

ALEXIS CALDER



FERAL QUEEN

REJECTED FATE

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REJECTED FATE BOOK THREE

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CHAPTER ONE

MADOC'S APARTMENT was nestled in an unassuming building a few blocks from the Umbra mansion. We'd ditched the car a street away and walked on the salt covered sidewalk hand in hand. I noticed the bronze sign near the front door alerting us to the historical preservation status of the building. Any other day, I would be interested in reading about the structure's past. I wished things were different, but at least I had someone on my side to help me get through it.

I pulled my hand out of his, an uneasy feeling settling into my gut. We'd talked this through during our drive. Until we knew more about what was going on with the Shadows, we had to keep our bond a secret. I hated the idea of hiding, but it was temporary. We couldn't deal with Madoc's dad right now on top of everything else.

"It won't be for long. I refuse to keep you hidden," Madoc said, reacting to me dropping his hand.

"I know," I said.

We entered the building, and I wrinkled my nose at the smell of mildew or something ancient. In front of us was an elevator, to the left a staircase lined with threadbare carpet, and to the right a wall of copper-colored mailboxes. The walls were patched in thick plaster that was a brighter white than the rest of the paint. Spidery cracks crossed the ceiling. It wasn't what I expected after seeing the mansion.

The stairs creaked as we made our way to the third floor in silence. Half the lightbulbs were burned out, so everything was dimly lit. It made the cracks in the plaster look a little more severe.

"It's not much, but it's off the grid," Madoc said as he let us into the

apartment.

I stepped inside, past the open kitchen and into the cozy living room. Everything in the space was simple and well-loved, a complete contrast to the high-end, overly opulent furnishings of the Umbra mansion. The high-end stainless-steel fixtures and appliances were the only thing that gave a hint of the wealth Madoc came from.

"It's really nice," I said. "Cozy."

"I spend as much time here as I can, but I still end up at the house more than I'd like," he said. "We can get cleaned up and get some rest here before we move on."

"I like the sound of that. I wish we could just hide out here till this whole thing blows over," I said.

"I know," he agreed. "But the Shadows haven't breeched our borders like that in years. I'm not sure this meeting is such a great idea," he said.

Madoc had gotten details from his dad over the phone on our drive. The Shadow Wolves had attacked an Umbra patrol and then demanded a meeting on the night of the new moon. "It's a trap. Dax wants war."

"I know, but you also said the elders didn't approve of that," Madoc said. "Besides, my dad wants to attend, so I don't have much choice. He's still calling the shots."

I hated this whole thing. Nobody knew Dax like I did. At least I knew Madoc would head into the meeting with his guard up. "I still wish I could go with you."

"He was clear on the terms. Alpha and five representatives only."

"I could be a representative," I said.

"You know why that's a bad idea," he said.

It was a terrible idea. Me being at a meeting between the Shadows and Umbras as part of the Umbra Pack would only provoke Dax more. I just hated the thought of Madoc being too close to Dax. I wanted to be there with him to protect him. It was foolish because my mate could take care of himself.

I set my hand on his cheek, then slid my hand to the back of his neck. "I'm selfish, and I want to keep you away from everyone else."

He tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "I understand that feeling completely. The good news is we have all night tonight before I have to see my dad."

I stood on my toes and pressed my lips to his in a quick kiss. "Tell me,

will we both fit in that shower of yours?”

“Only one way to find out.” He scooped me up in his arms. “Or maybe I won’t make it to the shower. Maybe I’ll take you right here.”

“Is that so?” I lifted my chin, and he lowered his face to mine.

“You couldn’t go through with it?” A female voice called.

Madoc nearly dropped me as he turned toward the front door.

“I can’t believe I managed to sneak up on you. That mating bond is making you soft, Mad,” Willow said.

Madoc set me down on the ground. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I feigned a limp. “He was just helping me to the shower. I hurt my ankle.”

She grinned. “Sure. That’s exactly what it looked like. Even if I believed that, I’m supposed to ignore the fact that you’re holed up in Madoc’s apartment together.”

“When we found out what happened, I figured she could help. She knows the Shadows better than anyone,” he said.

“And why would she agree to turn against her pack?” Willow asked.

“We’ve already been through this. They aren’t my pack anymore. I was kicked out when I saved your future alpha, remember? And it’s Ivy, in case you forgot.”

I was conflicted on how I felt about Willow. I’d seen flickers of kindness from her, but there was a defiant streak that was incredibly protective of Madoc. She didn’t trust me, and it was possible she might care for him almost as much as I did. I knew she would never let anything happen to him, which made us allies. Because right now I didn’t give a shit what the packs did to each other. As long as my mate came away from this unscathed, I wasn’t even sure I cared to pick a side. From everything I’d learned, the Umbras were just as terrible as the Shadows. Neither of those packs should have any kind of power if I had anything to say about it. Unfortunately, I was in love with the future alpha of the Umbras, which meant I had to choose a side, even if it seemed like a no-win situation.

“Don’t lie to me, it’s insulting. How many of your secrets have I kept over the years, Madoc?” Willow put her hands on her hips.

“It’s survival,” I assured her. “The Shadow Pack likely wants me dead. I wouldn’t survive on my own, so if I can trade information for protection, I’m going to take care of myself.”

“She was dating their alpha. She can help,” Madoc said.

Willow shook her head. "I know you better than anyone. You're going to have to do a better job of selling this when you see your dad. In fact, you might want to just leave her behind. I can see right through it; it might take longer for the others, but you're eventually going to make a mistake and everyone will know."

"I'm not staying behind. I already told you, the Shadow Wolves are going to kill me for being a traitor," I said.

Madoc ran his hand through his hair and blew out a breath of frustration. I resisted the urge to touch him. I wanted to rub his back or take his hand or otherwise comfort him with my touch. Maybe Willow was on to something. It was going to be difficult not to make mistakes.

"We couldn't do it," Madoc said. "But you have to swear to me that you will keep our secret."

I covered my face with my hands and groaned. We didn't even last an hour keeping this away from her. How were we going to fool everyone else? I lowered my hands from my face. "We tried. The bond was too strong." I glanced at Madoc. "And I'm not sorry."

"Me neither. We'll figure it out," Madoc said.

Willow was staring at me, her hands on her hips. "I don't like it. It complicates things."

"It was for the best, Willow. Can't you just be happy for me?" Madoc asked.

"The only reason it complicates things is because your dad thinks you broke it. I'm thrilled you found your other half, but I wish it was different. This is going to be a challenge to hide," she said.

My shoulders slumped. Willow was happy for Madoc, except for the fact that his mate was *me*. I was the complication.

Willow took a step toward me, and I tensed. She paused, then narrowed her eyes as if studying me.

I glanced over at Madoc, unsure of how to react. He didn't seem concerned, so I stood there feeling uncomfortable under her scrutiny. Suddenly, Willow launched forward and wrapped her arms around me in a tight embrace.

I straightened and blinked, completely confused by what was happening. My arms were pinned to my side, so even if I wanted to hug her back, it wasn't possible, but I was a little grateful that it wasn't an option.

When Willow stepped back from our awkward hug, she was smiling.

“The situation sucks, but I’m glad you’re here. If anyone deserved true happiness, it’s Madoc. And I know you’ll give him that. So, welcome. It’s the only welcome you’ll get, because everyone else in the family will try to kill you, but for Madoc’s sake, I’m in. And I have a few ideas for how to make this work.”

CHAPTER TWO

THERE WAS NO GOING BACK. Madoc was my future, even if neither of us knew what that future would look like. We were taking huge risks. If our plan backfired, I might end up dead; he could lose his pack, possibly his life. “You sure you want to go through with this? You could stay here till after the meeting.”

“No. If there’s a chance for me to help, I want to take it. Maybe your dad will listen to me.” I had to hope he would, because that was what I was offering. Information in exchange for protection. And a chance to be near Madoc until we figured out how to break the news about our bond.

He crossed the room to me and then pulled me against his chest. With his arms around me, I felt safe and at peace. It was the feeling of belonging I’d always been searching for. I never thought it would come from finding my mate. I thought it would come by joining my pack.

Madoc kissed the top of my head. “It’s going to be fine. Willow’s plan was even better than mine. This is going to work.”

“There’s a lot riding on this,” I said.

“Yes, but right now, none of that matters. I get you to myself for a few more hours and I intend to use that time wisely.” He pressed his lips to mine softly, but he quickly intensified the kiss.

I met him eagerly, hungry to feel his skin against mine. Our tongues tangled and our hands were frantic as we tore each other’s clothes off. My legs were wrapped around his waist, his hands on my ass. I could feel his hardness against my thigh and my body ached to feel him inside me.

Suddenly, my back was against a wall, pinned in place by Madoc’s firm chest. His mouth moved to my jaw, then to my neck. I moaned as his hands

slid up my body, stopping to caress my breasts. My nipples were in painful peaks, and I arched my back, offering them to him. His warm breath seemed to make my nipples tighten even more before his tongue flicked across the sensitive skin. I closed my eyes, sucking in a breath as he expertly lavished his mouth and tongue on each of my breasts. I never knew just how sensitive my body was until him.

“I never fully claimed you.” His voice was rough, his tone dangerous and lusty. It made my pussy even wetter. How did he do that with just his voice?

“You know I’m yours,” I breathed.

He growled, a feral sound that made my toes curl. Then he leaned down and bit my shoulder just as he entered me. My back arched as pain mingled with pleasure, sending me over the edge in an instant. I cried out, already undone, and he’d barely gotten started.

Madoc’s thrusts were intense, pounding into me. My back scraped against the wall, my body bouncing as he hammered deeper. With each movement of his hips, mine responded, matching him. We moved as one, our bodies working together without instruction. I dug my fingernails into his back as I braced myself. Each movement sent the coiling sensation low in my belly even tighter. Panting, I closed my eyes and held on to the building climax.

His lips crashed into mine, and I devoured him. Tangling my fingers into his hair, I kept him near me, deepening the kiss. I couldn’t hold out any longer. Tossing my head back, I felt my eyes roll into the back of my head as the building orgasm exploded like a tidal wave.

Madoc grunted, his body shaking as he found his release. Panting and damp with sweat, he leaned his forehead against mine. His lips were swollen and red, and his eyes were still heavy with lust. He never looked sexier. “You are mine,” he said.

I kissed him. “I’m nothing but trouble.”

“You’re exactly the kind of trouble I want,” he said.

Carefully, he lowered me to the floor. “When this is over, we’re going to spend an entire week locked inside this apartment, and I’m going to do all sorts of naughty things to you.”

My heart pounded. “How much time do we have?”

He grinned. “You ready for round two?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Think you can handle it?”

He scooped me up in his arms, and I squealed. “Challenge accepted.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE KNOCK on the door made me jump even though we were expecting it. Before Madoc could tell me to stay back, I crossed to the door and looked through the peephole. My heart raced. I knew he was coming, but it was so odd to see him after everything that had happened in the last few weeks.

When I opened the door, the surprise on Holden's face mirrored how I felt about seeing him again. "Well, what do we have here?" He stepped inside and I closed the door behind him.

Holden looked over at Madoc. "Willow told me you needed me, but I didn't expect this. Finally came to your senses and sent Joe to retrieve her?"

"I came on my own," I said. "Dax let me in, then pushed too far. I've seen too much to go back."

"Welcome to the fold then, I suppose. How does Erwin feel about this?" Holden asked.

"He doesn't know yet, which is where you come in," Madoc said.

"Whoa, I'm not crossing your old man," Holden said. "I'm still on his shit list from that job five years ago."

"You've been on the Umbra's payroll that long?" I was surprised he'd pulled it off under Preston's nose.

Holden grinned. "I never left the Umbras. The Shadows never fully trusted me, but I got what I needed."

"I'm sure you did," I said. "Everything and everyone passed through the Howler."

"Told your dad a bar was the best investment." Holden winked at Madoc. "He still gives me shit for going that route instead of cozying up to the alpha."

“Preston would’ve never let you in,” I said.

“I wasn’t a dumb, young blonde,” Holden said darkly.

I cocked a brow. “Do I even want to know?” I’d heard my share of gossip working at the Howler, but it was amazing how much had been kept from me.

“Let’s just say I had to spread a few rumors about you to keep his paws off you,” Holden said.

“Um, thanks, I guess,” I said. “But why would you bother looking out for me?”

“Cause I owed it to your ma,” he said.

“Wait, what?” I clutched the countertop for support. I’d let go of wanting to know about my parents. At least that’s what I’d told myself. But what the fuck was that supposed to mean?

“You knew her mom?” Madoc asked.

“Sure, she was my first love back when we were growing up here. Things didn’t work out for us, but I always had a soft spot for her and she knew it. Probably why she asked me to keep an eye on you.” Holden walked to the fridge and pulled out a can of beer. He popped it open and took a sip. “The real question is, do you want to know, or do you want the mystery?”

My mom had been an Umbra Wolf? How had she ended up in the Shadows? Or had she just dropped me off before going back to her pack? And how the fuck was Holden involved?

I wasn’t sure what I wanted. Was digging this up going to make things worse? At the very least, I now knew that my mom had asked someone to look out for me, even if she wasn’t willing to do it herself.

“Why are you telling me this now?” I asked. “Wait, is this why you gave me a job?”

“Partly. But I wouldn’t have hired you if you hadn’t come with such good recommendations. Every time I checked up on you, they said you were strong; a hard worker.”

I stared at him in disbelief, my jaw dropping open. “What the fuck? You checked on me?”

“I told you, your ma asked me to. And it wasn’t hard to get a few comments out of your old teachers when they came in for drinks.” He shrugged.

I winced, feeling a little violated. How could Holden have been asking about me my whole life and I never knew?

Madoc set his hand on my shoulder. "You don't have to say anymore if you don't want to know."

I caught Holden's eyes move to where Madoc's hand rested. I shrugged him away and tossed my best disgusted look at him. We were supposed to be selling that we didn't have feelings for each other. "I can handle my own past, thank you."

Madoc seemed to have caught his mistake. He put his hands up in mock surrender, then took a step away from me. "Whatever you say. You're the one with the buckets of trauma from your old pack, not me."

"Like your pack is any better," I spat.

"That's enough," Holden said. "Ivy, your mom, she couldn't handle being a mom. She could barely take care of herself. I know you didn't have it easy, but I can assure you, it would have been worse if she kept you."

"I'm not sure about that," I said darkly.

"How much do you want to know?" Holden asked.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek while I considered what he was asking. Whatever he told me, I couldn't un-hear. It would stay with me. It could change things for me. But this was my chance to know some of my past. I needed to take what I could get. "Is she still alive?"

"No. She died a few years after you were born," he said.

"What happened to her?" Knowing more about her might help me understand why she'd left me behind.

"She ran with a tough crowd as a kid but got cleaned up, started to make something of herself. That's when I met her. I didn't know about her past until we got close. Things didn't work out between us, but we stayed in touch. Then one day, she stopped by my place to tell me she was in trouble." Holden paused, and it almost looked like he was holding back tears.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

"I don't know if I should tell you everything..." he said. "She was pregnant. Made me swear I'd look in on you after she dropped you at the foundling house. That was always her plan."

"Then what?" I asked.

"After you were born, she fell back in with her old group. Things got out of hand, and she paid the price," he said.

"What are you leaving out?" I asked, my voice a whisper. It was so much to take in at once, and my emotions didn't know how to respond. Instead, I felt numb.

“That’s all I know,” he said.

“My father... that’s what you’re leaving out,” I said.

He swallowed. “You don’t need to know about him.”

“He was fae,” I said. “I figured that part out.”

Holden looked uncomfortable. He *never* looked uncomfortable. He was hiding something big.

I narrowed my eyes as I put the pieces together. “You knew. You were the one who knew I was part fae. You told someone.”

He looked down at his beer. “I’m sorry. I really did do what I thought was best.”

“You told the pack. They made me drink tea to keep my powers away.” I moved toward him; my hands balled into fists. “Tell me I’m wrong, Holden.”

“I wish I could, but I had my reasons,” he said.

“You’re why they muted my magic,” I said.

He nodded. “It’s how I got in good with Preston. I shared about you and about how to curb your magic. Your mom was terrified of what you might become.”

My shoulders slumped. That was the truth. It wasn’t because she’d be a bad mother; it was because she was afraid of me. “My own mother thought I’d be a monster.”

“She had her reasons,” he said.

“Explain!” I shouted, surprising myself with how intense the word was when I said it.

Holden flinched. I don’t think I’d ever seen him flinch. I felt a little bad, but I needed to know this.

“Please, make it make sense,” I said.

“Your father was a monster,” Holden said. “He destroyed everything he touched, and he took what he wanted. Including your mother.”

Deep sorrow settled inside. My mom had been a victim, and I was the result of a horrible crime nobody should ever endure. No wonder she didn’t want to see me. No wonder she was afraid of me.

Heartbroken for the woman I’d never even met, I walked toward the couch and sat down. Holden had been right. I did wish I didn’t know this.

Madoc joined me and pulled me against him, his arms circling me in a protective embrace. He kissed my forehead. “I’m so sorry, Ivy.”

Tears slipped down my cheeks. “My poor mother.”

“If it helps, he’s dead, too,” Holden said. “The Umbras took care of him

and the last of the fae.”

I looked over at Holden. “What do you mean, *the last of the fae*?” I didn’t want a monster like my father out there hurting others, but the way Holden said it was as if he were talking about something disgusting. Like exterminating an infestation of bugs.

“The tension goes back hundreds of years. Honestly, until I met you, I thought all fae were monsters.”

I pulled myself out of Madoc’s embrace and stood. “But you cut off my magic. So you *did* think I was a monster.”

“You two seem close,” Holden said, his eyes darting between me and the place where Madoc still sat on the couch.

“Don’t change the subject, Holden.” I pointed at him. “Tell me what you mean by all this.”

He blew out a breath. “Look, I like you well enough, Ivy. Herbs or no, you’re clearly not a monster. But we were taught that fae were evil. It’s not an easy thing to dismiss.”

“The same way I was taught that the Umbras were evil? Or that the Umbras were taught that the Shadows were evil? How we were all taught that going feral meant we’d go insane without a pack connection? Where do the lies end, Holden?” I snapped.

