you’re on your own. I’m not ruining my reputation for nothing.”

I pulled her in a sudden hug.

She returned it with an intensity I didn’t expect. “Don’t make the senator hate you,” she whispered. “Pureblood elves are pure ego.”

“He can hate me if he wants, so long as he’s okay.”

She snorted and pulled away. “Our simple, sweet Delphi.”

“Our elegant, serene, Forsythia,” I returned with a fond smile. “I can’t believe that you hid in a cupboard.”

She made a face. “I can’t either. I really hated the way he talked about you, so perfectly weak and vulnerable for his purposes.”

“Who was he? Zephin Clay?”

She shrugged. “I have no proof. Honestly, I don’t want proof. He could destroy me without any effort, and as far as I can tell, he was the reason to Loren’s madness. Secret societies should stay secret if at all possible.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but I wasn’t an investigative reporter, particularly one who used my position to cover up my own crimes. The wind rustled the leaves above me and a dark haze filled the air as the night expanded.

“What’s that?” I asked, looking up at the spreading darkness.

“I would say that’s likely the heir Lord of the Night Court calling his true love.” She shivered and backed away from me. “Good luck with that monster, sweet Delphi.” She turned and ran, disappearing into the night.

Chapter Twenty-One

Cross was floating off the ground, wrapped in lines of pulsing darkness and light energy. His eyes were bright, blinding violet, with irises shaped like half moons. His dark hair streamed around him, whipping eerily around while he spread his arms, holding his subjects at his feet, prostrate, every one.

He did not look like a polite senator, but a tyrant, happy to drink the blood of his subjects.

I hesitated on the walkway of the promenade, the sloping lawn filled with cowering guests, while Cross hovered in the center, flickering like a bomb waiting to go off.

I looked around, because I couldn't look at Cross without burning my eyeballs. On the edge of the walkway were Max and a group of scared kids that he was growling at, low, a warning that they didn't want to anger the mighty ruler. The kids smelled like freshly turned wolves.

"So," Libby the Librarian said, slipping in next to me and linking my arm with hers. "Don't see that every day, do you?"

I turned to stare at her and then up at Cross, where he seemed to be gathering darkness and energy so he could explode and kill everyone. "No, he's usually a bit more relaxed than that. Can you stop him?"

She laughed, sounding a bit mad around the edges. "Sure. That's why I'm here. I apologize in advance for the indignity." She grabbed me and pressed a knife against

my throat. “I’m going to make you bleed, but only enough to get his attention. And then I’m going to run, and you’re going to faint and pretend like you’re helpless and need him to save you. Otherwise, he’ll come after me and rip out my spine. I’ve seen him do it. It’s very pretty, but I don’t think I’d be in a position to enjoy the effects. Ready?”

She sliced me across my shoulder and neck, deep enough for me to cry out. I’d lost enough blood tonight. I thought she was going to scratch me, not cut me deep!

Cross focused on me with those violet lasers. Wow! So much roiling destruction in such a pretty color.

“Gotta run!” Libby hissed, then knocked the back of my knees so I collapsed while she sprinted into the darkness. “Sorry about that! I’ll buy you sushi...” she called, but the rest of her words didn’t matter because Cross was above me, gazing down at me with infinite destruction in his eyes.

I swallowed hard as he gestured at me, raising me in the air until I landed in his arms. That felt so weird, but good when I finally ended up where I belonged.

I gulped and clung to Lynx, who was still unconscious. “What are you doing?” I whispered.

“I don’t want your pity,” he said in a cold, booming voice. “You are the one who deserves pity, being adored by a monster like me.” He was so loud, so clearly out of control in a very public space so everyone could see exactly what the head of the House of Mercy was made of. It wasn’t mercy.

I cleared my throat and clung to his broad shoulders. “Senator Silverton, you aren’t a monster. You’re just having a hard time...Um...with the sudden death of someone close to you.”

He cupped my face, so I had to gaze into those painfully bright eyes. They swallowed me entirely. The moon in his eyes burned every thought out of my head, leaving only awe, fear, and aching desire. I wanted him more than I'd wanted anything, even yarn.

"I bind you to me," he intoned, sending a wash of sensation down my left side. I felt like I was burning, also glowing, also melting, but not in an entirely painful way.

I shuddered and clung to him more tightly. "Does that mean you won't drop me? I hope so. I'm tired. I want to go home and sleep in your bed. I want Manny to take care of Lynx so she doesn't die. I want my mom to come visit and make cinnamon rolls. I want you to love me for real, not because of a spell or some magical force that compels you."

He blinked and his eyes were slightly less blinding. "You want to sleep in my bed?"

That's what he heard? I rolled my eyes and thumped his chest with my little fist. It didn't make a dent. "I promised Lynx sushi. Not tonight. I lost so much blood fighting the Lo-Beast."

He held me tight and then the world shifted and we were above his house, specifically over the balcony. He stepped on the railing and then on the deck, one smooth movement without a ripple of clumsiness.

The doors opened for him, creaking at the force of his will as he carried me inside his room. Flames in the fireplace sprang to life, the floors creaked, and the walls groaned. I gasped and tried to get down, but he didn't release me, not until he'd laid me on his bed. With a gesture from his elegant hand, the vines fled, leaving me naked for the second it took him to pull the blanket over me.

And with that, the darkness was gone, leaving me with a shocked elf who tried to blink the moons out of his eyes without any success.

“I’ll take Lynx to Manny,” he said, carefully scooping up the kitten in his strong hands before he turned and strode out, leaving me tucked in his bed without any clothing. My left side burned. I carefully pulled down the blanket to see glowing lines vining through my flesh exactly like his eyes had glowed in the shape of the moon. It looked like constellations and vines, growing together in a mess that ran from my shoulder, down my arm, body, hip, and leg, all the way to my pinky toe. I wiggled it and then pulled the dark blue blanket back up when the door opened and Cross was there with a medical kit and piles of bandages, still looking bewildered, like he’d just woken up from a very strange dream.

Was the spell broken? Had he stopped loving me? I hoped so, then I could try to make him fall in love with me for real.

“What happened?” I asked. That seemed like a safe question.

“That’s my question.” He sat on the edge of the bed, carefully pushing back the blankets so he could see my wounds. “Or it would be if I didn’t intimately know these claws. You fought the beast? What about the kitten? Did it kill Forsythia? Does she need medical assistance?”

“She’s the one who infected me, but it was an accident. I mean, she didn’t know that it would turn me into a monster and...” He didn’t need to know about Elodie. Forsythia couldn’t just make someone disappear. What about the girl’s family? It wasn’t good for my friend, either.

Cross and I tried not to notice how naked I was. He spoke slowly as he cleaned the gashes in my arms. Ouch. Weird that I had anything left of them after that beast was finished with me.

“Forsythia was the beast?”

“No, that was Loren. She had a whole menagerie of experimental helpers, but Lynx saved me from them.”

“Lynx...” He raised a brow. “The kitten was also part of the experiment?”

“Yeah. She likes me better than Loren, even though Loren was a fauna empath. Now you. What happened to turn you into that...”

He focused on my wounds instead of looking into my eyes, almost like he didn’t want me to see his glowing moon irises. “After you left with Forsythia, freshly infected children were released into the party. They turned feral and attacked the crowd, so I contained them until Max got there. Everything was under control until Zephin Clay came to ask me where you were. And then I heard you scream.” He frowned as he carefully finished bandaging that arm and then looked at me with deep concern in his eyes.

He hesitated and then peeled off his shirt, revealing a design down his right side that mirrored my left. “This happened. It’s an elven binding between houses. I’ve abandoned my house, and your father’s is completely wiped out, but somehow at some point, the two must have made an agreement between them that was fulfilled in us.”

I stared at him while my brain tried to parse those nonsensical words. “I screamed, and then an ancient house binding went under your skin? How does that make sense?”

He sighed heavily and started working on my other arm, the side with the binding. Every touch over those glowing markings was bone-deep pleasure, completely eclipsing the pain. Interesting. Also made it hard not to hyperventilate.

He said, “It doesn’t. Sense would be me tracking you down and quietly killing any

threat. Terrorizing the city and threatening to liquify it myself is not. Before the kids started biting guests, Zephin Clay asked me what I intended to do about your mother. Apparently, she'll be quite upset if she discovers that we aren't engaged. Bindings like we have," he said, gesturing towards the glowing constellations and vines on the right side of his incredibly beautiful chest and arm, "Are much more serious than a conventional marriage. I will die without you. Due to such circumstances, perhaps we should consider announcing our official engagement."

I stared at him and then sat up and threw a pillow. It hit his gorgeous face and fell into his lap. "Due to circumstances we should announce our engagement? What kind of marriage proposal is that? You'll die without me? How can you make that not be romantic? You're a positive miracle worker. Why don't you make it sound like you can't live without me as in you don't want to live without me? Instead, it's just one more obligation you owe me. Forget it! I don't know what weird thing happened to make you compelled to love me, but it has nothing to do with me." I scowled at him while he stared back.

He suddenly smiled, but his eyes flickered violet and moonbeams. "You want romance? I can do romance."

I threw another pillow at him. It hit his perfect face, then joined the other one in his lap. "You are proving that you can't. I don't want you to want what I want! I want you to want what you want! I don't want you to play a part for me. I want to be the one person in the world who gets to see you exactly as you are! Because you're the only one who truly sees all the pieces of me. Even the vicious elf. You see her too well."