“I didn’t start this. Don’t look at me. I’m just trying to survive, okay?”

“You knew what I was this whole time, and you helped them keep my magic hidden away. To what end? What was the play?” I asked.

“There was no play,” Holden said. “I told Preston the tea would remove your powers, and you’d just be wolf. I convinced him that if you drank the tea for twenty years, you’d be cured of your fae blood. It was a lie, but I owed your mom. I did my part.”

“What about the rest of the fae?” I asked. My throat tightened as I thought about Xander’s mom. His mom had helped him work through his magic. She probably wasn’t the monster my father had been.

“They’re all gone. Erwin’s father started the war, eliminating any fae they found, including those in the feral packs. If they find out what you are...” Holden shook his head.

I swallowed hard. His words confirmed everything we’d been told by the feral pack, but it was still painful.

The worst part was that Erwin knew exactly what I was. Madoc was standing next to me and the feel of him so close brought me a little bit of

comfort. I glanced back at him. "I'm not sure this plan of ours is going to work."

Madoc ran his hand down my arm. "It will work. You have to trust me."

"Have you two already completed the bond?" Holden asked.

Fuck. I tensed, and Madoc took a step away from me. Getting the unexpected information about my past had thrown me from our original plan. Madoc and I were too comfortable, too familiar. We shouldn't have been touching at all, and I never even stopped to consider it. Being with Madoc was like breathing. I was going to have to work hard not to show affection. It was the complete opposite of how I'd been my whole life. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Holden chuckled. "Your dad doesn't know, I take it?"

"He thinks we broke the bond," Madoc said.

"*Madoc.*" I glared at him.

"Holden knows both of us too well to keep it secret," Madoc said.

"But I don't know him at all. He supports killing fae," I said.

"I never said I supported it," Holden said.

"Then why take the sides of the Umbras over the Shadow Wolves? The Umbras were hunting down the fae. The Shadow Wolves are bad, but they only wanted to take down the Umbras. And right now, I'm not seeing a whole lot wrong with that."

"Ivy, the Shadow Pack alphas have been providing the locations of the feral packs to the Umbras for decades. They're all in on it. There are no good guys in this situation," Holden said. "Like I said, I was just trying to survive."

"That's what we're trying to do right now, too. At least until we figure out how to make my dad understand," Madoc said.

"You want me to lie to your dad," Holden said.

Madoc nodded. "How long have we known each other, Holden?" Madoc asked.

Holden grunted.

"I had your back the whole time I've known you," Madoc said. "I need you to return the favor."

Holden sighed. "I hate keeping secrets."

"You're shit at it, too," I said, still mad he was the one who told the Shadows about me.

"In my defense, I thought that was helping you. You could have turned out like that other kid. The one who killed his mom and had his mate sent

away.”

“Wait, what?” I moved closer to Holden. “His mate? Are you talking about Xander?”

“I think so. Part fae kid, lost control when his magic came in.” Holden shook his head.

“I know about his mom and sister. He didn’t have a mate. At least, he never told me about that,” I said.

Holden shrugged. “Probably too painful to talk about. He was young when he found his mate. Sometimes that happens. It did for him.”

“What happened to her?” Goosebumps spread along my arms. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. If anything happened to Madoc, I wasn’t sure I could continue to breathe. Especially if I was the one who hurt him.

My brow furrowed. “He didn’t hurt her. That’s not possible. We can’t harm our mates.”

“She survived, but Preston sent her away to live with the feral wolves,” Holden said.

“They know where she is, though, don’t they?” I asked.

Holden shrugged. “Maybe.”

“That’s what they have on Xander. If he steps out of line, they’ll find her.” I shivered. No wonder he made the choices he did. I’d given up my pack without a second thought for my mate and we barely even knew each other. The bond was so strong, I couldn’t turn away from him. I’d walked away from everything. Even my best friend. The thought of Kate sent a pang of longing through me. Was I ever going to see her again?

“Holden, do you know if Kate knew?” I asked. “About the tea?”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

I blew out a long breath and ran a hand through my hair. I thought things were complicated before, but everything had escalated. “What now?”

“Now, we move forward with our plan,” Madoc said. “And then we take things one step at a time.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE WERE a million unanswered questions swirling in my mind. Each day, it felt like I was gaining access to more information without details. I wanted to know more about my parents; but I also didn't want to open more wounds that would never heal. The new information about Xander and how my pack learned about my abilities were also constantly nagging at me. How had Xander never mentioned his mate?

When I stopped to think about it, the two of us weren't close. We'd known each other for a short time, at least on a personal level. It explained so much of his limitation and why he felt forced to obey Dax, but it left me with more questions.

There were always more questions.

Was that ever going to change? It felt like the deeper I went down these rabbit holes, the worse it got. And I was about to take things to a whole new level.

"What's on your mind, Ivy?" Holden asked.

I shook the thoughts away and turned to look at my former boss. It was so odd to be sitting in the passenger seat of a car with him. Alone. My whole body ached to be with Madoc, but it was probably a lot better for us to spend time away, so we didn't accidentally ruin our lie.

"Go on, ask," he encouraged.

"Ask what, exactly?" To be honest, none of my current musings were linked to Holden. I was sure I'd get there and wonder about him at some point, but the other topics were more pressing.

"Oh, I don't know... how long I've known your mate? Why I killed Darleen and her boyfriend, why I was always such an asshole to you?" He

glanced at me, then looked back at the road.

He brought up lots of interesting questions, but I wasn't sure I could take much more. "Is there anything that has an absolute answer and won't lead to more unknowns?"

"Probably not," he said.

"Then, no, I don't have any questions," I said. "I've got enough already."

"Smart," he said. "That's one of the reasons I thought you'd be helpful in our quest to take out the corruption of the Shadow Pack."

"Cause the Umbras are so much better?" I said.

"I know you haven't known Madoc long, and that you're connected through a bond, but eventually you'll see that he's the solution," he said.

"I know enough about Madoc," I said defensively.

"Of course you do," Holden said with a chuckle.

I rolled my eyes. "Are you going to be like this the whole time?"

"All I'm saying is that the packs all suck. But you can't fix it with blunt force. You start a war and you just end up with another power-hungry asshole leading the bunch. You have to make changes from the inside. Madoc is different. I never really knew why he was different. I just knew I felt something about him that wasn't the same as the other alphas." Holden grunted. "Turns out it might have been that he's part fae, and here I always thought it was because he was one of the good ones. That's still blowing my mind, though. I can't believe Preston has kept that hidden about Madoc all this time."

"He is good," I said. "But that other thing. The fae thing with the mating bond. Is that common knowledge? That you have to have some fae blood to find a mate?"

"Anyone who's been around a while knows that," Holden said. "But trust me, I never would have guessed that our future alpha was part fae. How Erwin let him live, I will never understand."

"Watch your words," I threatened.

"I mean no harm. I like Madoc, respect him, even. I've seen my share of alphas and I've never respected any of them."

He'd always made that clear in the Fringes. Holden wasn't shy about his dislike of Preston or Dax. "Why the fights at the Howler? What was the point of that?"

"Mostly to piss off Preston," Holden said with a grin. "But it was a cover to get information to the Umbras."

Holden stopped the car at the gate, and my heart pounded against my ribs. I really hoped Holden had enough sway with Erwin to make this work. Things had to work. We didn't have any other choice. Holden was right when he said Madoc was something special. He needed to be there for his pack so he could start making changes. Besides, I knew how important his pack and his family were to him. I didn't want to cause a rift between Madoc and his dad, even if his father was a monster. We had to stop the violence between the Shadows and Umbras before we could figure out what to do next. One step at a time.

A crackly voice burst through the speaker, "Identify yourself."

"It's Holden. Let me in, asshole."

"You owe me six-hundred bucks from poker last night," the voice said.

"I've got it right here. Or we can play double or nothing tonight," Holden said.

"You're on, old man," the voice said.

The doors swung open, and I stared at Holden in wide-eyed surprise. That was not exactly how I expected this to go down. Maybe he would have the connections we needed.

Holden walked in like he owned the place, and while I kept my chin high and my gaze forward, I could feel the stares of everyone we passed. The Umbra estate was a flurry of activity. Shifters ran back and forth with paperwork or stood conversing in small groups. It reminded me of the energy I had seen at Dax's house before the heist and again after the arrival of the decapitated heads. The memory came with a twinge of guilt. I should feel worse for my dead former pack members than I did, but it was hard to find sympathy once you learned they had no qualms about setting you up to get caught.

Last time I had been in this house, I had seen a bathroom and an office when I broke in. Later, I got a view of a formal sitting room and dungeon. This time, I was walking down hallways lined with paintings and passed by a formal dining room, another sitting room, and a library. Each room was meticulously decorated in the same lavish style. There were hallways and doors to other areas that I wasn't able to get a peek at, showing me just how massive the mansion was. We turned down a long corridor, passing a few closed doors, until Holden paused in front of the one at the end of the hall. He looked over at me. "You ready for this kid?"

I nodded. "Let's do this."

Holden knocked three times, then waited. Just when I was starting to think no one was in the room, the door opened and a severe looking shifter with a diagonal scar that took up most of his face scowled at us. The scar cut from his forehead, through his eye, across his lips to his chin. He was probably lucky that he still had use of both eyes, which he used to continue glaring at us. He had to be seven feet tall and was nearly as wide as the door. Suddenly, I was having second thoughts. What made me think I could pull this off? I was pretty sure the man standing in the door could eat me.

“Hey, Karl. We’re getting a poker game together later if you’re interested,” Holden said.

Karl, the largest shifter I had ever seen in my life, lifted an intrigued brow. “Usual crew?”

“It should be. Last-minute planning, but what’s better than a little gambling to blow off some steam when we all might be dead by morning?” Holden said with a chuckle.

“Man, I forgot just how nuts you were while you were away.” Karl stepped to the side so we could pass. The smile he’d had for Holden turned upside down as he locked his sights on me. “She smells like a Shadow Wolf.”

“I *still* smell like a Shadow Wolf,” Holden said. “Their scent lingers something fierce.”

I pulled my gaze away from the hulking figure and scrambled into the room behind Holden. I hadn’t really thought about the unique smell of each pack, but my wolf senses have been largely kept away from me for so long. I had noticed my own scent, and the slightly floral tones I got from both Xander and Madoc, which I’d come to associate with the fae heritage, but I’d never spent time scenting other wolves. I inhaled, making note of the musky scent of the office. I got tones of bourbon and smoke, a completely different scent than I had come to expect with Madoc. I was going to have to pay better attention to these types of details.

The Umbra alpha, Erwin, sat behind a huge oak desk facing the door. He did not look happy to see me, but I didn’t let myself linger on his face. Instead, I scanned my surroundings, taking in the built-in bookcases and the warm, wood-paneled walls. It was a classic study, the kind you would expect to see in a house this grand. In addition to the two chairs facing the expansive desk, there was a second sitting area where four chairs were gathered around a low coffee table.

The space was large and open, but it had no windows, which made me feel trapped. None of the built-in bookshelves contained a single book. Instead, they were lined with a hodgepodge of trophies and small sculptures. It was an odd mix of both classy and kitsch. Over the door I had just come in was the mounted stuffed head of a snarling black bear. It was disturbing to see an animal in that state.

As a shifter, hunting large game was always seen as taboo. Most of us didn't hunt creatures that could be shifters in their animal form. While bears were not as common as wolves, they were the second largest shifter group and therefore off-limits. I had to wonder if that was purposeful to serve as a warning for anyone coming into this office.

"You better have a damn good explanation for this, Holden," Erwin snarled.

I turned my attention back to the alpha, my whole body tensed, already preparing for a fight. I tried to slow my heartbeat. I needed to appear calm and controlled.

"I told you before that I had someone in the Shadows I wanted to bring over, remember?" Holden said. "Well, this is her. Ivy worked at the bar. She was a foundling, no loyalty to the Shadows. We ran into each other last night while I was out for a run. She told me she'd been kicked out and that she wanted to get even."

"Is that all she told you?" Erwin asked.

"I know I have a complicated history here. Everyone knows I was your prisoner and that I was returned to the Shadows. But I was not welcomed back with open arms, as you might have thought. I went from one prison to another, but I was also put in a position to be their alpha's plaything. I'm nobody's fucking plaything. But I did use my time to listen and learn. My plan was to go feral, but after I heard what they did to your pack, I know no one is safe. I'll spare you what they did to me, but trust me when I tell you I have no loyalty to my old pack."

"I sent you away from here. Why would you have any loyalty to this pack?" Erwin asked.

"I don't. I want revenge. I don't have loyalty to any pack, but I want to see the Shadow Wolves go down," I said.

"Leave us," Erwin said with a wave of his hand.

I moved my hands behind my back and balled them into fists to keep myself standing straight and focused. Holden didn't look at me as he left, and

I knew as soon as the door shut that both he and the large shifter were waiting in the hall. If Erwin wanted to harm me, he would have no witnesses.

“And the other problem? Does anyone know about that?” Erwin asked.

“I didn’t tell Holden if that’s what you’re asking. The secret died in Willow’s room,” I assured him.

“So it’s done?” Erwin asked.

“Yes.” I was grateful he hadn’t asked for a more specific response because sometimes it was difficult to trust my body when it came to the bond. But keeping it vague allowed me to trick myself. My heartbeat was steady, and I knew my emotions were under control. If Erwin had any extra senses, he wasn’t getting a reading from me.

“What makes you valuable? Give me one good reason I shouldn’t just lock you up again,” he said. “Or kill you where you stand. You know things you shouldn’t.”

“Because when I ran from the Shadows, their alpha had an opportunity to kill me. He let me live. I’m his greatest weakness and I can get close enough to take him down. But I’ll need some help to get him alone,” I said. It wasn’t what we planned. I was supposed to share how I knew secrets and strategies and details that only the inner circle could know. But the words that came out of my mouth felt right. If anyone was going to bring Dax to his end, it should be me.

CHAPTER FIVE

ERWIN WAS SILENT, but I held my ground, not breaking his gaze. I'd meant what I said. I might hate the Umbras just as much as the Shadow Wolves for what they had done to the feral shifters, but I could only handle one fight at a time. Right now, my old pack was more of a threat.

Erwin huffed out a breath, then pushed back his chair and rose to standing. "You're here on a trial run. If I find your information valuable enough, I'll let you stick around. Maybe even let you join the pack."

Considering his hatred of all things fae, I highly doubted he was sincere in that statement. And honestly, it wasn't what I wanted. "That's not what I'm here for. I'm not trying to get in your good graces to earn something I don't want. I told you, this is about revenge. Or justice. Whichever term you prefer."

One corner of his mouth quirked upward. He looked amused by my comment, and I got the feeling he was used to having most people fawn over him. I was done with that. I didn't belong to his pack; I didn't belong to any pack. Traditionally, you joined your mate's pack, but things were different for me. I used to think joining the Shadow Pack would give me the freedom I craved, but now I knew better.

"Alright. I'm going to put you to work. Let's see what you know." Erwin stepped around his desk and walked toward the door. He pulled it open and strode into the hall, making the two wolves who were waiting for him jump in surprise. "Are you coming or what?" Erwin snapped.

I was a little surprised it went as well as it did, but I wasn't going to argue. This was step one. Get in so I could be near Madoc and help put an end to this war before things got out of control. Too much damage had

already been done, and I knew how bloodthirsty both packs could be. I kept my distance behind Erwin as I followed him. Holden fell into step next to me. "I'm guessing it went well?" he asked.

"He's going to let me try before he makes any final decisions," I said quietly.

Holden made a noise that sounded a bit like an affirmation, and the two of us continued down the hall. I followed the alpha up the stairs into a huge open space where several shifters were already gathered. In the center of the room was a wide table covered in maps. More maps were pinned to the wall along with large color photographs of Dax, Xander, myself, and several other high ranking Shadow Wolves.

I was startled to see my own face staring back at me, but it made sense that I would be on their radar considering I had been captured after breaking into this very house. It also didn't help my case that I was said to be the Shadow alpha's mate, or at the very least, his girlfriend.

The thought made my stomach roll. I hated that I had once been intimate with Dax. There were a lot of things I didn't like about my past, but I think the decisions I made with him while under the false bond were the only thing I could truly count as regrets. Everything else I'd ever done had been for survival, and it had eventually led me to my true mate. I was grateful I found Madoc, even if the situation seemed impossible. I had no idea how we were going to navigate all this and how we would come out unscathed on the other end, but we had to try.

The whole space was like something out of a movie. I could feel the gazes lingering on me, but because I had walked in with the alpha, I didn't get any questions. I did notice several shifters glance at the wall where my picture was hanging before staring at me for longer than was polite. It was obvious they recognized me, and it was also obvious they were confused as to why I was here.

This wasn't my pack, though. And I wasn't in charge. Which meant I could let them be confused and uncomfortable since Erwin wasn't sharing any information about why I was here.

Once I got past the initial discomfort of being the center of attention, I found it a little amusing. These shifters were likely the alpha's inner circle, and they had no idea what was going on or why I was here. I kind of liked the disruption I was causing. After spending my whole life trying to take a back seat and simply exist, there was a thrill at knowing I had at least a little

power.

Holden was nearly glued to my side, as if he was worried someone was going to grab me and carry me away if I wasn't within arm's reach. He leaned close so he could whisper. "That's Maverick Gold, alpha of the Senka Pack. Things have escalated. There's no way they're planning to use diplomacy against your ex-boyfriend. This is war."

I winced at the mention of Dax with that title, but didn't linger as the gravity of Holden's words sunk in. Adding another powerful pack to the Umbras was unexpected. There was no way Dax was prepared for that. This was going to make everything more difficult for the Shadows.

From what I'd always heard, the Umbra Pack was far more organized and able to fight than the pack I'd grown up in. The nature of the Shadows meant that loyalty was bought and sold; it wasn't inherent. So few of the members of that pack were there out of a sense of belonging. When your whole pack identity was a place for the disenfranchised, the outcasts, and the criminals, finding common ground wasn't always possible.

The Shadows were in deep shit. I honestly wasn't even sure why I was here anymore. The Umbras didn't need me. With two organized official packs, there was a possibility my old pack would be annihilated within a matter of days.

I swallowed against a lump in my throat. I didn't feel loyalty to them, but there were shifters there I cared about. Even if my emotions were a mess right now, I still didn't want anything to happen to Kate. It was hard to believe she'd purposefully deceived me all those years. If she had, did it mean our whole friendship was a lie? I wasn't sure, but I knew I didn't wish anything bad on her.

There was also Xander who, despite everything, I still felt an odd connection with. He was probably involved in the attack against the Umbras, but I couldn't bring myself to hate him. And there were plenty of members of the pack who had never done anything wrong. Shifters who were there as a matter of circumstance, for falling in love with the wrong person or getting kicked out for the crime of a family member. There were kids like me who had nowhere else to go. What was going to happen if these two packs staged an all-out war against the Shadows? This was Dax's fault, and he should take the fall.

It was probably a good thing I wasn't going to attend the upcoming meeting. As much as I thought I'd distanced myself from my old pack, I was

still emotionally attached.

I looked up at Holden, not hiding the concern in my expression. “What was your plan? What were you going to do after you took out Preston?”

“Madoc had big plans, but none of those can happen now. And nothing major would have changed until he was alpha. Honestly, I’m kind of glad I never took Preston out. It would have only sped up the timeline. Now we know how unstable Dax is, and we know he should have been our target rather than his father.”

“Preston was no great treasure from what I heard,” I said, thinking of what Xander had told me about the way Preston had treated his son. While I held no love for Dax; it still didn’t mean he deserved to be treated that way. Especially not as a child. What might he have become if he’d had a nurturing and loving parent instead of an abusive asshole raising him?

Unfortunately, his story wasn’t all that different from many members of my pack. And most of those kids didn’t grow up to be sadistic, power hungry, ruthless monsters. Preston’s blame could only go so far. At some point, Dax made the decision to embrace the darkness all on his own.

“Preston was bad; Dax is worse,” Holden said.

I nodded in agreement. “He has to go.”

CHAPTER

SIX

“GATHER ROUND. Before we discuss our next steps, I have someone who wants to share with you,” Erwin said.

My pulse raced as I watched the shifters in the room move toward the table in the center. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Madoc slip in. A sense of calm washed over me and my pulse slowed. The two of us couldn’t let on that we were friendly, and definitely couldn’t show that we were intimate, but it helped just knowing he was here. I knew if anything took a turn, he’d have my back. Of course, I hoped it never came to that, but it was reassuring, nonetheless.

I tried not to stare at him while keeping him in my field of vision. He walked over to his dad, leaned close, and whispered something in his ear. Both males gave me a look before Erwin turned and spoke to his son. With all the movement and chatter, I couldn’t catch any of their conversation. Erwin seemed satisfied though, because he patted Madoc on the arm before moving to the head of the table.

Madoc tossed me a disgusted look that made my breath shaky. I know it was acting, but it still hurt to see that expression on his face. I fixed my own face with the look of defiance, channeling the anger I felt for my former pack to guide me.

Madoc joined his father, and two younger males joined him. They both had the same dark hair and dark eyes as Madoc. One was a bit smaller in stature, and their faces were a little softer and less angular, but it was obvious they were related. The only one missing was Cavan. I wasn’t sure why, but I was grateful he wasn’t here.

Holden set his hand on the small of my back and urged the two of us

toward the table. We stood alongside it, surrounded by other shifters. Some people were focused on Erwin at the head of the table, but there were plenty of them distracted by my presence. Even if they didn't know who I was, or my history with this family, I stood out instantly since I was the only female in attendance. Even Willow wasn't present at this meeting. I was angry for a whole other reason now. Even the Umbra Pack follows the archaic system where everything was ruled by males. It was another thing that needed to change.

"As you can see, we have a guest with us today," Erwin said. "For those of you who don't know, this female broke into our home last month and was captured. Because of my firstborn's foresight, he kept her alive and traded her to bring Holden back to us."

"For which I thank you again," Holden said. "You cannot imagine how terrible it was living there for so long."

"You did get us a lot of good information over the years," Madoc said.

"Which brings me to our visitor." Erwin turned his attention to me, and I could feel the gaze of every pair of eyes from the room.

I held my chin high and refused to let them rattle me. I did take note of the fact that the description of me went from guest to visitor in a matter of moments. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I knew I didn't have Erwin's approval. Not that I wanted it. At this point, I only wanted to stay alive long enough to survive this issue with the Shadows.

"It seems then, after being treated with kindness as a prisoner of the Umbras, it brought into contrast how terrible her own pack was. And now she has graciously agreed to give us information in exchange for hospitality," Erwin said.

None of that was true. I had been beaten and abused and tortured at the hands of the Umbras. I had to wonder now if that's why Cavan wasn't here. Erwin had to know what had taken place in those cells and I could tell he wasn't stupid. I wondered if it was him who sent Cavan away to give me less reason to refute the quality of my treatment. I also knew the members of his own pack wouldn't give a shit if they had beaten a girl in a cell. He was saying this to benefit the members of the other pack.

I racked my brain trying to think about what I knew of their policies. I didn't recall hearing anything negative or warning about the Senka pack. Perhaps they were less brutal than the packs I'd been raised around.

"Why would your former prisoner agree to turn around and give us

information?” Maverick Gold, the alpha of the Senkas asked. He turned his green eyes on me. “And how do you know she’s not a spy for them?”

“My name is Ivy.”

“Ivy, I am Maverick, alpha of the Senka pack. And I don’t trust you.” He stared at me with an impassive expression, his posture straight, his chin high. He gave off an air of dignity and power in a different way than I was used to.

“You don’t need to trust me. In fact, it would be foolish of you to trust someone you just met, no matter the situation. But if it helps, the alpha of the Shadows betrayed me in the most savage way possible.”

“Your words mean nothing. As far as I can tell, you’re a scorned lover. What, did he choose another female over you?” Maverick asked.

I narrowed my eyes. “Not that I owe you an explanation, but he forced a false bond between the two of us, then bedded me while I was under the influence of the bond.”

Maverick lifted a brow. “That doesn’t guarantee your loyalty.”

“That’s fair. But this isn’t about loyalty to anyone other than myself. When I rejected him, he banished me. But I’m not foolish enough to think banishment was where it would end. I humiliated him, and with an ego the size he has, humiliation is worse than death. I have no doubt I’m being hunted. And until he is removed from power, my life is at risk. So say what you will about me, but I’m not here for any noble reason. This is survival, nothing more.”

“You expect us to believe that you’re upset all these years later after your first shift?” Maverick asked.

“As a foundling, I wasn’t allowed to run with the rest of the wolves. Every full moon, I was home by myself. Which meant my wolf never felt the urge. Dax leveraged that to his advantage,” I said. “I had my first shift recently.”

It was a little embarrassing to admit I’d shifted so late, but it was mostly the truth. They didn’t need to know about the herbs or my heritage. I meant it when I said this was about my survival. I didn’t care about their cause, I only cared that our goals were aligned.

“To forbid a shifter the community of pack on the full moon...” Maverick shook his head. “Surly no pack would do such a thing?”

“The Shadow Pack is made up of the rejects and outcasts from all the other packs. There are no rules in the Shadows. It’s every wolf for themselves,” I said.

The Senka alpha looked over at Erwin. “Is that really how it is? They’re your neighbors.”

“Yes, it is. It’s why they’re not an official recognized pack. As she said, they’re basically feral. Criminals, the lot of them.”

While Erwin spoke, I stole a glimpse of Madoc. Our eyes met for just a brief second, and I felt that familiar rush of warmth as we made that connection from across the table. We both looked away, and I felt my cheeks heat. I couldn’t risk looking at him again if I was going to blush simply from making eye contact with him.

“Ivy?”

I looked up and was greeted by a confused look on Maverick’s face.

“I’m sorry. It’s difficult sometimes to relive the trauma of everything I went through. What were you asking?”

“What can you tell us about your former alpha? Does he have any weaknesses? Is there anything we could leverage so we could get him to solve this diplomatically?” Maverick asked.

“Of course,” I said. “One of his biggest weaknesses is me.”

“How can we use that to our advantage?” Maverick said.

“Bring me with you when you meet him. He’ll let me get close. I can help,” I said.

“Absolutely not,” Madoc said with a growl.

I shot a glare at him. “I can take care of myself.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Erwin intervened. “Just tell us everything you know and let us handle him from there.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRUSTRATED, but not surprised, I blew out a breath. Where to begin with Dax? There was so much I'd learned about him. He was a loose cannon; he was unpredictable. Aside from his attachment to me, that was his next biggest weakness.

"The first thing you need to know about Dax is that he leads with emotions, not logic. He's obsessed with power and control. He'll keep anyone close if he thinks they can help him get what he wants."

"And what exactly was it that he wanted from you?" Maverick asked, a touch of defiance in his tone. "How was a girl who couldn't even shift useful to him?"

"You can't seriously think he's the first man to try and trick a woman that he finds attractive into being with him?" I narrowed my eyes, daring him to contradict me. History was littered with examples of women who had been traded as possessions, only valued for their appearance.

I knew I was pretty. Because of my status, no one was interested in getting romantically involved with me, which hadn't really bothered me when I was younger. Now that I stopped to think about it, the desire to have a partner might have been what partially drove my need to belong to the pack. I knew for sure it was what allowed me to fall into Dax's trap. If I hadn't been so desperate to fit in, so desperate for more connections, I might not have gotten sucked into his deception. I would never admit it to anyone, but I was terrified that the false bond wasn't what had driven me to his arms. I could see my mistakes so much more clearly now, but in that moment, the opportunity to fit in and finally have a place had shut down my objections.

"You're not saying there wasn't some other attractive female he could

have had? I guess what we're all getting at is how do we know you're not here on his orders? How do we know you're not his mate, as we have heard through the rumors?" Another shifter asked.

"I was nothing. A foundling with no parents, easy to manipulate and an example in a pack full of misfits. Dax being with me was a symbol to the rest of the pack. He wanted to show me off. The poor little foundling girl who rose into power because of her loyalty and her love of the alpha. Don't you see what incredible propaganda that is?" I asked.

"I watched her turn him down. I was on patrol near our border and the Shadow alpha and some of his pack attacked me. He didn't know who I was, but Ivy stepped in and saved my life. I offered her a place in our pack in exchange, but she chose to go feral after her experiences in the pack that let her down," Madoc said.

"What are you asking for in exchange for your information?" Maverick asked. "You clearly have no loyalty to the Umbras."

"When I left my pack, I didn't realize exactly how violent Dax was. Now that he's shown his hand, I don't think I'm safe. I'll provide information and I will help as long as he is in power. Once he's eliminated, I'll figure out my next steps." I was getting annoyed that all the questions were about me instead of Dax. Who exactly was the bad guy here?

"I brought her in," Holden said. "She worked for me when I was with the Shadows, and I'll vouch for her. Can we move on? She's here. The alpha wants her to share info about our opponent. Just listen and take from it what you will. We're wasting time getting her background when we need to be learning about Dax before the meeting."

"Agreed," Madoc said. "Tell us about his inner circle."

"He trusts very few people, so he hasn't even chosen an official beta yet, but he's got someone basically doing the job anyway. He buys loyalty, rather than earning it. I don't think he has a single member of his circle that is there because they believe in him. They're there because they're afraid of him or they want the power for themselves," I said.

"What of the Shadow elders? Can you give us any information about them?" another shifter asked.

"I was there in the room when they received Madoc's gift." I closed my eyes and shuddered, almost feeling the blood on my hands again.

"I sent them some heads," Madoc said. "They tried to kill me. I sent them the heads of their assassins. It was a couple days after they attempted an

assassination of my father, so I was feeling dramatic.”

I opened my eyes and looked at the males standing around the table. “When that was delivered, Dax’s immediate response was to fight. He wanted a full-scale attack, and he called for war immediately. The elders did not support it. They wanted to try diplomacy, or to apply to become an official pack. One member even said the elders would support an alpha challenge between Dax and the Umbra alpha. Dax refused. He didn’t want to do things by the books, he wanted violence. In reality, he knew he wouldn’t win. He threw me out of the meeting once I brought that up.”

“You told him that?” Madoc laughed. “Of course, you did. I would have loved to see the look on his face when he had someone tell him the truth. I held back when I fought him in the ring that night. He’s weak, and even with the alpha strength, I don’t think he would be difficult to take down.”

“Perhaps that’s the solution?” Maverick suggested. “An alpha challenge would unite your two packs under a single leader.”

Erwin growled. “No. I refuse to have those criminals as part of our pack. Most of them are people we cast out ourselves. They can’t be allowed back in our borders. It would create too much of a threat. As it is, we’re struggling to keep the human population from discovering us more and more every year. You bring in those wolves and it would doom us all. They must stay in their own territory, but we cannot have such a foolish young shifter as their leader. Tell me about this unofficial beta of his.”

“His name is Xander. I’ve spent time with him and he’s nothing like Dax. He’d make a good leader,” I said.

“Could he be convinced to challenge the alpha?” Maverick asked.

“No. When I was there, Dax held my best friend captive. He said if I didn’t cooperate, he would kill her. He’s doing something similar to keep Xander in check.” My stomach twisted into knots as I was again reminded of Kate. I really hoped she was okay after everything.

“I think that’s enough for now. Madoc, show our guest to her room. She doesn’t need to be part of every conversation,” Erwin said.

My heart fluttered in anticipation at the thought of having even a few minutes alone with Madoc. It had been painful to be so close yet so far and to have to pretend that we meant nothing to each other. The only good that came from this was that I had seen no sign that Erwin suspected we had left the bond intact.

I gave Holden a nod, then walked away from the table to where Madoc

was waiting by the door. Careful to keep my actions and my expression emotionless, I followed him out of the room.

We walked down the hall in silence; me following him at a distance. It still wasn't safe to drop our guard. It was painful to stay this way, so close yet so far. I wanted to touch him, to feel his strong embrace around me. I knew he had to feel the same way.

As soon as Madoc closed the door behind us, his arms were around me and I melted into him. A tidal wave of emotions roared through me, and I felt all the anxiety and fear I'd bottled up subside. I let myself sink into him, breathing him in and finding comfort in his embrace.

Madoc rested his head on mine, the two of us locked in each other's arms for a long, silent moment. We didn't need words to communicate the relief we felt at being able to touch each other again.

I was the first one to move, backing away enough so I could look up at him. "This is harder than I expected. It seems impossible to be in that room with you but not actually be with you."

"I know." Madoc smoothed back my hair, then moved his large hand to cradle my head. I relaxed even more, feeling totally safe. Everything about being with him felt so comfortable and so natural. It was hard to imagine that I'd spent most of my life without him, and that we'd been enemies just because of where we lived.

"I know Dax is power hungry, but he has to know he's outnumbered. That's the only reason he attacked the way he did. Once he sees that there are two packs working to stop him, I don't anticipate he'll hold on for long. You told me yourself the elders from your pack are the key to this. He'll have to back off at that meeting. After the stunt he pulled, he's lucky we didn't retaliate."

I blinked as his words settled in. Why hadn't they retaliated? "Madoc, do you think your dad is keeping things from you?"

His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Maybe because of me. Maybe because of your blood. I don't know. But don't you find his restraint strange? Why didn't they instantly get revenge?" I should have thought more about this before, but in the shock of completing the bond and the worry about being discovered, I'd let some of the other things slide.

"You know that if we attack the Shadows, it's going to be war. Not just retaliation. Full on war. We'd risk spilling over into the human population

and destroying everything we've worked so hard to build. He's being strategic," Madoc said.

"Maybe." I still wasn't sure I believed it. There was something very off about Erwin. He'd accepted my help too quickly.

"Now tell me, do you think we can leverage Xander? He sounds like the best way to fix this without too much bloodshed," Madoc said.

"Xander can't stand Dax. But he's trapped since his mate is essentially being held hostage. I don't even know if he knows where she is. But I know if I were him, and it was you I was being threatened with, I would do just about anything to keep you safe. If there's a way to ensure his mate's safety, whoever she is, Xander would be the best chance."

"If we found her, do you think he'd join us?" Madoc asked.

"I doubt we could even find her in time," I said. "But even if we did, I could see him taking the opportunity to flee with his mate and wash his hands of all pack politics."

Madoc smirked. "Now there's a tempting idea."

"You know you couldn't do it," I said.

"You're probably right," he agreed. "Do you think this is all Dax driving this, or do you think there are others behind the scenes? An elder, maybe?"

"None of the elders want war, but not because they're pacifists. I get the feeling they know it will disrupt their lives too much. They might not be loyal to Dax, but there's no way they would go against him in public."

"What about your friend? Your roommate? You told me you could trust her," Madoc said.

"I think so, but she's not involved enough. Besides, there's now the complication of the tea and the fact that I left her and chose you. I don't know where we stand."

Madoc pressed his lips to my forehead, and I closed my eyes, savoring the contact between us. He lifted my chin with his finger and then his mouth found mine. There was a sense of urgency in our kiss, and it was over far too quickly. Madoc released me from his embrace, and I already felt naked without his presence, even though he was still standing in front of me.

"I have to get back to keep up appearances. But I'll come as soon as I can. If you think of anything else that might help, let me know. The sooner we fix this problem with Dax, the sooner I can tell my dad the truth about me and you."

"What if he doesn't accept us? What if he still wants to eliminate the

problem?" I asked.

"I already told you, I won't let anything happen to you. We'll figure this out together," he said.

Part of me wanted to press the issue because I knew how important this pack was to Madoc. He was the next alpha, and I knew he was going to start making changes to improve things that should have been changed decades ago. But our relationship put everything at risk. It shouldn't, and it was one of the things that needed to change first, but shifters were stubborn, and change happened slowly.

Madoc leaned forward and gave me one more quick kiss before turning the door handle. I caught sight of Karl standing outside my door. His head nearly brushed the ceiling, reminding me just how large he was.