"And love her," he said, nodding soberly. "She healed me, kissed me, and killed me. I also love your gnome, sweet, diabolical, and true. Your beast is terrifyingly beautiful. I love her. I love every single bite, every single lick, every single hair. I love your family, your writing, your knitting, and your song. You touch me and I melt. You are

the evening star, first and last in my sky, outshining every other light. You should close your eyes and rest. Probably shift into your wolf, so you heal more quickly. I almost killed the Alta with my bare hands that time he allowed his dogs to hurt you. I won't stand by anymore. Never again. I can't. You're embedded in my skin. You should probably ask your father about that."

I scowled and threw the last pillow at his head. He caught it and then put it back behind me, tucking the other pillows around me so I was in perfectly snug. He leaned over me, staring into my eyes while his kept with the glowing half moon over the iris.

"What's with the moon?" I asked, touching his cheek, the silky skin that led down to his soft lips. He felt so good. I'd been so scared that I lost him.

I suddenly realized that I was touching his mouth. I blinked and pulled my fingers away like they'd been burned.

"What's with the vines instead of clothes, hm?" He raised a brow. "Apparently, we both have unique ways of showing our individual style. Yours is much more intriguing."

I snorted and poked his chest. "Seriously, what's with the moons?"

He winced. "My father has that. I'm sorry it's so creepy. I can use a glamour. It's part of my heritage I thought I'd escaped. Unfortunately, not."

I frowned at him. "You should call my dad and ask about these bindings. You can put him on speaker phone. I'm too tired to move my arms."

He frowned and shook his head, not happy with my injuries. "You shouldn't have gone after the beast without me. You can call him in a few days when you feel better."

I rolled my eyes. “So you could get Henrick to drug me? Anyway, after that engagement announcement, in a few days, my whole family will be here. Except Bram. He probably has to work. Call now so dad can explain that there’s a perfectly simple solution to all of this.”

A few minutes later, I was scowling at Cross’s phone.

“That’s your solution?” My voice was a little screechy, but I’d stayed awake to hear him say that we were soul-bound in life and death, so we should make the best of being stuck together.

“You’re overreacting, Delphinia,” my father said in his soothing voice. “Centuries ago, the Night Lord scried and saw his son as well as the family line of his future bride, House Erasmus. He contacted me, and since I had a daughter, I agreed. She was already a well-trained soldier and would be a capable match for the unborn future Night Lord. Unfortunately, she didn’t survive the great war. My brother and wife also died, leaving me...” He sighed heavily. “The Night Lord personally escorted me out of elfland, my house broken, like me. If you don’t want to accept the bindings and make the most of your alliance, you can break them as long as you haven’t declared your heart to him. Have you?”

I hesitated. “Of course I haven’t.” Not out loud, anyway.

“Then it can be undone. Gnomes are very talented at breaking bindings. Your mother has a real gift for it.”

I looked at Cross in horror. He was looking at me like I was the most beautiful fudge chocolate swirl brownie in the entire world. He loved me because he couldn’t help it.

I cleared my throat. “You think that Mom would actually agree to break bindings to a handsome elf who might give her grandchildren? It’s like you don’t know her at all.”

Cross and I stared at each other while my dad sighed heavily. “It isn’t your burden, Delphinia. Bindings can be useful, sharing power and control, which is necessary when you have someone like the Night Lord, but you weren’t the one intended to be his morality, sanity, and strength. He could crush you. He will crush you unless you have the cold will required to keep him in check, the magic to bring him back to himself. Your elf magic shouldn’t be strong enough to match his binding.”

I cringed. “You elves are so good at making everything sound romantic. I never knew you had another daughter.” Or brother. Or wife for that matter. He didn’t talk about elfland. Ever. It’s like I didn’t know him.

“It was a different world, another time. There was no room for softness and warmth. So many elves became corrupted or mad after the war. I suppose it’s good that I was the one rather than the other. Your Cross wasn’t born until afterwards. He never met Aurora.”

“I can’t believe you guys bound someone who wasn’t even born. I’m hanging up now. I have healing to do.” I pushed the off button on Cross’s phone and frowned up at him. “So that’s what the love spell was, our parents meddling in binding magic without asking themselves if it was ethical.”

He bent over me and brushed my adorable nose with his straight, perfect one. “No. Bindings aren’t affection. I saw you and it was like coming home, only my home was never so warm, so beautiful, so right. I heard your song, and it filled something hollow inside of me that had been aching since my best friend betrayed me, and then almost killed my family after I showed her mercy and didn’t immediately kill her. The night lord has to be absolutely just. Mercy and weakness can’t influence him, or the innocent suffer. I was too weak to fill my father’s role.”