I put my hand on my hip and narrowed my eyes. He was supposed to be intimidating, and he was, but he was wasting his talents by standing outside my door. "You really think it's necessary to have *you* guarding little old me? What am I going to do? Run away and get slaughtered by my old pack?"

"Watch her carefully. She's stronger than she looks," Madoc said.

I rolled my eyes and had to resist the urge to smile.

"I'm not leaving this spot. And before you wonder, there are guards outside, too. So jumping out that window would not be a great idea," Karl said.

I blew out a frustrated breath that I didn't have to fake. I was really getting tired of being a prisoner. This thing with Dax better be settled fast because, as much as I loved Madoc, I wasn't sure how long I could tolerate being locked up in another room. I slammed the door without saying goodbye to my mate and a little piece of my heart broke at treating him like that.

It was all part of the plan, acting rude so that no one would let on, but every time I had to fake that we didn't have a bond, I felt like I was tearing apart my own soul. Mating bonds were intense.

The only comfort I could find at being frustrated and stressed at this whole situation was the fact that I knew Madoc was feeling the same way. It was reassuring to know that someone cared about me that deeply. I might be in enemy territory, but I had absolute faith in Madoc. He would do what it took to end this thing quickly, and then the two of us could move on together.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ROOM WAS SPARSE. It was a step up from the dungeon cell, but it had a similar feel to it. This wasn't a room you'd house a family member or an important guest. This was bare bones accommodations. I wouldn't mind if I could come and go as I pleased. But with a guard outside my door and more pacing the grounds, it felt just like the cell I'd been locked in before.

A queen-size bed protruded from the center of the longest wall. Opposite from the bed was a door that led to a small, practical bathroom. It beat the bucket in the dungeon, but it didn't even have a shower curtain on the dingy shower. The wall with the door had a small bookshelf up against it. I'd already read the one magazine left haphazardly on the dusty shelf. The last wall had a large window, which was the best feature of the room. It overlooked the backyard, and I could see the well-maintained garden. I was on the second floor and there were guards patrolling the garden. Trying to escape from the window definitely wasn't possible.

I jumped from the bed the second I heard the doorhandle turn. After nearly an hour of pacing, I was getting restless. My shoulders sagged when Willow stepped into the room.

"Wow, don't be so obviously upset that I'm not someone else," she said.

I caught sight of Karl peering into the room. He was definitely listening to every word of our conversation. Fixing an indifferent expression on my face, I crossed my arms over my chest. "Don't take it personally. For some reason, I'm not a fan of being trapped in here like a prisoner. I was hoping for information about moving on the Shadow Pack so I could get out of here."

Willow looked around. "At least it's a prettier cage this time."

"It's still a cage."

She hummed, then lifted the paper bag in her hands. "Hungry?"

I could smell the greasy fast food, and my stomach growled in response. "I can eat."

"None of my famous quesadillas this time," she said with a grin.

It was odd that she was joking about how she'd given me food while I was locked in their dungeon. She was talking to me as if we were old friends and I wasn't still a prisoner of her pack. She'd welcomed me at Madoc's apartment, but I was still cautious.

"You can close the door, Karl. We'll be fine."

"If she tries anything, holler for me," Karl said.

"As if I couldn't take her," Willow said.

Karl grunted, then closed the door.

"I'm not sure who would win if we fought," I said. "Wolf form, you'd win. Human form..."

"I wouldn't mess with you in human form. Not with that extra gift of yours," she said.

"Madoc told you?" I asked,

She shrugged. "The only thing he didn't share was the details about completing the bond. For which I am very, very grateful."

I grimaced. Willow probably knew more about my relationship with Madoc than anyone else. It was strange because I didn't have anyone I could talk to anymore with Kate being out of the picture.

Willow stepped into the center of the room and looked around. "I guess there isn't a great place to eat in here. Picnic on the floor?"

"You're staying to eat with me?" I asked.

"You might be locked in here, but you're not actually a prisoner. I thought you could use some company. Especially after everything you went through." She sat down in the middle of the floor and started pulling out hamburgers and fries. She placed napkins down and set all the food on top of them as if it really was a picnic.

I sat down across from her. "You really don't need to eat with me if you have other things to do."

"What else could I do right now? They don't exactly welcome anyone without a penis in the war room." She rolled her eyes.

"They sure couldn't get rid of me fast enough." I grabbed a paper wrapped burger.

"It was brave, what you did for Madoc," she said. "He told me about the

potion. You were ready to give it all up for him.”

“He couldn’t lose his pack,” I said.

“You also gave up your pack for him,” she said.

“You’re making me sound like I’m a lovesick crazy person,” I said.

She shook her head. “No. You’re brave. I don’t think you did it all for him. You walked away from the Shadow alpha. That took guts.”

“Look what it got me.” I gestured around the room.

“It’s going to pay off,” she said.

“It might get me killed,” I countered.

“Madoc won’t let that happen. And neither will I.” She took a bite of her burger.

I unwrapped the food. “Thanks. For lunch and the support.”

“I talked to Freya,” she said.

I finished chewing, then set the burger on the wrapper. “How is she? Did they find a safe place?”

“Yeah, they’re safe. They’re staying at an old feral hideout, so they have what they need for now.”

“Hey, do you know what Madoc’s up to? I was hoping to see him after the meeting I was sent away from.”

“I don’t know. They’re all staying busy right now.” She crumbled up the paper from her burger. “You already know Madoc and I are close. He’s my best friend, my brother, my family. He’s special, but you already know that.”

“Yeah, he’s different from the rest of his family,” I said, even though I probably shouldn’t have. I didn’t know what her relationships were like with the others.

“I don’t have anyone else. Just this group of rowdy boys and my uncle. They’re my family. But I always wanted a sister.” She smiled.

My throat felt tight. Willow was so protective of Madoc, something the two of us had in common. “Me too.”

We ate the rest of our meal in silence, then we shoved all the trash back in the bag. “Be careful, Ivy.”

“Thanks for lunch,” I said. “And good luck.”

She nodded, then left. The room felt a little less empty after her visit, and I felt a little less alone.

CHAPTER NINE

SHORTLY AFTER WILLOW left my room, the door opened again. My entire body tensed when I caught sight of Cavan glaring at me.

“You shouldn’t be here. I don’t know how you convinced everyone that anything you have to say is helpful,” he said.

“Well then, it’s a good thing that the decision wasn’t yours. My reasons for being here are between me and your father,” I said.

“And sometimes he’s a foolish, easily deceived old man. I’m not as easily swayed. And I’ll be watching you, waiting for you to screw up,” he said.

“Is that what you’re doing here? Coming in to threaten unarmed shifters who are deep in enemy territory? What kind of harm could I possibly cause in this situation? Why on earth would I come here, into the lion’s den, if I didn’t have a very good reason?” I said.

“That’s what I’m going to figure out. Coming to give intel about your old pack isn’t worth the risk. You’re up to something. And as soon as I figure it out, your time’s up. Not even Madoc will be able to hold me back this time,” he said.

There wasn’t anything I could say that would sway him, and I wasn’t sure if I cared. Cavan was dangerous. He was going to be a threat to me even after Madoc and I shared about the bond between us. Part of me was terrified at being alone in this room with him, but I knew I couldn’t let the fear win. Besides, I could still see Karl standing in the hall, listening to every word of our exchange. He had been instructed to keep an eye on me and I had a feeling that if not for him, Cavan might have thrown me around a little. The fact that he hadn’t made me wonder whose side he was on. Cavan wasn’t in charge. His father was. And under him, was Madoc. Cavan was forced to

play ball, and I rather liked that idea. Maybe Karl was loyal to my mate. There wasn't any way I could know for sure, but Madoc had asked me to trust him.

"Is there anything else?" I asked. "You're wasting my time."

"You're locked in a room alone with nothing to do," Cavan said.

"And it was far more productive than this conversation I'm having with you." I put my hands on my hips and waited impatiently. If he was going to do something, I'd rather him do it now than continue to string this out. If he just came here to throw insults and threats, I'd rather he finish and leave. While being alone in this room was starting to wear on me, it was better than dealing with Cavan.

"I was sent to retrieve you. It's an insult, honestly." He glanced over at Karl. "You take her. I don't have time to deal with this. My father wants her back in the war room."

"If the alpha asked you to do it, then it's your job," Karl said.

"You forget who you're addressing. Now do your job and take her like I asked," Cavan said.

I bit down on the inside of my lip to keep myself from smiling. Cavan was shaking a little, clearly surprised by the fact that Karl had stood up to him. Instead of showing dominance, he came across as a spoiled child. There was a lot more power dynamic here than I realized. Maybe Karl could be an ally.

"I don't take my orders from you. The alpha put me on guard duty. I will protect her as I was instructed, and I will put her down if she steps out of line. But I will not be a tour guide. If he asked you to do something, do it," Karl said.

Cavan snarled, then huffed out a breath of frustration. He was trying to throw his weight around and he'd been cut short so easily. He was a loose cannon, someone who wanted power but was incapable of reining in his emotions. It was why he'd beaten me so aggressively even when Madoc had told him not to. He didn't know how to hold back or how to toe the line in any level of moderation. Cavan was all in one way or the other, which made him dangerous.

I was suddenly grateful that Karl had been stationed outside my door. While I knew Madoc would do whatever he could to protect me, he wasn't here at this moment and Cavan could go from angry to brutal in a heartbeat. I wasn't as helpless as I once was now that I had access to my magic, but I

needed that to stay under wraps until we were ready to share. Even then, I wasn't comfortable with people knowing exactly what I could do.

Most shifters were already afraid enough of the fae. It was one thing to have a gift like Madoc's, where he could tell if someone was being honest; it was another thing to be able to cause an explosion from your hands. One of those gifts was far more socially acceptable than the other. As soon as people knew what I was capable of, they'd either be like Dax and try to use me to their advantage, or they be terrified of me.

I supposed the third option was what Erwin did to the fae. I suppressed a shudder at the thought. He was responsible for the death of so many who shared my similar bloodline. I didn't want to be helping him, but change took time and I needed to do whatever it took to survive. I'd figure out how to deal with the Umbras once the Shadow Wolves were under control. They were a means to an end.

"Well, are you coming or what?" Cavan asked.

"Lead the way." There wasn't any reason to rile him up more. And I was honestly thrilled at the prospect of getting out of this room and the possibility of seeing Madoc, even from a distance. I stepped toward the door and followed Cavan down the hall. Karl followed behind us, which made me smile. He could have easily taken me to the war room since he had to follow me anyway, but I appreciate the way he talked back to Cavan.

When we arrived, Cavan spun on his heels and exited the room without a word, leaving me and Karl alone in the war room with Erwin. Disappointment settled in my gut. No Madoc. But at least there wasn't anyone else here, either.

Actually, I wasn't sure if that was a good thing. The only witness if Erwin decided to harm me would be Karl. I wasn't sure if I could sway him to like me, but I knew he was currently loyal to the alpha.

The space looked much larger than it had previously now that it was empty of other shifters. The huge table at the center was still covered in documents and maps and the photos of members of my old pack were still pinned on the walls. An icy chill skittered down my back when I caught sight of my photo right next to one of Dax. I tried not to think too hard about the fact that I was still up there on the wall with the other enemies of their pack.

"I need to know locations." Erwin said without preamble. He extended his hand, offering a pencil. "Label everything you can."

He shoved some papers out of the way and I looked down at the table to

see a map of the Fringes. Holden's bar was already labeled along with the alpha's house, the hall of records, the foundling house, and several other prominent structures. I wasn't sure what use me labeling other shops and locations was going to be when they had so much information already. But I needed to play along, do my part to show that I was helping the Umbras.

I hesitated, my hand hovering over the middle of Main Street. For the first time, I felt like a traitor to the pack I'd grow up in. I'd come with the intention of taking down Dax, but this was bigger than that. Then I remembered that Holden had lived in the Fringes for decades. He knew the town better than I did. He knew more shifters, had access to more information. Anything I'd give would be secondary. Erwin cleared his throat, and I shoved the misgivings aside. What had the Shadows ever done for me, anyway?

Quietly, I began labeling the other shops and a few of the homes. It honestly wasn't anything new, I was sure. With Holden on the Umbra payroll, they already had all of this information. They would know where every elder lived, where each strategic location was, and probably far more about the geography than I did. I wondered if this was a test to see how compliant I could be. I put in as much as I could, careful to avoid labeling my place, Kate's parent's house, and Xander's home. The last thing I labeled was the clearing where we held the full moon parties, and then I set the pencil down on the table.

Erwin scanned the map, dragging his finger from location to location. His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed as he studied every marking I made. Finally, he looked up from the map and set his gaze on me. "Good work. Do you remember where Willow's room is?"

I was sure my jailer would be following me, so I didn't think it mattered all that much, but I nodded. "I think so."

"Good. She's working on a few things for us. You can see if she needs any help." Erwin turned his attention back to the map, and I took that as my cue for dismissal.

So this was a test. And it seemed like I had passed. I glanced at Karl, noting his impassive expression. He didn't give any reaction I could read. He was going to be difficult to figure out. While he'd turned down Cavan's orders in favor of the alpha, that didn't mean much. In some packs, alphas changed often and there were always shifters who would follow the title, no matter what.

I wondered if he was like Xander in that sense. Loyal to whoever the alpha was, or if he was Erwin's man. Though, now that I knew more about Xander, I realized his loyalty to the alpha had nothing to do with his desire to serve the pack. Everything he did was because whoever the alpha was, they held the life of his mate over his head. My hands curled into fists involuntarily and a little surge of anger flared in my chest. Maybe when this was all done, we could go through the records at the alpha house and find out where they had sent her. Or maybe Xander could use the connection to find her himself once he knew the threat was no longer hanging over her. There were hundreds of human cities, thousands even. If she'd been forced to live like a human without tapping into her wolf, would the mating bonds still connect them? There were so many things I didn't know, but I really hoped that when this was all figured out, Xander could find the peace he deserved.

All of us deserved that.

CHAPTER TEN

I FOUND Willow on the floor in her bedroom surrounded by jars, little boxes, and bags of herbs. Her eyes widened when she saw me. “So they sentenced you to join me doing the only acceptable job for a female in this family?”

“I guess so. The alpha couldn’t wait to get me out of the war room,” I said.

“I’ve never even been inside the war room. They take that boys’ club thing very seriously around here,” she said.

Her eyes flicked to where I knew Karl was standing like a sentinel behind me, then she returned her gaze to me. “I’m making healing poultices and then I’ll probably make some things to help get through *that* time of the month. Any interest?”

“Yeah, I’d love to help,” I said.

“Karl, you can start by handing me that lavender. It’s the best thing to add to my anti-bloating poultice. Need me to make you a batch?” Willow asked. “You can bring it to that special lady of yours.”

“I’ll wait outside,” Karl said. “Call for me if you need anything.”

“Bye!” Willow said a little too eagerly.

I stifled a giggle as I heard the door click shut behind Karl. With a backward glance to make sure the room really was clear, I let the laugh free. “You’d think with that scar on his face he wouldn’t be so easily disgusted by ordinary bodily functions.”

“Oh, you should see him around his own blood. The mere sight of it makes him pass out. He can take gallons of the stuff from anyone else, but you prick his finger with a needle and he’s on the floor.” She laughed. “I’ve learned everyone around here has a weakness. It’s just not always what you

expect it to be.”

“It’s funny how that works, isn’t it? Some people hide things we could never imagine.” I took a seat on the floor next to her and looked around at her selection of herbs.

“You’re an interesting addition to that dynamic.” Willow set the box she was holding down on the ground.

“What dynamic?” I asked.

“Weaknesses. You yourself seemed to have gotten under the skin of two very powerful shifters.” She lowered her voice to a whisper, “If anyone knew the full extent of what you were capable of, they wouldn’t let you out of their sight for a second.”

“The magic?” I asked quietly.

She shook her head. “Not that. It’s the Helen of Troy shit. You’ve got the alpha of the Shadows and the heir to the Umbras both willing to kill and die for you.”

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. “I never asked for that. And there’s only one of them that I’d die for.”

“Exactly. Just like Helen of Troy,” she said.

“I have no intention of being the cause of anyone’s war,” I said.

“I think it’s too late for that. I wouldn’t say you’re the cause exactly, but you’re a key player. And there’s not much you can do about that. At this point, it’s going to come down to who’s the strongest and who has the best alliances. Right now, they’re playing it like cat and mouse. But everyone knows what that meeting on the new moon really is. It’s just an appointment for a battle. No one’s going with the intention of making peace,” she said.

“Why wait? I’m surprised the Umbras are sitting here patiently awaiting an obvious attack after what the Shadows did,” I said.

“So far, all the attacks have been on the outskirts, and nobody’s died. Easy to hide from humans. If we escalate it now, we’re at risk of involving the non-magical parts of the city. Nobody wants that. Even your ex-boyfriend isn’t stupid enough to involve the humans. That’s a mess none of us could clean up. Discretion allows us certain privileges that wouldn’t exist if humans were aware of our existence. We might be more powerful than them, but there’s a lot more of them than there are of us, and humans do stupid things when they’re scared,” she said.

“I don’t think Dax gives a shit about humans. He’s cocky enough to think that our kind could take them out,” I said.

“Which is probably why Erwin agreed to the meeting, even knowing full well that it’s a trap. But based on the preparations I’m seeing around the house, nobody is intending to walk into that unarmed or unprepared for a battle,” she said.

“The Shadows can’t be that dense. They have to know there’s a battle headed their way,” I said. “They won’t last against the Umbras.”

“You’ve told us how cocky Dax is. He probably thinks he can win. I would bet Erwin is counting on his lack of experience.” She narrowed her eyes. “But you’ve never once mentioned that. He’s young, right?”

“He is. He’s a good fighter, but not as good as Madoc. But he’s bloodthirsty and hungry. They shouldn’t underestimate him,” I said. I knew in a fair fight, Madoc could take Dax. But I knew getting a fair fight wasn’t likely. He had to have something up his sleeve, but what was his plan? He continued to antagonize the Umbras by attacking the shifters who lived near the border, then fleeing into the night. It was bizarre and didn’t make any sense.

“I suppose that’s where the healing poultices come in. It’s funny, when Erwin first caught me dabbling in minor witchcraft, he was furious. But after he got bit by a rattlesnake and I was able to calm the injury and remove the poison with a mixture of herbs, he stopped questioning it.” She grinned.

“I wondered about that. I thought witches weren’t really welcome in the other packs,” I said.

“They have their uses. But they aren’t pack the way they are with the feral wolves or the Shadows,” she said.

“Can you teach me?” I had a little too much first-hand experience with how powerful herbs and potions could be at the hands of a witch. But I rather like the idea of something that could be used for good, for healing. Especially since that is what I had thought the tea was doing for me.

Willow didn’t waste any time teaching me the names of the herbs and showing me how to weigh them and mix them into the little bags. It was a tedious but meditative process and once I had the rhythm, my thoughts wandered.

I thought about Kate and wondered if she ever helped her mom bag up potions or remedies. Had she helped make the tea when she went to visit her parents?

Willow reminded me of her, and after the initial pang of sorrow at that thought, I leaned into it. It was nice to have someone to talk with.

The two of us spend the next several hours in easy conversation while we bagged up herbs. The time went by quicker than I expected and I much preferred this to the solitude of the room I'd been given.

After we'd made enough, Willow and I delivered them to Erwin, who grunted in response but happily took the boxes from us. Erwin shooed us away without any instructions for me. I took that to mean I didn't have to return to my room.

"Want a tour?" Willow asked.

"Sounds good," I said.

"We can't go into the south wing. That's where all the official business happens, but I can show you most of the estate."

With Karl as my persistent shadow, I followed Willow around the estate. She showed me music rooms, offices, and a library. We peeked inside bedrooms covered in sheets and dust. The Umbra mansion was massive.

As we walked down a long corridor, I paused to look out the window, catching sight of a hedge maze and garden. I'd seen part of the garden from my room, but I hadn't seen just how expansive it was.

"Want to go see it? It's pretty nice today," Willow said.

"I'd love that." It was that strange time of year where the weather fluctuated between winter and spring. Today was inching closer to the spring side, but there was still a crispness in the air that warned us that winter wasn't finished with us yet.

After a walk around the garden, we grabbed some pizza from the stack of boxes in the kitchen. Willow and I talked about random stuff, none of it too deep. With Karl following us, it wasn't possible. But it was still an excellent distraction. It almost felt like I was spending time with a friend, but every time I started to get comfortable, I would catch sight of the scarred guard who was always at my heels.

Twice, I saw Madoc from a distance. Both times, my heart thumped wildly in my chest, and I had to force myself not to stare at him for too long. He did the same, giving me a longer look than he probably should have before returning to whatever he was working on.

All too soon, it was time for dinner. I wasn't looking forward to the night of isolation awaiting me. At least I wasn't going to the dungeons.

Piles of sandwiches wrapped in paper were stacked high on the counter in the kitchen. The offer of food had brought in all the shifters who were lingering around the house, and I got to see the sheer number of people who

were hard at work plotting for the fight with the Shadows.

Dozens of shifters were in and out of the kitchen or finding little cubbies or nooks to sit and eat. They sat in small groups, eating and conversing easily. I had lost track of Willow, and unfortunately, Karl was still at my side.

I grabbed a sandwich, then looked around for an empty space to sit. Willow would be able to find me easier if I stayed in one place. Suddenly, I felt a familiar calm, and I knew without looking that Madoc had walked into the room. I turned and my breath hitched as our eyes met.

He quickly moved his attention to Karl. "Has my dad had you following her all day?" Madoc chuckled. "Not a great use of resources. I'd have swapped you out for one of the new guys now that she's shown she isn't going to run."

"I've had worse assignments," Karl said.

"I can babysit if you need a break," Madoc said.

Internally, I was screaming at Karl to get away and let me have some time with Madoc. But I fixed a bored expression on my face and then began to fiddle with the paper wrapped around my sandwich.

"I'll take her to the dining room. No outside exits, easy to secure. You want to meet us there after you eat? I can give you a few minutes," Madoc said.

Karl pursed his lips as he considered the offer, and I didn't breathe. Finally, he gave one nod and then walked back toward the pile of food. Karl hadn't even considered listening to Cavan, but he was willing to trust Madoc. I wasn't sure if he had a better relationship with my mate or if Madoc just held more power overall. Either way, I wasn't going to complain.

We weren't even out of sight but I could already feel the tension melting away just from the prospect of getting to be near Madoc, even if the time was short.

The dining room was completely enclosed. The only entrance was a single pocket door and along the back there were a few windows with the shades drawn. It was about as private as you could get in this place without ducking into one of the bedrooms.

As soon as the door slid closed, Madoc pushed me up against the wall and pressed his lips to mine. I dropped the sandwich threw my arms around him, trying to pull him closer to me. I needed to touch him, to feel him, to make sure he was still real. I breathed in his scent, memorized the taste of his kiss, and reveled in the feel of his body against mine. The kiss was hungry and

desperate and over far too soon.

When Madoc backed away, his chest was rising and falling in heavy pants. My eyes dropped to the bulge in his jeans, and I gave him a knowing smile.

“I’ve been dreaming of touching you all day,” he said.

“Me too. I hate this.”

He leaned down and picked up my wrapped sandwich, then handed it to me. “I know. But we’re only a few days away from that meeting and as soon as it’s over, everything is going to change for us. Just trust me.”

The two of us sat down at the table just as a group of three shifters burst in through the door carrying food of their own. “Can we join you?”

“Go ahead,” Madoc said. Under the table, his fingers moved in lazy circles across my thigh.

I wasn’t sure how I managed to eat anything while Madoc continued to touch me. My core was on fire and little shivers raced up and down my spine.

The door slid open and Karl walked in. “She give you any trouble?”

“None at all,” Madoc said.

It took everything I had not to whimper when he moved his hand from my leg. The food in my mouth tasted like ash but I reminded myself it was just for a few days. Then everything would be better, right?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE NEXT FEW days flew by in a flurry of activity. Every so often, Erwin would call me into the war room and ask me a specific question about Dax or the Shadow Pack, or one of the elders. Most of the time, I didn't really know the answer.

I hadn't been super plugged in and I was feeling a little bit guilty about my initial assertion that I could be of use to the Umbras. Holden was in the room every time, nodding in encouragement when he could get away with it. We never got a chance to talk, but sometimes he would add in a comment to support me or build on what I had already said. I could tell he was looking out for me, though he was very good at making it look like he was trying to show off for his alpha.

All of my times in the war room were short. In and out in a matter of minutes, making it so I never got a good look at most of the people present. Each time I was pulled in, the group seemed to grow. From that first meeting where it was just me and Erwin, it expanded to Holden and Madoc. Sometimes Cavan and the two younger Umbra brothers were in attendance, and I'd also seen the Senka alpha and various shifters I didn't recognize. Sometimes the room was packed, other times it was an intimate group. It happened so often during the next several days that I stopped getting nervous when I would have to pop in. At least it broke up the monotony.

The best part of my day was when Willow would spring me from my room so we could walk in the gardens, carefully followed by my ever-present shadow, Karl. Other than that brief glorious few minutes in the dining room alone with Madoc, Karl didn't let me out of his sight. All of my interactions with my mate were at a distance, but every so often we would pass in the hall

and he would brush his fingers against mine, sending a shiver down my back.

We were so close, the new moon was creeping up on us and I kept telling myself that if we made it that far, we'd get through the next part.

It was odd waiting around for the Umbras to take out my old pack. I felt guilty at how I was contributing, but I couldn't think of another solution. Dax was dangerous, and I knew he needed to be removed. The only thing that made me feel better was the fact that I knew Erwin didn't want to swallow up the Shadow Wolves. In the bits and pieces of information I had gathered, it sounded more like they wanted to get rid of Dax and place someone who would be a better ally at the helm.

Several times, I had mentioned Xander as a good alternative to Dax. I wasn't sure if they listened to me, and I really hoped that me bringing him up didn't put a target on his back. Willow seemed to know more than me, always finding ways to know the gossip even though she wasn't allowed in the war room.

Karl trailed behind us as we walked through the gardens. I paused to take in the first signs of sprouting green leaves. "Look at this. I didn't see these blooms yesterday, did you?"

Willow leaned down and inspected the flowers. Tiny green shoots were pushing their way up through the earth. "Looks like it might actually be spring. About time. I think I was over winter weeks ago."

"Seemed to hang on this year, didn't it?" I asked. Our conversations were often stilted when we were outside because of Karl being so close. The few times she'd managed to kick him out so we could sit in her room were the only times I got actual information.

We walked a little more until we reached a stone bench. Willow took a seat and stretched out her legs, lifting her face up to the sun. Eyes closed, she basked in the warmth. I joined her, letting myself lower my guard enough to close my own eyes. The sunshine was wonderful and with the number of times I'd been locked into a cell or a room lately, I tried to appreciate all the fresh air I could get. I was hoping my time being locked up was done after this, but I hadn't had the best luck recently. There was no way I wasn't going to appreciate every ray of sunshine on my face.

I heard Willow move, and I opened my eyes. She turned to look at Karl, who was standing awkwardly near us, squinting into the sun. "I could bring her back into the house for you after our walk. Nobody has to know."

"I don't think so," Karl said.

“Where am I going to go? Run back to the Shadows so my ex-boyfriend can slaughter me?” I still didn’t like that term for Dax, but I felt like it got my point across easier.

“Remember that thing I make for you every month?” Willow said.

Karl’s eyes widened for a flash, then he narrowed them. “You know it’s my job to make sure nothing happens to her. Or to make sure she doesn’t run.”

“Erwin trained me well. I think I can handle it,” Willow said. “Or have you forgotten the last time we sparred?”

I glanced at Willow, surprised by her words. That was a side of her I had never seen before. Willow had many talents, that I didn’t doubt. I just never knew fighting was one of them. It shouldn’t be a surprise, even us foundlings in the Shadow Pack had been trained to fight. But the Umbras seemed even more old-fashioned with how they treated the females in their pack. Willow was still the only one I had ever seen inside this house.

“I’d pay good money to see you two spar,” I said with a grin.

Karl growled.

“I always come through for you, Karl. You know my word is good. Just give the poor girl some space for a change,” Willow said. “You can’t tell me there’s not something else or *someone* else you’d rather spend the afternoon with?”

Karl’s jaw tightened, but he looked like he was considering Willow’s request. I held my breath, trying not to get my hopes up. It wasn’t like the alone time would get me anything, but I knew I breathed a little easier without him staring at me all the time.

“She needs to be in her room by sunset,” Karl said. “Don’t let anyone see.” He turned and walked away.

I waited until he was out of earshot before I turned to Willow. “How did you do that? What do you have on him? And please tell me you kicked his ass when you sparred with him. I really need to hear that story.”

“He’s one of my regular customers,” Willow said with a shrug.

I lifted my brows. “Customers?”

She elbowed me. “Not like that. He buys herbs from me. Specifically, birth control. I don’t know who he’s been messing around with, but he’s very uninterested in getting his partner pregnant.”

My brow furrowed. Shifter children were rare, especially when you were having sex with another shifter. We almost never worried about birth control.

But that wasn't the only option in here. We weren't in a supernatural town like the Fringes. "He's seeing a human."

"That's my guess. It's a lot easier to knock up a human woman than it is a shifter," she said. "I wasn't totally sure until I saw his reaction just now. He really doesn't want anyone to know what he buys from me every month, and Erwin would *never* approve of one of his favorites having a human wife."

"Are they close? Karl and Erwin?" I asked.

"Karl's hard to read. He takes his job seriously, but I've never been able to tell if it's just a job or if he's truly friends with my uncle," she said.

That was the same read I'd gotten on him and it left me with so many questions. How many of the shifters here were actually loyal to Erwin? Maybe things weren't all that different than they were in the Shadows. Maybe alliances could be bought and sold just the same.

"How many of these customers do you have? I'm sure you're collecting quite a few secrets in your line of work," I said.

"Where do you think I get most of my information?" she said. "They won't let me in the war room, but I get what I need."

"And? Any news?" I rolled the hem of my shirt in my fingers nervously. The more time went by, the more concerned I was about my former pack. I tried to tell myself they didn't deserve my pity. So many of them had mistreated me my entire life, but I couldn't bring myself to wish the harm on them that they had put me through.

How about that? Despite everything, I'd turned out to be a decent person. I wished the same could be said for more of the shifters that I had been raised around.

"They've brought in a few sharpshooters. Mercenaries who don't pledge to a specific pack," she said. "Last we talked about this, I thought they were going for a full-on battle. Now I think they've changed strategies. More like what you've been pressing for. Eliminate their alpha and let things go back to the way they were. Turns out, they're listening to you."

"Back to when they ignored the Shadows and used them as a dumping ground for anyone they didn't like." My tone was darker than I intended. It was what I wanted, wasn't it? But it didn't dismiss the fact that the Umbras were awful. They both were.

"One step at a time," Willow said.

I nodded. Dax was terrible. I had a feeling he was responsible for a lot more damage than I would ever know. I couldn't bring myself to feel even an

ounce of remorse for Dax. So maybe I wasn't *that* good of a person after all. When the dust settled from this, I wanted him gone. I wasn't sure what kind of a person that made me, but I was willing to live with that.

"Holden has been going to bat for your friend. Saying he'd get behind him as the new alpha. Xander, right?" she asked.

"Well, that's good," I said. I still couldn't be certain that Xander was the best person for the job, but if it was between him or the gang that Dax had run with in high school, Xander was a far better choice. "Once he's free from Dax, he can find his mate. I think he'll help smooth things over with the feral shifters, too."

"How can you be so certain?" Willow asked. "Most shifters want nothing to do with the feral shifters."

I knew Willow was friends with at least one of the members of the feral wolves, but Xander's secret was mine to share. "Just a feeling."

Fat raindrops landed on my cheek and arm, the moisture coming out of nowhere. I looked up to catch sight of a few tiny clouds that hadn't been there when we sat down.

Willow held her hand up in the air. "At least it's not snow."

I scanned the sky and saw the building storm clouds in the distance. "The sun was nice while it lasted."

"Let's head in. We can hide out in my room until you have to go back to yours." Willow suggested.

The two of us stepped back into the house and as we climbed the stairs toward her bedroom, I saw the familiar form of my favorite shifter in the entire world.

Madoc was alone, standing near the top of the stairs, poised to go down. He backed up and waited for us to approach, and I noticed that he was alone. It was rare to see him without other shifters trailing him. As the future alpha, he always had an entourage.

"You lost your jailer," he said.

"I have to return her to her room by sundown or she turns into a pumpkin," Willow said. She made a show of looking up and down the hall, then back down the stairs. I glanced around, hardly believing my luck that we were truly alone.

"I'm going to get some work done in my room. Why don't you get some rest in yours," Willow said before waggling her eyebrows.

I shook my head and gave her a little push. She laughed, then waved

before disappearing into her bedroom. Madoc and I stood in the hallway staring at each other for a long moment before I realized we were wasting time. A wide grin spread on my lips, and I grabbed his hand and pulled, leading him to the room that had felt so much like a prison cell. Right now, I was incredibly grateful for the fact that nobody came in or out of the space except for me and that Karl always knocked.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I STRETCHED my hand out and reached across the bed. Disappointment was heavy in my chest even as it hit me that I shouldn't have been surprised. I knew Madoc would be gone by the morning, but I couldn't turn off the incomplete feeling I had knowing he wasn't even in the house anymore.

Madoc asked me to trust him, and I did. That didn't mean this was any easier. With a sigh, I threw back the covers and got out of bed. A sense of unease lingered at the realization that Madoc wouldn't be here to protect me if something went wrong.

We'd hardly spent any time together the last few days, but he'd still been close enough that I could have used his assistance if needed. Now he was out by the border, patrolling the space between my old home and where I currently resided. I couldn't quite call this place my home yet, but maybe it would be one day. That didn't feel right, but the Fringes wasn't home anymore either.

Then I remembered I could protect myself.

That was why I'd insisted I come with him. I wanted to be near him, to help him, to protect *him* if needed. And now I couldn't do that, either. I hated that he was so far from me. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to help at the border for long.

A fist pounded on the door and I quickly glanced around for my clothes. "Just a minute."

The door swung open just as I was snapping up my jeans, my chest still bare. "I said just a minute!"

Karl's eyes fell on me for only a second before he stepped into the room without explanation.

"I'm naked here," I said.

He grunted. "You have pants on."

I rolled my eyes. *Shifters*. Being naked wasn't an excuse for privacy.

Karl wasn't looking at me, though. His eyes scanned every crevice as he walked around the small space. He'd never walked in uninvited before, and my heart raced in response. Had someone seen Madoc and me together last night? If they had, why would they send Karl to check now?

I tugged a tee over my head, then followed him around the room. "Find what you're looking for?"

He turned to me. "You have clothes on."

"Yeah. That's what people do when they wake up in the morning," I said. "Was that why you barged in here? To see if I had clothes on?" I knew that wasn't the case, but I wanted to see if I could make him blush.

It worked.

His face and ears went bright red. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not my type. Someone said they saw... Never mind. Alpha wants to talk to you."

I had no idea what time it was, but it sure felt early for a summons from the alpha. There was a strange, buzzy energy as we walked through the halls. People moved faster than usual and spoke in rapid-fire tones. Things had been worked to a frenzy, which I suppose made sense considering the approaching deadline.

I turned toward the staircase that led to the war room, but Karl called me back. "We're headed downstairs today."

Brow furrowed, I followed Karl, retracing steps that were all too familiar. Tension made my insides tight, and my pulse skyrocketed as Karl opened the door to the dungeons.

I hesitated, wondering if this was a trap. After all, Madoc had been sent away. What if Erwin never believed us? What if he was buying his time? What if he waited until he could send Madoc away before locking me up again?

"Do you need me to carry you?" Karl asked.

I tossed a dirty look his way before descending the stairs in front of him. If this was a trap, there wasn't much I could do about it. I'd have to use my fae magic, revealing the power I had, and then I'd have to run. As long as it was just Erwin and Karl, I was pretty sure I could get out of this alive. The two of them wouldn't live through it, but if it came down to it, I would fight for myself.