His eyes were so intent, soft, filled with agony. His voice was rough with emotion, feeling you didn’t get out of an elf very often. I’d really helped repair his broken

heart with my little song?

I cleared my throat before I burst into tears. “So you went to become an assassin instead?” Yes, because he was so soft and weak. That’s why he was able to torture me for months, even though he was in love with me. Was he really? Just for me?

He shrugged. “I’m good at it, and the order takes in orphans, so they accepted me.”

“Not that you’re actually an orphan. I never saw any kids in the compound.”

He frowned. “I haven’t taken many in. It’s problematic to bring a child into a life that is so hard and soulless.”

I put my hands on his cheeks. How long could I resist kissing him when he was leaning over me like this? Not long. “You shouldn’t force anyone, but if someone wants to join, don’t you need to fill your ranks? Your house performs a very necessary duty in the world. Protecting the innocent. I can do that.” I nodded and kissed him.

He tasted like the wind and violets and happiness with an underlying buzz of electricity. He pulled away, eyes literally alight as he stared at me. “You can do that?” His voice was careful, uncertain yet hopeful. Poor thing. He’d been bound to my family before he was born. Who could we possibly blame for that? Our parents, obviously, but no one can help who their parents were and what they did. It would be best if we broke the bindings and started over this relationship from scratch. Well, not from scratch, just from a baseline that didn’t involve other meddling parties.

I nodded. “Yes. I can bring warmth to the House of Mercy. I’m a gnome. I can bring warmth to even the most aloof elf. Now stop being so pretty so I can rest.”

He stared at me, not looking anything close to less beautiful. “You can bring warmth

to the House of Mercy?” He said it like it was a foreign tongue that he didn’t know. The likelihood of him not knowing every imaginable language was very small.

“Mm. I don’t think I can work for Zephin Clay anymore. Besides which, being with you has made it difficult to work as an anonymous society reporter. Maybe I’ll be the House of Mercy’s housekeeper instead.” I closed my eyes and pulled him close so I could snuggle him. “You’re so delighted that you bound me to your secret society so I can adorableize it.”

He hesitated and then carefully wrapped me in his arms and nuzzled my hair. “I am so delighted. Most of my members will stab you if you try to hug them.”

“Only most? Challenge accepted.”

He sighed and settled down around me, relaxing into the mattress. “You should shift into a wolf so you can heal more quickly.”

“Sh. Maybe I like recovering exactly like this.”

I did. So much, but I shouldn’t say that when it made the bindings in my skin thrum and tighten. I shifted into my wolf and he immediately scooped me even closer, climbing under the covers with me. Fur was much less shocking than naked gnome-elf to my beautiful appropriate love.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I woke up stiff, sore, and miserable. I was also exhausted, starving, and irritable. Cross was my complete opposite, beaming down at me while he held a tray burdened with cinnamon rolls, hearty liver stew, and lightly steamed vegetables.

I took one look at that tray and my heart sank. “My mom’s here?”

He settled the tray on my lap and carefully rolled the top of the blankets and sheet. I was wearing his shirt. Did I want to ask him how I’d gotten into his shirt? No. Definitely not.

His smile was still bright and irritatingly beautiful. “You’ve been sleeping for days. You must have a voracious appetite.”

I scowled harder at him. “Days? You drugged me! Admit it!”

He smiled so sweetly as he brushed my nested hair away from my face and then held out a spoonful of liver stew for me. “You’re so intelligent, understanding exactly the lengths I’ll go to in order to keep my heart’s light healthy.”

“Hmph.” I took the bite and almost bit his hand, but that stew was absolutely everything my beast needed. I stole the spoon and proceeded to shovel it into my mouth. Mm. Liver. Also other tender organ meat. My mother was amazing. When I’d cleaned out the bowl, I moved onto the vegetables, until I got to the cinnamon rolls. I sighed almost happily as I bit into that first soft, sweet, delicious bread. Perfection. The swirls of cream on top, the perfect chewiness of the dough’s exterior, and that

cinnamon spice that makes everything nice.

Once I'd finished eating, I looked up to see Cross staring at me with a soft smile on his otherwise chiseled face. I pointed at him, remembering what we'd been talking about. "You can't drug me any time you like."

"It was your mother's idea."

I shook my head. "Don't try to blame her for your high-handed drugging. What did I miss?" I put the tray on the side table and threw back the blankets. My thigh still had a rather impressive gash across it. I didn't remember getting that.

He tsked. "And this is why I have to knock you unconscious, because you can't stay in bed and rest like a proper housekeeper."

"Why aren't I completely healed?" I asked, frowning up at him. "I can heal from shattered bones in a day. Was there some kind of weird poison?"

"It's the binding."

"But the binding is supposed to give me strength."