Unfortunately, there was a third shifter present and I couldn't stop the goosebumps that traveled up my arms. Madoc's sadistic brother and his father were both waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs. I couldn't see anything in the darkness beyond them with the way the cells were angled. I desperately wanted to know if those cell doors were open, ready to swallow me whole, or if they were filled with someone I might know.

I wasn't sure which would be the worst situation. Just as the thought struck me, a flicker of terror brought a little voice to mind; *getting locked up would be far worse*. I couldn't ignore that fact. As much as I wanted to be benevolent and concerned for anyone who might be captured by the Umbras, I wasn't sure I could handle going back in one of those cells. The thought made my skin crawl, and I had to resist the urge to run back up the stairs.

"What you see down here today does not leave this dungeon, understand?" Erwin said.

I nodded, hoping whatever I was in store for wasn't too gruesome.

"Brings back those warm fuzzies, doesn't it?" Cavan said with a grin. "This is the first place we met. Perhaps you'd like to go inside one of the cells for old times' sake."

"Cut it out, Cavan. She's here to work. I don't need you messing with her head and throwing off her game," Erwin said.

I was surprised at Erwin's strange way of shutting down Cavan and taking my side. If that's what that was. I supposed it meant he was satisfied with the information I had been providing so far. Maybe I was doing better than I thought in our little meetings.

"You worked at Holden's bar." It was a statement, not a question, so I nodded.

"Which means you saw just about everyone who lived in the Fringes. I need you to identify some shifters for me. We caught them snooping around our grounds last night," Erwin said.

"Oh, I'm sure they're friends of hers. That seems to be Ivy's specialty. Breaking and entering into Umbra property," Cavan said.

I threw a glare at him but didn't bother humoring him with a response.

"You and Karl wait upstairs," Erwin said.

"Dad, I should be here," Cavan said.

"Are you saying I can't take care of myself?" Erwin asked.

Cavan grunted but turned and stalked toward the stairs. Karl followed him silently.

“Let’s go.” Erwin started walking toward the cells and somehow, my feet moved me forward.

“There are three of them in there. They all said they weren’t Shadows, but with everything going on, I need to be certain. My concern is that we have another pack sniffing around. We can’t have people see us as weak just because we’re waiting for the right moment to strike.”

I supposed that made sense. It did make the Umbras look bad to simply sit here and do nothing from an outsider’s perspective after another pack had attacked their lands and their people several times. I wasn’t sure I bought the theory that they were waiting to have a battle that wouldn’t involve humans, but it wasn’t like Erwin was going to give me the details. It felt like there was something else going on, something larger. But I couldn’t focus on that. Aside from Madoc and now Willow, I didn’t harbor a lot of affection for anyone in the Umbra Pack. As long as their plan kept those two safe, I didn’t really care. At least, that’s what I told myself.

We stopped in front of the cell next to the one I had previously occupied. The cell where I’d been still had a pile of papers on the floor from when Cavan had thrown the documents I’d attempted to steal. The door was closed, but the fact that they had never cleaned it out felt significant. Like a reminder of how easy it would be for them to return me to the dungeon.

I looked past it, focusing my attention on the three miserable looking figures inside the cell we now stood in front of. They were all hunched over and curled up, making it impossible for me to discern details in the dim light.

Erwin slammed a metal rod against the iron bars, filling the dungeon with an echoing clang. The sound made me hiss out a breath, and I winced. My skin prickled, and I recalled the sensation of those iron bars against my skin.

The three figures cried out, but when the ringing subsided, they sat up. I gasped at the sight of them. Two males and one female stared at us with hollow, sunken eyes. Their clothes were torn to shreds, their fair hair a matted mess, and every inch of visible skin was covered in angry red welts. These people hadn’t just been captured, they had been tortured and abused. My insides twisted uncomfortably. This had to be another test. Erwin wanted to see how I’d respond to seeing shifters he thought I’d know in this state. I couldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing how much this was getting to me.

As we inched closer, the stench of sweat and human filth grew overwhelming, making me choke back a gag. I wondered how long these

people have been kept prisoner down here. Even if they were traitors, how could anyone do this to another being? Erwin was just as awful as the rumors said.

He shoved the metal rod he was holding between the bars and all three figures skittered backward, giving the piece of metal a wide berth. My senses ignited, my fingers tingling as if reacting to their response. That couldn't be normal metal, that had to be fae iron. Which meant these shifters, whom I didn't recognize at all, weren't Shadows. They were part fae. I was certain Erwin knew they weren't from the Shadows. Had they even been on their grounds or had Erwin hunted them and captured them? In my gut, I knew the answer. Even without their torn clothes and dirty faces, they didn't look like they were in a position to harm anyone. All three of them looked malnourished and weak. I didn't get the sense they were here as spies or to attack.

"I've never seen any of them before," I said quickly, hoping it was the information Erwin wanted from me. I wanted to leave here, to get Erwin away from them before he did any more harm.

"They're not?" Erwin said. He slammed the metal against the bars again and I clenched my teeth, wincing against the terrible ringing sound. It vibrated in my bones, making everything ache. "Are you sure?"

I took a deep breath, trying not to show him how much harm that sound alone was causing me. "I'm sure. Like you said, I saw almost every shifter who lived in the Fringes. I don't know any of them."

"So why were they skulking around our home?" Erwin said, tapping his chin with his index finger as if in deep thought.

"We weren't anywhere near your house. We were in our lands. You had no business taking us," one of the males said.

"We don't belong to any pack, and we're not shifters. We don't owe our allegiance to anyone. You kidnapped us," the female spat. She looked at me. "We mean you no harm. Let us free."

"Maybe there's been a misunderstanding," I said. "They say they can't even shift. Maybe..."

Clang. Clang. Clang.

My knees buckled, and I fell to the ground, covering my ears against the horrible singing of the iron against iron. My whole body trembled, and I cried out against the discomfort. It felt like something deep inside me was trying to rip free of my body to escape the sound.

When I lowered my hands and looked up, Erwin was kneeling in front of me. “Now that’s interesting. Imagine how much worse it would be if I set this iron against your skin.”

I stared at him, my eyes wide. “Why did you bring me down here?”

He lifted the piece of iron in his hand and pointed toward the cell. I looked at the three fae curled up in little balls on the ground. They were shaking and crying, completely broken from whatever torture Erwin had been doing to them.

I turned my gaze back to him as I balled my hands into fists against the sensation of magic building in my palms. My insides were screaming now for a different reason. It wasn’t fear or agony this time, but anger. Erwin was a monster. Everyone said the fae were pure evil, but the beings in that cell were nothing like the alpha who was out here walking free. He was just as bad as Dax. How could he do this? What the fuck was wrong with him?

Forcing my breathing to remain steady and trying to keep my magic in check, I turned my attention back to Erwin. “Why are you doing this to them?”

“You came here asking for my protection and offered to help my pack. I wanted to make it clear what will happen to you if you try to deceive me or double cross me in any way.” He stood, towering over where I was still crouched on the floor. “If you step one toe out of line, their fate will be yours. Do you understand?”

I stood and kept my eyes locked on his. I needed him to know I wasn’t going to back down. I wanted him to know I didn’t fear him. Because I didn’t. This was desperation, not true power. He wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble to intimidate me if he wasn’t worried about me. The thought seemed to appeal to my inner wolf. She seemed to stretch and straighten inside, mingling with my fae magic. It gave me a boost of confidence. Part of me wanted to end the tension between Erwin and me right now. I could kill him and free the captives. I had that power.

But I couldn’t do that to Madoc. If I did that, it would cost me everything.

“I said, do you understand?” he asked.

“Release them. You made your point, and I understand,” I said.

“I’ll consider it. If you behave,” he said. “Madoc isn’t here to watch out for you anymore. Now, we get to play by my rules.”

“You know my being here has nothing to do with your son.”

“We’ll see. Karl is waiting for you upstairs. You will spend the rest of the

day in your room until I have use for you,” he said.

I risked a glance at the crumbled figures in the cell before turning and walking toward the stairs. Maybe I wasn't any better than him. If I was truly good, I'd have freed them. Instead, I found myself back in my room, collapsing to the ground as tears streamed down my face.

I wasn't sure how much longer I could do this. Until this, I hadn't realized just how much Erwin was like Dax. Even when the business with the Shadows was finished, I couldn't live under an alpha like him. I couldn't ever be part of this pack.

The problem was that this pack was everything to Madoc. I had no idea what I was going to do.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NOBODY CAME TO MY ROOM. Not Willow with food, not Karl to take me to the war room. I'd cleaned myself up after a good hour-long cry and waited for someone to come. When the pounding sounded on my door, everything was dark and I sat up fast, surprised that I'd fallen asleep on the floor.

The door opened, letting in a crack of light from the hallway. It illuminated Erwin's large frame. I managed to keep my disappointment to myself. Either Madoc wasn't back yet, or it wasn't safe for him to visit.

"Did you come for more questions?" It wasn't what I wanted to say. The only thing I wanted to know was where Madoc was, but I knew I couldn't ask that.

"You said you wanted the chance to take out your old alpha. Did you mean it?" Erwin asked.

I had meant it, but I wasn't sure where he was going with this.

"Well?" Erwin looked impatient.

"Yes, I was serious," I said.

"You might get your chance," he said.

"Please tell me you have him in the dungeon," I said.

"Not yet," Erwin said. "Come with me."

I hesitated. I wasn't really afraid of Erwin, but after our interactions this afternoon, I was wary of what he might do.

"Make your choice, girl," he said.

Fuck. This was probably another test and there wasn't a whole lot I could do to object. How many times was he going to see if he could get me to break? I really hoped he eased off once the meeting happened. There were only three days till the New Moon. It couldn't come soon enough.

I stood and pulled my hair into a hasty bun with the hair tie around my wrist. "Let's go."

The last thing I expected was getting into a car with Erwin Umbra. Seated between Cavan and another shifter I didn't know, I tried not to show just how uncomfortable I was. My racing pulse was likely to give me away, but Cavan wasn't commenting about it. It was a little shocking how quiet he was. It made everything feel different and off. Every time Cavan's arm brushed against mine, a little chill spider walked down my back. I was never going to be comfortable around him.

I wished someone would say something about my mate. The few clipped conversations hadn't even given me enough information to know where we were headed, let alone what he was doing back at the Umbra estate. If he was even still there.

"Wolf forms tonight," Erwin said. It was the first clue as to what we were doing.

"Can you even shift, little wolf?" Cavan asked.

More chills. I hated that I was still a little afraid of him. I could protect myself now, but the memories of what he'd done to me were too fresh. "I can shift fine."

"She'll stay with me, heading north. You, Miles, and Anton patrol the east side," Erwin said.

"Where are we headed?" I risked asking. When I had asked him to explain what we were doing when we first got in the car, he had told me that if I was serious about helping, I would shut my mouth and follow directions.

I had to bite down on the inside of my cheek to prevent myself from screaming at him. He would never be my alpha, and I had no respect for him. But I couldn't afford to cross him.

"We're nearing the border between our territory and the Shadow Pack lands," Erwin said.

A little flicker of hope filled my chest. Were we joining the other patrols? The thought of seeing Madoc was too much to hope for, but what else would we be doing out here?

Then it struck me. If he was still out here, why would they need us? "Did something happen to the other patrols? Was there another attack?"

"Not yet, but we got reports of Shadow Wolves in the area. We didn't have enough patrols out to cover everything. It's just a precaution," Erwin said.

Was Erwin starting to trust me more? This seemed like a serious job. It was also dangerous. Maybe he was hoping the roving Shadow Wolves would eliminate me for him. Why had I opened my big mouth and said I wanted to help take Dax down? I could have just said I wanted to share information so somebody else could.

But that wasn't the truth. He had caused me nothing but harm, and it seemed only right that I pay him back.

"This is your chance to prove what you're made of, little wolf," Cavan said. The tone of his voice was a bit manic. He was too excited about whatever we were headed toward.

I didn't like Cavan's choice of words. The possible double meaning wasn't lost on me, but I couldn't bite. I wasn't sure if Cavan knew about my fae blood or if he was just taunting me based on my lack of experience shifting. When I'd tried to flee from him, I wasn't able to shift. I wasn't the same shifter I was then. It was amazing how much I'd changed in such a short time. Cavan didn't know just how dangerous I was now, and for the first time since seeing him again, I wasn't as afraid of him.

"It might be your lucky day, girl. If there are Shadow Wolves in our borders, we take no prisoners," Erwin said. "Maybe your old boyfriend will be there and we can end this now. Without wasting our time at a meeting."

I swallowed hard. Dax would be insane to prowl around Umbra territory after what he'd done. But then again, that was on brand for him.

"Madoc said you can fight. But he said you're better in human form than as a wolf," Cavan said. "Fighting as a wolf isn't all that difficult. You just have to lean into your strengths. You're probably small when you shift, and I'm guessing you're fast. That's probably why you're a good fighter in human form. So use it. As a wolf; dodge, outmaneuver, then strike. Go for the arteries with your teeth."

I'd been wanting to learn how to fight in my wolf form since my first shift, but hearing Cavan explain it like that made it sound so brutal.

My throat felt dry, and I licked my lips, trying to take my mind off the bundle of nerves twisting in my gut. It was one thing to assist with a coordinated attack on a specific wolf who had done me wrong. It was another to chase down shifters who used to be my pack mates.

These were people I had brought drinks to, maybe some I had gone to school with. When I thought of Dax, it made me feel like I might have a violent streak. But when I thought of harming anyone else, the desire wasn't

there.

I didn't want to hurt other shifters. Especially when I knew they were acting on orders from a deranged alpha. How many of those working for Dax were there against their will? What else had he used to buy the loyalty of his inner circle? Dax clearly didn't trust anyone to follow him using his own charisma or leadership abilities. He must have bought every single person in his corner. The thought struck me as both completely insane and also a little sad.

I wasn't ready when the car stopped. My heart hammered against my ribs. I had trained to fight to protect myself, not to go on patrol. What if I wasn't sure which pack a strange wolf belonged to? How was I supposed to know what to do?

"Do the full circle down to the border, then we'll meet back at the car," Erwin said.

The shifter in the front seat and the shifters next to me got out of the vehicle and started to remove their clothes. They made it seem like it was something they'd done a million times. Maybe they had.

"Get ready to shift," Erwin said. "Then just stick with me. If we run into anyone who isn't an Umbra, we tear their throats out. You with me?"

I nodded.

Erwin got out of the car. His clothes came flying back in before he slammed the door. I was the last to exit, and all the others were already in wolf form when I stepped onto the gravel road. Quickly, I pulled off my clothes and threw them in the car. Being naked in front of your new in-laws was weird. Even if I was a wolf shifter and they didn't exactly know of our connection.

Thankfully, my wolf was eager. The change took me quickly, and I trotted over to where Erwin's large gray wolf was waiting.

He huffed, then pawed at the ground before taking a few steps. I followed, leaving a little space between us. He glanced back to see that I was with him, then he took off at a run. My wolf practically exploded with joy at the prospect of running. With the wind blowing through my fur, I could almost let go of the fear and strangeness of being out here in the middle of nowhere with Erwin Umbra.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but I figured I'd follow Erwin's lead. This had to be a test to see if I was going to uphold my end of the bargain. I wouldn't be surprised if there weren't any other wolves out here besides us.

The city was behind us, and up ahead stretched a seemingly endless expanse of tall yellow grass. Weeds brushed up against my fur and my paws found holes in the ground more than once. I was grateful it was too cold for snakes to be out since I wasn't exactly being mindful of where I stepped. Erwin was moving too fast for me to notice much about my footing.

Finally, he stopped. I kept my distance, staying a few feet away from him. His wolf scanned the area, and I joined in automatically. My senses weren't picking up anything. Not even a rabbit or bird. It was dark and if not for my wolf vision, I wouldn't be able to see anything. Was I missing details?

A growl alerted me back to Erwin. Had he seen something? The alpha stalked toward me, his lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing his fangs. After a few more steps, his body broke and shuddered as he shifted back to human form.

Confused, I maintained my wolf form. This had to be another test, right?

Erwin stood in front of me, completely naked. He glared down at me. "Shift back."

There was a pull behind his tone, and I found it challenging to resist, but I persisted. His posture was tense, his expression deadly. This wasn't good. I needed to be able to run if he advanced on me, and being in wolf form would give me an edge.

"Shift back. *Now.*" His words were like a force I could feel in my bones.

Against my will, my body responded, folding and breaking as the shift took me without warning. The pain was intense, sending tears streaming down my face. I cried out through gritted teeth. It was as if my body was fighting me as the forced shift took hold.

A moment later, I was on all fours in the dirt. Panting as I recovered from the most painful shift I'd ever had. It was freezing, but my hair was stuck to my damp brow. My stomach rolled, and I thought I might throw up. What was that? How had he done that?

Then it hit me. He'd used his alpha powers on me. I'd never felt that before, and it was crazy effective.

Erwin grabbed my throat and hauled me up. I grabbed for his hands and kicked my feet, but he held me with one hand, letting me dangle there. Gasping for breath, I fought him. How the fuck was he holding me like this?

"I had a feeling Madoc would be too weak to break the bond, but that wasn't what gave you away. It was the looks between the two of you. The little touches when you thought nobody was looking. You couldn't hide it.

You're an Umbra Wolf now. I can make you do anything I want," he said with a growl. "I am your alpha."

"Don't do this," I said between gasps.

"The way you reacted to the sound of the iron," he shook his head, "I never knew just how strong your fae blood was until then. You're dangerous," he said.

"Put me down," I gasped out. Desperately I tried to kick him, but he was too far for me to reach.

"It's too bad, really. You're pretty enough. But the two of you can't be. It would ruin everything I've built for him. He doesn't know the fae like I do." He spit in my face. "You're all a bunch of filthy monsters."

I gagged and wiped his spit from my cheek. "Let go." The words came out as a strained whisper. My vision was blurring as I struggled to get a breath. "Please."

"I do love hearing a woman beg," he said. "In another life, I'd have enjoyed fucking you myself."