"Yes, but forming the binding takes a great deal of magic. It probably would have killed you if you weren't enhanced by the serum Forsythia so recklessly bestowed upon you." His lips tightened for a moment before he resumed his happy smile. "How did you defeat the beast? Forsythia said that you crushed her with an oak tree?"

Ah. His smile was a lie. That made more sense than him actually being so happy after my family crashed his mansion.

"You questioned Forsythia? I hope you were gentle."

“I didn’t kill her,” he said all creepy-sweet. “That’s more than she deserves after what she did to you and your other friend. Please, expound about the oak tree crushing.”

I studied him and then put a bright smile on my face. Two could play that game. “Oh, you know, I was bleeding out, so I used my blood to grow this adorable little sapling that turned into a sixty-foot monster. Loren was so big, I didn’t think she would fit inside the tree, but I made it work.”

“Mm. That explains why the tree is animate. His name is Fergy, and he’s been stealing people’s phones and snacks, particularly beef jerky. He is good friends with the great ape that lives in the enclosure, at least according to him, but the animal is frankly terrified of Fergy for some reason, perhaps the dark magic.”

“You’ve talked to my tree?” I asked, impressed.

“Your father. He’s the flora empath, like my mother. He could sing a tree to health and vitality. You can sing a tree into a werewolf-eating monster. He’s very proud.”

Mm hm. That sounded about as likely as my mother getting along with Manny. I grabbed his arm, pulling him closer. “What about Lynx? Was Manny able to help her? Is she okay?”

His eyes softened and his smile became real. “Lynx is fully recovered and eating more snacks than is healthy, but Manny and your mother both assure me that since she’s genetically and magically altered, it’s fine.” He raised a skeptical brow. He was worried about the proper nutrition of my kitten-monster. Imagine how he’d be with his kids. My heart melted at the thought of Cross holding a little mini-Cross and plotting out its happiness and well-being. The thought was such a stark difference from the ominous creature hovering over everyone the night before.

I pulled him down on the bed next to me. “Cross, what about your whole glow-up? How is Henrick going to spin it for the Senator? Your eyes are still moons. I always

expected to be the one who messed up your image, but instead, it was the Night Lord.”

He studied me expressionlessly. That was a much more natural face for him. “Yes, that. Everything’s up in the air right now. Henrick isn’t spinning anything, not when I’m not sure which direction you’d like to proceed in. You mentioned being the House of Mercy’s housekeeper. You are technically bound to me, and I am bound to the House, so if I am released, you wouldn’t be able to have that dream job. I could keep the position if I put effort into it, but they are nervous after I’ve stepped into my heritage so ostentatiously.”

“Also ominously.”

“What do you want, my love?” The way he looked at me didn’t give away any feelings, but I knew his heart.

My heart beat faster and faster until I reached for him, pulling him close enough that I could kiss him.

Cross froze for a moment before he slowly moved his lips against mine, teeth brushing my bottom lip. He held me like I was precious, perfect, and his. So very his.

Mine. He was mine. His mouth, hands, soul, all of him belonged to me. His blood was mine to spill, his body mine to crush and heal. Mine. Forever.

I slid my hands over his shoulders, into his hair, tugging him closer to me while I devoured my sweet, delicious heart.

A thrum went through me, like a note of music too low to hear with my ears, but it wrapped around us, piercingly, achingly sweet.

I pulled away, breathing hard while the binding flared to life in my skin. He gazed

back at me, otherworldly, powerful, a god of night come down to capture my soul. Would I ever get used to that glowing quarter moon in his mysterious violet eyes? Probably since I was already thinking how magically attractive they were.

“Sorry,” I said breathlessly. “I should talk to my mom about breaking the binding.”

His eyes flickered with pain before it vanished beneath a soft smile that was still probably a lie. “Of course. I’m sure she’ll be happy to help us,” he said, slowly raising my hand to kiss the back of it. Um. What? I couldn’t remember what we were talking about, not when my buzzing lips and racing heart were wrapped around my beautiful, mystical mate. Wait, what? Mate? No. My wolf didn’t get a mate, not until she chose someone free to love me. But what if Cross didn’t love me without the binding? I liked him looking at me like I was his whole world. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t a gnome who took whatever she liked. I was an elf too, and that meant that would happily hold on to my misery for the sake of ethics and propriety. Also stake him with a live tree in the library. Very properly.

“Are you all right?” he murmured, kissing my hand again.

“Yes. Break the binding, get a job, get an apartment, and then we can talk about kissing.” I tugged on my hand, but it was a floppy tug, not a real, ‘give me back my hand, you brute.’

“Mm. I should probably inform you in a romantic way that is beyond me that after waking up in bed with you three times, I have no intention of ever waking up any other way again.” His voice rumbled so delicious and low, implacable.