I dug my fingernails into his wrists, breaking the skin. He dropped me suddenly, and I hit the ground. I sucked in a deep breath, letting air fill my lungs, then I took off at a run. I could fight but trying to defeat Erwin would be impossible without my fae magic. And if I used that, he'd be dead. Cavan and the others would find me in an instant through the connection they probably had with their alpha. Nobody would believe that it was self-defense. I'd ruin everything. My mind was a blur as I pumped my arms, pushing myself to run faster.

The woods weren't far, and I knew we were close to Shadow territory. If I could clear the border, maybe Erwin wouldn't follow me. My old pack would probably kill me on sight, but Erwin was deranged. What was it with the alphas of these packs?

His body slammed into mine, knocking me to the ground. My chin hit the cold, hard ground and my vision went white as sharp pain shot through my face. *Fuck.*

Digging my fingers into the earth, I clawed forward, trying to escape his grasp. Erwin held fast, digging his knee into my back. "Don't bother fighting it. You can't outrun me. You should have broken the bond."

"I'm no threat to you," I said. "Nobody has to know. I swear."

"Your old pack knows, and nothing stays secret forever," he said.

"What about Madoc? Nobody knew. My old pack hates me. We can just

say it's a rumor. Nobody will believe it," I said.

"It's too late for that," he said. "When Madoc finds out his mate was killed by the Shadow Pack, his delusions of peace between the packs will be shattered. I should be thanking you. He's too soft. Once he realizes how brutal the Shadow Pack is, he'll finally see things my way."

That was his play. He wanted to rile Madoc up, get him to attack my old pack for revenge. I squirmed, trying to break out of his hold, but even without his alpha strength, this was a bad position to be in. "I'll run. Just let me go and I'll leave. I'll hide."

"He'd be able to find you," Erwin said.

"What about the whole sanity thing? Won't it make him crazy if you kill me?" I asked.

"That's a myth. And if it's not, I've got three more sons."

"You'd leave your pack to Cavan?"

A familiar scent caught my attention, and I turned just as a blur of fur launched into the air, knocking Erwin off me.

I scrambled to my feet and turned to see Xander's wolf pinning the Umbra alpha to the ground. Erwin screamed as Xander dug his claws into Erwin's chest.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MY EYES MET XANDER'S, and I could feel the hum of energy between us, that connection that I'd often wondered about in the past. We weren't pack, not anymore, but we were connected.

"I can smell your fae blood, you filthy half-breed," Erwin hissed.

"Xander, stop. That's Erwin Umbra," I said.

The wolf's ears flattened as my words sunk in. He growled at his captive, but I could sense his hesitation.

"You can't kill him. It would mean the end of any chance for peace," I said.

"You think there's any chance of peace?" Erwin said with a laugh. "We both know that's not an option. Go ahead. Kill me, you filthy mutt."

"Xander, please," I said. "You don't need his blood on your hands."

Xander growled again, but he stepped away from Erwin, releasing him.

Erwin stood, then brushed the dirt off himself. He locked his eyes on me. "You're weak. Even when your own life is threatened, you can't make the call to save yourself."

"I'm not weak," I said. "I don't need to force people to do my bidding or use fear to get what I want. You're the weak one."

His upper lip curled in disgust. "You're pathetic."

"No. You are," I snapped. "And you're not going to kill me. I will leave. I don't want anything to do with any of the packs."

"You're not leaving. Every single one of you must be purged from the earth. The fae don't belong here." Erwin shifted fast, going from human form to his massive gray wolf in a heartbeat. I didn't even have a chance to react before his wolf launched itself at me, claws extended.

Before I hit the ground, Xander's wolf leaped over me, knocking Erwin to the ground. His teeth sunk into Erwin's neck and blood sprayed, coating Xander's muzzle.

Erwin broke free and charged me, his teeth sinking into my shoulder. I cried out, using all my strength to push back at him. My hands lit up, and a burst of light exploded around us.

The alpha's body flew back and landed hard a few feet away from me. He twitched, then went limp.

I looked down at my hands and watched in horror as the light faded. My hands were covered in blood and I wasn't sure if it was mine or his. It didn't matter. Either way, I'd just killed the Umbra alpha. "Oh, fuck."

The dead alpha lay on the ground, unmoving. His fur was matted with blood and the grass around him looked like it had been painted red.

Xander was back in his human form. His face and mouth dripping crimson. "Are you alright?"

I nodded. "Are you?"

"I'm fine."

I could tell neither of us were fine, but what else were we supposed to do?

"You controlled it better this time. You didn't pass out," he said.

"Xander. I just killed an alpha," I said.

"He was going to kill you," he said.

"You don't understand. He's my mate's father. What the fuck am I going to do?" Panic made my voice higher than usual.

"You're going to tell them you were attacked by Shadow Wolves," he said.

I was staring at Erwin's wolf. Everything felt numb, and Xander sounded so far away.

"Ivy, you hear me? You blame the Shadows."

I turned to look at him. "It's going to make this worse."

"It was already bad. You think there was any chance at peace?" he said.

"You're not that naive, Ivy."

"Fuck. This is so bad, Xander," I said.

"You didn't do anything, you hear me? That bite to his neck was probably lethal. He'd have died anyway," Xander said.

"Maybe," I said.

"Ivy, you'll be okay. Your mate is the new alpha now, right?" he asked.

I nodded.

“He’ll protect you. Ivy, for once in your life, let someone help you, you hear me?”

I looked up at him. Xander really was one of the good ones. He didn’t deserve what he was going through. “Xander, I…” I had so much to say to him, but where did I begin?

“I know,” he said.

“No, you don’t. I know about your mate,” I said.

His eyes widened.

“I’m so sorry.”

His jaw tensed. “That’s ancient history now.”

“You can help change this, you know. You could challenge him. If Dax is dead, he can’t hurt her.”

“You don’t know how far his reach extends, Ivy.”

“You should be alpha,” I said.

“I don’t want that,” he said.

“You could put an end to all of this,” I said.

“I never wanted that,” he said.

“You could take him,” I said. “You could take Dax.”

“I can’t take that risk.”

Howling broke through the silence of the night. I tensed, feeling the urge to join in deep in my bones. I was feeling the pull of the Umbra pack. *Shit.* “You have to go.”

He nodded. “You going to be okay?”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “Just go.”

He nodded. “Alright.”

“Wait. Is Kate safe?” I asked.

“She’s fine,” he said. “Take care of yourself, Ivy.”

I stood frozen in place for a moment while I watched him return to his wolf form and run into the woods. Once he was out of sight, the reality of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks.

Erwin was dead. And I had killed him.

Three wolves arrived and quickly shifted into human form. Cavan was the first to step forward. He looked at me, then he looked to the fallen wolf behind me. His jaw tensed and a vein popped in his forehead. “What happened?”

“Shadow Wolves,” I said. “I tried to stop them.”

“Why is she alive?” One of the other shifters asked.

“They heard your howls. It scared them away,” I said.

“She led them to him,” someone said.

I ignored the comment and focused on Cavan. “Once they figured out who he was, they weren’t interested in me.”

“I know you’re Holden’s pet, but he can find himself a new one,” Cavan said as he grabbed my arm.

I tugged my arm free. “Don’t touch me.”

“No point in keeping you around anymore. We got what we needed from you.” Cavan grabbed hold of me, pulling me closer.

Using all my strength, I kicked Cavan in the balls. He groaned and released me as he doubled over.

Now would be a great time to shift. I told my wolf. To my relief, she complied. The shift was quick and rushed. If there was any pain, I didn’t feel it. I was too focused on getting the fuck out of here.

Running as fast as I could, I headed straight for Shadow territory. It was stupid, but right now, my old pack wasn’t looking for me and the Umbra wolves were.

I RAN until my lungs were on fire and my legs felt like they might give out on me. I’d felt the cold of the wards a while back, but it still didn’t feel safe to stop running. When I reached the clearing where the Shadow Pack held its full moon parties, I finally let myself rest.

The Umbra wolves would be insane to follow me this deep into Shadow territory. Plus, there was a good chance they figured my own pack would do their dirty work for them.

What were they going to tell Madoc? Would they tell him I killed Erwin and turned on the others? Would they make it into some elaborate Shadow Pack attack? My shoulders slumped. That was exactly what they’d tell him. Then they’d tell him I ran back to my old pack, marking me as an enemy and a traitor. Even if Cavan didn’t know that was what had actually happened, I had no doubt he’d use it against me.

My chest felt heavy. I had killed the Umbra Alpha. My own mate’s father. How was I ever going to look Madoc in the eyes again?

I never wanted to hurt him. Everything I’d done was to help him keep his

pack and his family. I didn't have either of those things and they'd seemed so important. Now, I wasn't sure if any of it mattered.

Packs could turn on you just as family could. Erwin had known I completed the bond with his son, yet that meant nothing to him. I should have been welcomed into his pack, into his family. Instead, his hatred for me was so deep that he was willing to risk his son's sanity and happiness to eliminate me.

Madoc had told me he'd kill his own father to protect me. Turns out, I didn't need him to step up to that role. I'd done it myself. I still didn't feel good about it, but I wondered if Madoc expected it would happen, eventually. His father was never going to accept us. Had he always known that? What was his plan once the war was figured out?

I needed to talk to Madoc. To explain what happened. He'd believe me, I knew he would. He had to. The problem was that if he didn't suspect that I'd killed Erwin, he'd know the Shadows had. Even Madoc wouldn't be able to attempt diplomacy now. An attack on a patrol was one thing. A dead alpha was another. The Shadows were now running on borrowed time.

Cautiously, I took a few steps forward and caught sight of the blood on my paws. I was a mess, and I probably looked very threatening despite my small size. It would be sunrise soon, and once I shifted back; I'd be naked. I couldn't exactly blend in anywhere.

I was out of options, and anything I did was going to be a risk. Going back to the Umbras meant hoping I could reach Madoc before anyone else found me. I didn't know the city well enough, and I'd never make it by morning. My best chance was home.

I was about to find out if Kate really had my back, or if our whole friendship had been a lie. I didn't like the idea of involving her in this, but I didn't have a choice and I needed to know the truth.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THERE WERE no guards around my apartment building, and all the lights were off. If Kate was home, she was asleep. Under the cover of the large pine tree where one of my guards had hidden, I shifted back into human form. After a quick glance, I booked it to my old front door.

Before I could think better of it, I knocked. If Kate was at Ryan's tonight, I might have to break a window to get in, so I had a place to stay while I figured out my next move.

Just as I was contemplating which window would be the easiest to access, the door opened. A bleary-eyed Kate greeted me, her expression turning to surprise in an instant.

"Ivy? Holy shit. Get in here." Kate grabbed my arm and pulled me inside, then closed the door behind us.

"Oh my gods, Ivy. Are you hurt?" Kate grabbed a blanket from the couch and threw it around me.

"It's mostly not my blood," I said.

"Shit, Ivy, what happened? And what are you doing here? If Dax finds out..." She shook her head. "Tell me nobody saw you. He's totally snapped, Ivy. He'd kill you in a second."

That wasn't new information. Dax has always been insane; I just hadn't seen it clearly for a while. Besides, I was fucked pretty much anywhere I went, making simply existing a risk. My larger concern was that I'd dragged Kate into this mess.

"You're okay?" I asked. "After punching him in the face?"

She chuckled. "I forgot about that. Damn, I want to do it again. Yeah, I'm fine. He barely acknowledged it because he noticed you were gone right

away.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I’ve been so worried about you.”

“Worried about me? I’m safe at home. You’re the one who had to go break a bond in enemy territory. Ivy, you were banished from the pack. Dax has everyone looking for you.”

“Who knew a little foundling could cause so much trouble?” I said.

“I’m just glad you’re alive,” she said, her brow furrowing. “Though you clearly got your ass kicked again. I’ll see if I have any of my mom’s tea around.”

I straightened. “I have to ask you something first.” I needed her help. I needed a place to stay and, at minimum, a change of clothes. But I had to know. “Do you know what is in the tea? Like for real, Kate. I know what it is. Do you?”

Her brow furrowed in genuine confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“That tea isn’t for healing. Did you know?” I asked.

“Of course, it’s for healing. What else would it be for?” she asked.

“To keep my fae magic away,” I said.

“No, that’s ridiculous. We didn’t even know you were fae,” she said.

“Preston did. Holden told him,” I said.

“What does this have to do with Holden?” she asked.

“It’s complicated, but they knew. They asked your mom to make the tea to keep me in check,” I explained.

“Are you serious?”

I nodded.

“That doesn’t make any sense.” She ran a hand through her hair. “Why would my mother hide that from me? Why would she ask me to give you that? I mean, I drank it on occasion too, but not as often as you. Why would she do that to you?”

“Maybe Preston had dirt on her,” I said. “But it’s why I didn’t shift sooner. Why I didn’t come into my fae magic.”

She stumbled to the couch and sat down, looking dazed. “How could she do that to me? To you?” Kate looked up at me. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Pretty sure.”

“You know I would never,” she said.

“I hoped that was true, but I’m starting to learn that nothing is as it seems,” I said.

Kate rose, then walked to me. She grasped my arms. “I would never hurt

you. You are my best friend. My sister. And we are going to figure this out together.”

“You did punch the alpha for me,” I said with a grin.

“And I’d do it again,” she said.

I leaned forward and gave her an awkward hug, blanket still wrapped around me and all. She pulled me into her, squeezing tight. I hissed as she bumped my shoulder and she let go.

“You *are* hurt,” she said.

“It’s not too bad,” I said.

“Show me,” she said.

I lowered the blanket from my shoulder, revealing a bloody mess smeared with dirt. The bite marks were already starting to heal, but they were going to leave a scar. Gross.

“Ivy, what happened? You were bit. You’re covered in blood,” she said.

“I did something very bad,” I said.

“Please tell me you snuck in and took out Dax,” she said.

“I wish I would have thought of that, but no.” I blew out a breath. “I killed the Umbra alpha.”

Her jaw dropped, and she blinked in rapid succession. “I’m sorry, what?”

“To be fair, he was trying to kill me. So it was self-defense,” I said.

“You killed him?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah. Dead.”

“Fuck, Ivy.”

“I know. I’m sorry I came here. I didn’t have anywhere else to go. We were out on patrol, but really it was a ruse to get me alone. Erwin tried to kill me and then Xander showed up and helped, but I finished it,” I said.

“Do they know? The Umbras?” she asked.

“They arrived after Xander left and saw me like this,” I said. “So yeah, they know.”

“Shit.”

“I’m so sorry I came here,” I said.

“I’m glad you did. We’re going to figure this out,” she said. “What about your almost mate? Are you on speaking terms?”

I bit down on my lip. Of course, she didn’t know about all that. There was so much to catch her up on. “We completed the bond. I have to get in touch with him, so he knows what happened.”

“You killed your mate’s father?” She looked horrified.

“Thank you for your support,” I deadpanned.

“I’m sorry. I know you feel bad already. And Erwin was a monster. They’re all monsters,” she said.

“Madoc isn’t,” I told her. “He’ll understand. He’ll believe me. But his brother probably already got to him and told him what I did.”

How was Madoc going to react when Cavan told him? Would he forgive me like I hoped he would? He was alpha now. He’d have to step into that role and lead his pack while knowing I was the reason he no longer had a father.

Fuck me. Everything inside me hurt. The aching grief was overwhelming. It had been self-defense, but I knew my actions would cause Madoc pain and that was far worse than anything I had to face myself.

“Can we call him?” Kate asked.

“I honestly never got his number.” I felt like an idiot.

“Do you have any contacts within their pack?” she asked.

Willow would help, but I didn’t have her information. Then I realized there was someone I could contact. “Can I use your phone?”

She grabbed it off the coffee table and passed it to me. Thankfully, I’d memorized Holden’s number when I’d started working at the Howler. He’d had a cell phone as our contact point if we were going to be late or needed time off. Had he kept the number when he left?

The phone rang. Then rang. Then rang some more. *Shit*. Voicemail. It was a generic greeting, and I wasn’t stupid enough to leave a message. Anyone could have his phone after his arrest here. I hung up, then passed the phone back to Kate.

“Thanks anyway. I’ll think of something.” I wished I knew how to get in touch with Joe, but I hadn’t even seen him around town, so I didn’t know if he was a Shadow or an Umbra.

Kate’s phone vibrated, and my pulse raced. I grabbed it from her and checked the number. It was Holden’s. I passed it back to her. “If it’s not Holden, say it was a butt dial.”

She answered. “Hello?”

After a pause, she handed the phone to me. “Hello?”

“Fuck, Ivy, what did you do?” Holden was speaking quietly, but the anger in his tone was clear.

“You know what I did,” I said. “I didn’t mean to, and I didn’t want to, but I swear to you, Holden; it was my only option.”

“This place is insane right now,” he hissed. “You put Madoc in the worst

position.”

“I swear it was an accident,” I asked. “Please tell me he knows I didn’t want this to happen. I feel terrible. What can I do?”

“They’re looking for you,” he said. “You’re being called a traitor. They say you were a spy the whole time.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, shit,” he agreed.

“I need to talk to him. I need to explain,” I pleaded.

“You have to lie low. Let him get through this first before you complicate things more.”

“Holden, he needs to know I didn’t plan this,” I said. “I had no choice.”

“He knows,” he assured me. “But he has to play along right now. You can’t be anywhere near here.”

That made me feel a little better. At least Madoc knew it was self-defense. “I really can’t talk to him?”

“It’s best for him if you don’t,” he said. “Where are you?”

“I’m with Kate,” I said.

“Shit, Ivy. You can’t be there.”

“Where the fuck am I supposed to go?” Tears stung behind my eyes. How was I supposed to navigate this? “I want to help. I need to help.”

“I’ll send you coordinates. Just stay out of the way for a while. I’ll contact this number when I have more details.”

“I don’t want to hide and do nothing,” I said.

“For once in your life, Ivy, let someone help you. Just trust me on this, okay?” Holden said.

His words were like ash in my mouth. It was so much easier to do things myself. Others let me down too often.

“Patience. Help is coming to you,” he said.