I gasped and shot a look around us to see who had overheard his declaration. We were the only people in his bedroom. My mother was actually giving us privacy? That boded ill if I actually wanted her to break the binding. My skin prickled all the way down my spine as my wolf rolled over and gave Cross her belly. They were in complete agreement, except he would be there when she woke up, too.

I grabbed his chin and turned his face so he was forced to look into my eyes. “You can’t say that.”

He blinked at me, face impassive. “I could pretend that I could sleep without you, but I already tried while you were unconscious. That experiment resulted in my teleporting to you in my sleep. Your father finds the entire situation fascinating. He put me in a lead box with only a few ventilation holes, and I was able to teleport out of that, as well as several other unique variations, completely unaware of myself.”

I gaped at him. “You can teleport in your sleep?”

“Apparently. And your wolf can snore perfectly in key. We are both truly gifted.”

“Absolutely. Anything else I should know about?”

He swooped me into his arms and then his mouth crushed mine, his hands pulled me against his strong body while he devoured me whole. His hands shook as he grasped me, sliding up to tangle in my hair before consuming my mouth deeper, sealing me his.

I melted, arching against him, letting him hold me up entirely, unfurling against his mouth like a night blossom. The music came back with a vengeance, practically keening around us with the force of his passion.

When he pulled away, he smiled slightly. Such a pretty elf with those bright violet eyes. He loved me violently. “Of course. Your mother’s in the kitchen with Manny, trying to take over.”

“Trying? That doesn’t sound like my mother. I’ve never seen Manny in my kitchen. I doubt he’d put up much of a fight.”

“Your kitchen?” Cross asked with a slight tilt of his head.

“I meant as someone who lives here, versus my mother who certainly doesn’t live here. They aren’t staying long, are they?”

He absently stroked my hair, like I was still the wolf who snored so adorably. “No, they’re just staying while we figure out the binding, although your father is helping me adjust to my new...” He trailed off like he didn’t know what to call moons in his eyes and teleporting in his sleep.

“The whole Night Lord package. So you’re telling me that they’ve taken over your house. They’ll never leave until we’ve given my mother grandchildren. It’s all a trap. We’ll have to sneak out the back in the middle of the night.”

He smiled slightly. “I am very good at sneaking around in the middle of the night.”

I brightened up. “Me too! They’ll never see us leaving.”

Sharp rapping on the door had me jumping, clinging to Cross while the scent of his spicy skin rolled through me in a wave.

“Delphinia, are you awake? I have another tray for you, as well as the kitten. Can I come in?”

I pulled away from Cross. “I’m not dressed,” I said and then blushed. “I mean, I’m just in a night shirt.”

She came in, like that had been an invitation. She beamed at us and then placed the tray on my lap. The kitten leapt from her shoulder to my chest, snuggling in while purring loudly.

I cuddled Lynx while I beamed at Cross. He’d kept her safe even while I was out.

My mother shook her finger at me. “Eat. Snuggle the kitten later. As for you, Mr.

Night Lord, you can go,” she pointedly told him.

He bowed and then gave me one last, intent look before he left.

She stood over me, plump arms folded, watching me while I slowly ate the repeated breakfast down to the cinnamon rolls and liver stew.

“He’s so handsome,” she said.

“Mm,” I replied, biting into a cinnamon roll. They were so perfect. Maybe she could come and be the House of Mercy’s housekeeper.

“Are you sure you want to break a perfectly good binding?” Of course she’d have to bring that up.

“I’m not okay with forcing someone to love me.”

She hmphed. “Nonsense. Love is a choice. These bindings don’t have anything to do with the way you look at him, like he’s even more delicious than a cinnamon roll.” She grabbed one from my tray and took a bite. She nodded in satisfaction as she chewed. “He did well.”

“He? You mean you let Manny cook?”

She sniffed. “Of course I let him cook. He’s the cook, isn’t he? You don’t think that I’d take over someone else’s business, do you? Hmph.”

I smiled behind my cinnamon roll while my heart warmed. Manny must have put up quite a fight to maintain a toehold in the kitchen. And she’d let him win.

A sharp trumpet pierced the air.

“Was that a trumpet? I suppose this is Singsong City,” my mom said, looking towards the balcony.

“Even in Singsong, we don’t have trumpets and...are those flags?” I pushed back my tray and went out on the deck, snuggling Lynx against my chest.

On the street past the gates, flags in misty purple and coppery orange paraded by. I leaned on the railing to get a better look. Were those horses? It was a large group filled with magic users crowding the street like they owned it, and no cars argued. That meant very obvious magic. They stopped at the gates beyond the courtyard, and a gorgeous white horse with a rider in pale glistening violet reared a few times, magic building with every lunge to the earth. What were they doing? Was this religious? Was it an attack against Cross? Maybe it had to do with his magic show the other night.

Cross walked briskly across the front courtyard, around the enormous fountain, and then with a gesture, the gates flew open and the parade came in.

The violet woman entered on her prancing steed, rode her horse in a circle around Cross, then slid off in front of him. Then she very obviously turned her back to him, looked up at me, and smiled. When she spoke, I could hear her as well as if she was sitting beside me. “You are Angustia Erasmus’s daughter? House Laster gives you greetings.” She curtsied while lowering her head regally.

Oh. She was bowing to me? Wait, House Laster? Wasn’t that the house my dad said that Cross was from?

Cross looked at me over his shoulder, giving me a small shake of his head. No, it wasn’t his house? No, this wasn’t his mother? Or no, I shouldn’t be snuggling a kitten in his shirt when some glorious royalty comes to visit?

I returned her curtsy, bowing until my face almost hit the railing, then I hurried back

inside.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I said, throwing open his large closet. I froze. Countless women’s dresses and suits hung on the opposite side from Cross’s.

“Is it better to keep her waiting and have the appropriate grooming, or is it better to rush down there looking like a cuckoo made a nest in your hair?” my mother asked with an innocent smile.

I groaned and went to the bathroom. She would have to wait, or better yet, have her business with Cross finished by the time I was presentable. Bathing with my injuries was slow. My hair was still damp by the time I was dressed in the unobtrusive black pants suit with a blue silk blouse, looking like I’d never been mauled by a monster. There was jewelry that matched all my favorite colors, so I had simple blue gem earrings in. I smiled at my reflection and then left the bathroom, walking carefully down the hall to the stairs, and then finally out on the porch where my mother and the Lady of Night were having a stand-off.

My mother’s smile was as sharp as a rattlesnake. “You’re here to help break the binding? How kind of you to come all this way, but I’m sure we can manage on our own.”

Lady Violet sniffed disdainfully, like they’d had this conversation several times. Gnome logic was often circular, always stubborn. “I crafted the binding. I hope my knowledge will prove useful.”

“Excuse me, you said you’re here to break the binding?” I asked, feeling like a little dull mouse compared to her gorgeousness.

She fixed me with a blinding smile. “So delicate, yet so vibrantly filled with life. It is such a pleasure to be of service to you in your wise efforts to unbind yourself from my unfortunate family.”

Cross stepped close to me and put his arm around my waist. “You didn’t need to come down. Lady Night was just explaining the basic mechanics of the binding. You’re still weak from its effects.”

“Of course she is,” Lady Night said with an elegant smile down at me. “You will be until the binding is sealed or undone. Such is the way with ancient house bindings.”

That explained why I felt so crappy and why I wasn’t healing quickly. Half-bindings were not the best. “Oh. How long does it take to break the binding?”

She tilted her head as she considered my mother, who stared back, ready to reach an impasse that she’d sooner die than back down from. “Not long at all. A few days, a few potions, a few unravelling soul ceremonies.”

“What?” Cross snapped.

She shrugged and gestured at him. “It will be child’s play for you now that you’ve unlocked your full potential. The binding must be undone quickly so that we can find a suitable match for you before you become unstable.”

My heart fell down to my toes like a rock, chipping off the edges when it hit. “What do you mean, ‘find a suitable match’ for him?”

She gave me a look with wide, innocent eyes. Lies. Those eyes were more lying than Cross’s. “It takes a great deal of scrying. I’m quite embarrassed that the binding reacted to you, someone so clearly unsuitable to bear the burden of his legacy.”

That was an elvish insult, more than insinuating that my family wasn’t good enough for her son.

My mother gave her a hard smile. “That’s right, what would a gnomish girl want with a cold-hearted elf lord, anyway?”

“Indeed,” Lady Violet Night said with a soft smile. She was going to bind Cross to someone else, no matter what he wanted or thought about it. He’d run away from that world, but she was going to bind his soul to someone else? What if Cross was bound to someone who wanted him for his title instead of for him? What if she never gave him hugs or fed him delicious unhealthy cookies? What if she didn’t fill the hollow places inside of him with warmth? Ice in your heart could do terrible things to a person.

Panic swallowed me whole and completely.

“I, Delphinia Erasmus bind Kilmaran Rosanthius Omarsus Silvaniustro to me. I swear my heart and soul to you.” The bindings flared bright in my skin before the dull throbbing entirely disappeared, along with any lingering exhaustion.

Lady Night studied me for a moment and then nodded, all hard ice. “That’s done then.” She turned to Cross. “You will study with Erasmus. Your father will check on your progress from time to time. You did well in finding such a strong wife.” She turned and walked over to her horse, waiting patiently for her, floated up onto his back and then proceeded out of the courtyard along with the rest of her retinue.

I stood there, frozen between Cross and my mother until my father slipped in behind me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“You had no chance against Violetta,” he murmured. “She can manipulate the Emperor himself. She only had to give you a reason to take what you already wanted.”

I exhaled the breath I’d been holding and slumped against Cross. He held me against him, kissing my hair hard, like he wanted to brand his lips on my crown.

“So she wanted Delphi to accept the binding all along? Hmph. I’ll have to make some pastries to send her. She’s too thin. Come Erasmus. We need to tell everyone that

Delphi's finally married! They'll have to send presents. Should we have a reception at home for all her friends? What theme would it be? Maybe..."

Finally, they left us alone on the broad porch where I'd come so long ago, begging him for a place to stay. He was still holding me in his arms while I stayed stiff and in shock against his side.

Slowly, I slid my arms around him and breathed in his heady, sweet scent. "Cross, I didn't mean to do that."

"I know. I didn't think she'd actually come to make sure...I didn't know her intentions. I can't imagine her ever approving of a gnome-elf-werewolf daughter-in-law, but here we are. She approves of you, which means that I can't completely discount her judgment. Which means I should attempt to be civil to her and my father..." He groaned and picked me up and carried me away.

"Where are we going?" I asked, held like a wrapped burrito in his strong arms.

"To bed. I'm going to hold you until the world makes sense."

I giggled and pressed my nose into his neck, breathing him in. "Cross, you married a gnome-elf-werewolf. Sense isn't ever going to happen after that. The most you can hope for is happiness."

He paused and looked down at me, still holding me off the ground. "It's hope and happiness. Faith and determination. I will love you in all the ways that make you feel safe, warm, and comfortable. I will build you a life as cozy as a gnome, as beautiful as an elf, and as fearless as the wolf. Perhaps some day you will learn to love me."

I grabbed him around the neck and pulled myself up until we were eye to eye. "No chance. I love you with every mismatched piece of myself. That's why I could learn to be myself, because I had you beside me, accepting me all the steps along the way. I

love you now and will fight to love you forever.”

He kissed me, so piercingly sweet, my whole soul sang in response. I kissed him back, clinging to the strong, beautiful creature who saw the beauty in my beast. I wanted to drown in him forever, but we had things to do.

I broke the kiss and poked his chest with my finger. “Cross, I like that you’re out in the world pushing back evil as the Senator and as the Head of the House of Mercy. I can only focus on the good in the world because there are people like you who protect it. You’re a protector, and I’d be an idiot if I asked you to stop being who you are just so I could stare into your lovely eyes for twenty hours a day. I’ll just plant a garden with my favorite purples. Irises, violets, hyacinths...” I sighed heavily. “That sounds beautiful in spring, but what about autumn? It has to be year-round.”

“What has to be year-round?”

“The garden. I’m helping you plan it. I am a flora empath, you know. We still need to catch Zephin Clay in the act of doing something diabolical. He was the original influence behind Loren’s experiments. He’s bound to slip up, eventually.” I squeezed his face so his lips pursed. “I love you. And the odds are that I’m going to do my best to seduce you sometime very soon. It’s so nice that we’re married in case I accidentally get pregnant. Otherwise, think of the scandal.” I smiled brightly and tried not to blush, but I wasn’t entirely a shameless gnome, and I could feel the heat in my cheeks.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Your parents are in the library as we speak, considering logistics. How long do you think they’ll be occupied? I think that I’m in danger of being seduced by you this very second.”

I gasped and then beamed at him while my heart beat faster. “You are, even though there are so many other political machinations to take care of?”

He nodded soberly and then brushed my nose with his. “Your machinations are my priority. You always will be. You’re so beautiful, Delphinia. So good, so light in a world of so much darkness. I have been studying you intently ever since you summoned the magic to save that sapling, like it was nothing. It’s not nothing, Delphinia. If you trained, you could be the next House of Mercy Commander or the Alta.”

I kissed him to stop him from saying such horrible things. Maybe I should get pregnant right away so he wouldn’t dare think of me as the Alta. Shudder. No, Cross would happily add our kids to the army camp he talked me into leading. He was a born manipulator. Which meant that he wanted me in his arms. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have happened.

Come to think of it, magical training would come in handy while I was his wife, navigating politics, assassinations, and other household issues.

He murmured and sank against my lips, urging me closer, tasting me deeper.

He was so sweet. So good. And he was mine. I could feel the pull of his soul, his heart, his warmth, and it was like having your back to a fireplace, wonderfully comforting on a cold winter’s day. And it was a fire that would never go out.

Be sure to sign up for my newsletter and get an extra scene from Cross’s POV, when Delphi shows up on his doorstep the first time. (Also a scene from Michael, and whoever else I get in there by the time you read this. :)

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