“How long do I have to stay away? Holden?” I waited for a response, but none came. The line was dead.

“Dammit, Holden.” I glared at the phone just as a text popped up from another number I didn’t recognize.

I clicked on the text and made a choking sound when I read the message. *Hang in there, sis.* It had to be Willow. Another text came through from the same number with a pin to a location six hours away from here. If she was helping me, it meant Madoc believed me. He knew I hadn’t killed his father on purpose. Tears slid down my cheeks. Even though I couldn’t be with him

right now, I felt less alone knowing that.

“What’s going on?” Kate asked.

“Holden said Madoc is dealing with the fallout right now and I need to lie low.” I shook my head, hating the idea of being away from Madoc again. Especially since my actions put him in danger. I should be with him. But I was an outsider, and Holden was right. My presence would probably make things worse.

“That makes sense. Where’s he sending us?” she asked.

“Us?”

“You think I’m letting you deal with this on your own?” She scoffed.

Holden had just told me I needed to let people help. It was something I’d struggled with my whole life, but I needed it more than ever. “Thanks.”

I showed her the text. “I think this came from Madoc’s cousin, Willow. She’s friends with the feral shifters. I think that’s where we’re headed.”

She pointed toward the bathroom. “You shower. I’ll pack snacks.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WE LEFT as the sky lightened in anticipation of the coming sunrise. It was cold, but cloudless, and I was grateful for the lack of snow. The ride with Kate flew by and if I tried really hard to clear my mind, I could almost pretend we were going on a trip somewhere fun instead of driving to the feral wolves.

Every so often, my thoughts would drift to Madoc and reality would come crashing in around me. My emotions were a tangled mess of regret, anger, and sorrow. I hated what I'd done, and I knew I was never going to be able to wash this blood from my hands.

Kate seemed to know I was upset, and she tried to distract me with conversation, but it never lasted long. My thoughts were invasive and consuming. How was I supposed to let go of the damage I'd caused? Was Madoc really going to forgive me?

I hated being cut off from him. I wanted so badly to talk to him and hear his thoughts. I wanted comfort, but I wasn't sure I deserved it after my crime.

"He would have killed you," Kate said.

I shook myself out of my thoughts. "What?"

"That's what you're worried about, isn't it?" she asked. "The death of the Umbra alpha."

"Yeah."

"It was him or you," she said. "You know that, right?"

"It doesn't make it easier," I said.

"I know. But your mate has to know what his father was really like. He'll understand," she assured me.

I hoped so. I'd been so confident at first, but the more time passed, the

more I got inside my own head. Madoc and his father were nothing alike, but I'd known him for such a short time that it was difficult to know the extent of their relationship. I'd seen Madoc defend me and choose me over his father, but that was when he still thought he was going to break the bond. Even as we'd headed back to see his family, Madoc seemed certain that we'd overcome his father's hatred and make this work. He had to have known Erwin was never going to allow me to live.

Maybe that was the plan the whole time. Madoc knew his dad better than anyone. He would have known how slim the chance was that he'd accept us.

"Listen, I hate to play this card because I know you need time to process this, but you don't have time. There's a good chance Dax and his friends are after you and from what you told me, Cavan might be looking for you too. You have to keep your head clear and focus on the present. You're going to have to process the rest of this later," Kate said.

"I hate it when you're right," I said.

"It's why we keep each other around," she said with a grin. "I'm sure I'll need you to pull me out of my own head soon and you'll be there to do it."

I've never had a lot of friends, but with someone like Kate by my side, I never felt wanting. She was right. I couldn't keep obsessing about things that might happen. I couldn't change what I did. And if I hadn't let my powers ignite, Madoc would be mourning my loss instead of that of his father.

It was shitty either way. He didn't deserve to be in this position, but I couldn't go back in time to make the outcome different.

"Okay, I'm going to change the subject. Cause you left out some details about the last few days," Kate said.

"I'm pretty sure you know everything," I said.

"Not quite," Kate said. "You left out the biggest single detail from the whole ordeal."

"What's that?" I asked, my brow furrowing in confusion. I had told her everything. What did she think I left out?

"How was he? I mean, you're stuck with him forever. I sure hope it wasn't bad," she said. "I know how mating bonds work. You had to have fucked him at least once."

I laughed. Of course, that would be what she'd want to hear.

"Oh, I have no complaints." My cheeks heated as I recalled our stolen moments over the last few days. Now that we were apart again, that time was even more important.

“You said he has brothers, right? Anyone you could introduce me to?” she teased.

“What about Ryan?” I didn’t want to explain the horror that was Cavan Umbra. I didn’t know the other two brothers, but if they were like Cavan, I wasn’t in a hurry.

“He’s fine, but on a scale of one to ten in the bedroom, he’s a six on a good day,” she said.

“Ouch. Madoc’s like a twelve.”

“Rub it in, bitch,” she said, before bursting into laughter.

It felt good to laugh. And it felt good to remember that Madoc and I did have something special. I was going to need to continue to remind myself of that. Most people in my life had let me down, but here was Kate, helping me when I needed it most. There were good shifters out there, and I knew Madoc was one of them. Despite everything, I was so fucking lucky that I found him.

We had to turn off the main road onto a dirt path that was almost overgrown. It didn’t look like anyone had driven on it in a long time. After another hour of driving along the questionable road, I caught sight of several structures in the distance.

A crumbling farmhouse, a barn with no roof, and an open stable came into view. There were also several odd round wooden structures that looked like a cross between a hut and a shed, along with a few rusted campers scattered around.

The buildings might be rotting and ancient, but they were more permanent than the tents I’d seen when I first met the feral shifters.

“What do you think? Park by the house?” Kate asked.

We’d reached the location Willow sent, so we had to be in the right place. There were no signs of other vehicles or shifters. It felt oddly quiet. “I guess so.”

Kate parked the car in a grassy area that might have once been a driveway. “What now?”

“Wait here, I’ll go check it out,” I said.

“Not happening.” She opened her door.

I rolled my eyes and got out of the car. The front door of the farmhouse creaked and a shotgun barrel emerged from the crack. “State your business.”

“Oh, shit.” Kate jumped a little and threw her hands up in the air.

I did the same. “I’m a friend. Willow sent me your location.”

“I don’t know any, *Willow*,” the voice behind the door called.

Kate glanced over at me. "Do something."

"How about Lucian? Or Freya, or Tasha?" The moody shifter wasn't my first choice but dropping names might help.

The gun vanished, and I heard a scuffle behind the door. Kate and I glanced at each other, both of us wearing confused expressions.

Mumbled conversation and more scuffles were followed by the door opening wide. Lucian stepped onto the chipped and moldy looking porch.

"Sorry about that. He's new." Lucian glanced at a teenaged male shifter who held the gun by his side. "These are guests. Friends of the pack."

The young shifter rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

"I didn't expect you back," Lucian said. "What happened?"

"So much," I said.

"Come in." He gestured toward the door.

Cautiously, I climbed the steps. They felt steadier under my feet than they looked. I hoped that was the case for the entire structure. It gave the impression that it was going to collapse if someone sneezed too hard.

The interior of the house was worse than the exterior. Chunks of plaster were missing from the walls, a path of planks stretched from the front door covering holes in the rotting wood. I wrinkled my nose at the scent of mold and decay. There was a good chance something had died under the floors.

"Stay on the path and you'll be fine," Lucian said, marching forward without concern.

"You don't think this is a trap, do you?" Kate asked.

"Probably not," I said. "But I'm a terrible judge of character."

"Stop that," she said. "You chose me as a best friend, and you told me your mate is one of the good ones. Dax wasn't your fault."

Her words were reassuring, but the guilt still hung around me like a cloud. Was I ever going to let go of what Dax did? It was so difficult to not at least partially blame myself.

Cautiously, I followed Lucian over the wobbly planks. We passed a staircase with warped and missing steps, a dining room where three overturned chairs sat abandoned and covered in thick dust. Aside from the planks, everything was gray from age and dirt.

We emerged into a large kitchen. At least, I think it was a kitchen. A few remains of pipes and yellowed peeling wallpaper were all that remained. A table surrounded by chairs sat on a platform of new wood covering the entire

floor. Someone had reinforced this space to make the floor more stable. I wondered if it was the feral wolves or if it had been done before they arrived.

Behind the table, a battered screen door creaked as a familiar figure walked in. Willow's eyes lit up when she saw me, and I smiled in return.

"You found us!" she called as she walked forward and pulled me into a hug.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I came as soon as I heard. Are you okay?" Willow asked.

"Am I okay? I can't believe you're even still talking to me after what I did." My actions felt like a heavy weight. I never wanted to hurt anyone. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help. Sending me these coordinates. It's more than I deserve."

"Don't say that. We all know you did what you had to do. Nobody blames you for that," Willow said.

Warmth filled my chest, and my throat tightened. It helped to hear that she didn't hate me. Holden had said as much, and she'd sent the coordinates, but seeing her reaction made it feel real. "Thanks."

Willow glanced over at Kate. "You brought a friend."

I stepped back and swept my arm toward Kate. "This is my best friend, Kate. Kate, this is Willow, Madoc's cousin."

"So, she knows about you two?" Kate asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Wait, the friend who gave you the herbs?" Willow asked.

"Unintentionally," Kate said.

Willow's mouth twisted, and she gave Kate a disapproving look. "Sure."

"I trust her," I assured Willow.

"If you say so. We're going to need the help. A lot has happened since you left with Erwin," Willow said.

I winced. Hearing his name on her lips was harder than I expected. Even with her kind words.

"I told you, we all know you only killed him because you didn't have a choice," Willow said.

"Wait, Ivy killed Erwin?" Lucian looked at me. "You killed him? Damn, girl. We heard it was a Shadow Wolf. I should have known."

"I didn't plan it, and there was a Shadow Wolf involved, but I made the fatal blow," I admitted.

"Erwin was an asshole," Willow said. "Few will mourn his death."

“I still feel terrible, though. And I know it’s making Madoc’s life hell right now. Have you talked to him? How is he?” I asked.

“Erwin wouldn’t have had a second thought about killing you. Don’t waste your tears.” Her tone was hollow and angry. I never realized exactly how much she disliked her uncle until that moment.

“The second Madoc found out Erwin took you, he lost his shit,” Willow said. “I’ve never seen him so unhinged. He was ready to kill his father himself.”

A flicker of pride fluttered through me. Madoc had my back, just as he said. Fuck, I missed him. “Erwin tested me to see if we’d completed the bond. He said we were too obvious around each other, but I swear we were careful.”

“You probably were. But breaking a mating bond is insane,” Willow said. “I don’t know how anyone could resist that urge to be with their mate. It would take a lot of willpower. He probably knew it would be impossible.”

We’d gotten close to breaking our bond, but even with so much on the line, the two of us couldn’t walk away from each other.

“Does anyone else know?” Willow asked. “Did Cavan find out?”

“I’m not sure if Erwin told anyone. Last time I saw Cavan, he wanted to kill me. I didn’t stick around to find out what he knew.”

“We have to hope Cavan doesn’t know. He’d use that against Madoc for sure,” Willow said. “Nobody wants Cavan in charge.”

“Cavan’s a sadist. He’d have killed me just for the pleasure of it. But if he finds out about the bond...” I closed my eyes and pressed my palms into my eyelids. I should have seen this coming. This is why we were going to break the bond.

Dropping my hands, I looked back at the gathered group. “I should have stayed behind.”

“That wouldn’t have helped,” Lucian said. “The Umbras sent wolves after us right after you left. Caught us before we even pulled away from the old campsite. They had a picture of you, and they checked everywhere. If you’d stayed, you’d be dead.”

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. “Erwin never planned on letting us break the bond. He must have guessed we wouldn’t do it. Or he really wanted me gone.”

“Neither would surprise me,” Willow said.

“Why let me in the last few days, then?” I asked. “Why not just kill me

when I arrived?"

"Probably because he got some information from you," he said.

That made sense. "I guess he got all he wanted."

"What now?" I asked. "There's a dead alpha. No way that meeting is still going on as planned."

"They're going after my pack, aren't they?" Kate asked. "They'll pin it on the Shadows one way or another."

"I'm not sure what they're going to do," Willow said. "They won't want a fight in the city. My guess is they're planning to take the fight to the Shadows."

"We have to do something to stop this madness," I said.

"Don't look at me," Lucian said. "We're not getting involved. This is pack business. Feral shifters aren't a pack."

"You *are* a pack. And you damn well know that they're not going to leave you alone forever," I snapped.

"I don't see why we'd need to get involved. The wolves searching for you left us in peace," he said.

"For now. What makes you think it will stay that way? Especially if Cavan gets his way." I hated to consider a situation where Madoc wasn't calling the shots, but there was too much at play. If he had the Shadows and his own brother after him, he wasn't safe.

I turned to Willow. "We have to help Madoc. Dax is up to something, I'm sure of it. He wouldn't have started this if he didn't have something big in mind. He'd have to know the Umbras would have support. He wanted a war. There has to be something I'm missing."

"I heard the Tari Pack joined the Shadows," Kate said darkly. "It seemed like an insane rumor until just now. I mean, nobody has ever stepped up to help us before, but you're right. This is different."

"Shit. If the Tari Pack is involved, Madoc's walking into an ambush. He won't know to plan for that," Willow said.

"What about the Senka Pack? They're still on board, right?" I asked. "They were at the meetings."

"They are. Which means this is about to explode. If these packs go at each other..." Willow shook her head. "I can't imagine the kind of damage this could cause."

"Maybe the Umbras won't take the bait?" Kate asked.

"I doubt it. If they don't fight, Madoc will probably try diplomacy by

going to that meeting,” Willow said.

“The whole thing is a trap. He knows that. I’ve been telling him that since the beginning. He won’t do that.” I hoped I was right. But did that mean that Dax and his friends were on their way to Madoc? Was his plan to take out the Umbra family one shifter at a time?

Or was Madoc already on his way to the Shadows?

There had to be another way to end this without bloodshed.

“Lucian, come with me. Help me talk some sense into these alphas. You’re basically an alpha. They won’t listen to me cause they’re stuck in the stone ages. But they might listen to you.”

“I told you, we don’t get involved,” he said.

“What kind of life is this? Running from place to place? Abandoning your home and the magic of it for a moldy house? Is this the legacy you want for your people?” I asked. “You can help.”

Lucian’s jaw tensed, and I could tell he was pissed. But it was true. They were the victims. A group of shifters who just wanted to live a peaceful life. Yet, they were the ones who got no protection and had to move at the whims of the major packs. It wasn’t right.

“Please, Lucian. The feral wolves deserve a place at the table. This is the first step to getting that.” I held my breath, waiting. It felt like this was the key. He was an experienced leader and a neutral party.

“Okay. I’ll help. Only because this is bigger than anything I’ve seen. You’re right. If all four packs are involved, we won’t be able to stay out of it,” Lucian said.

This had to be the answer. I needed help and I couldn’t do this alone. As much as I hated it, the other alphas just wouldn’t take me seriously.

Someone raced into the room, eyes wide, expression panicked. “We’ve got company!”

All of us bolted from the room, the planks vibrating violently under our weight as we ran to the front door.

Eight huge wolves paced in front of the farmhouse. Metal glinted from their claws. They’d had iron added to them as weapons. I didn’t need to get any closer to know they were Shadow Wolves. And they were here for me.

The pack parted and a huge, dark gray wolf walked between them. My heart raced. I’d know that wolf anywhere.

“Ivy, don’t,” Kate said.

I was vaguely aware of my name being called from behind me and

someone grabbed my arm. I tugged away, walking toward the wolves as if pulled by a magnet.

“What are you doing here, Dax?” I asked.

The huge wolf’s body convulsed as he shifted to human form. The smiling face that greeted me was the last thing I wanted to see. Dax was a monster.

“It’s my lucky day,” he said. “I came here for another bitch, and instead I get you. It’s like a two for one deal.”

“As if I’d go anywhere with you,” I said.

“You’re going to let our little fight ruin the good thing between us?” He pushed out his lower lip in a fake pout.

“Are you fucking crazy? There is and never was anything between us.”

“I disagree. You lost your virginity to me. That means something,” he said.

“You were the first person I had sex with. That’s it. Virginity is a bullshit construct, and you know it.” Since when had wolf shifters given a shit about who they first had sex with? Most didn’t remember unless they happened to find their true mate early.

“Such a romantic,” Dax said.

He took a few steps toward me, and as he got closer, I could see him better. His eyes were wild. He looked even more unhinged than usual. Something was wrong. “Dax, you don’t look good. Go home before you do something stupid.”

“Are you worried about me? Oh, darling, that gets me right in the feels.” He set his hand on his chest.

I rolled my eyes. “Last warning, Dax. I killed Erwin Umbra, and I will have no qualms about killing you.”

“So it wasn’t Xander who did him in?” Dax laughed, the tone manic and crazed. Something was very, very wrong with him. “I should have known it was you and your glowing hands.”

My wolf was restless, pacing inside and begging for release. No, not release, revenge. She wanted to make him pay for everything he’d done to us.

“Last warning, Dax,” I said, already feeling the magic bubble under the surface. I’d never felt both before, the wolf and the magic. Now they seemed to be rising together, a united force.

“We’re just here to retrieve something we left behind a few years ago.” Dax’s gaze moved from me. “Lucian, nice to see you again.”

The treachery knocked the wind from my lungs. How could he be working with Dax this whole time? Channeling my emotions into anger, I balled my hands into fists as betrayal seared through me like a hot iron. Lucian was working with Dax? Hadn't he just agreed to help me?

"Lucian? What's going on here?" Stepping back so I could see both alphas, I tightened my jaw, waiting for Lucian's response.

He glanced at me, his expression timid, before looking back at Dax. "I'm afraid she's gone."

I arched a brow. *She?*

Holy shit. The realization made my eyes widen. Dax was here for Xander's mate. The whole time, she'd been tucked away with the feral wolves. She hadn't moved to a human city.

"Don't lie to me, Lucian," Dax said.

A low warning growl came from one of the wolves behind Dax. I'd almost forgotten they were all standing there. I'd been so hyper-focused on Dax that none of the others seemed to matter.

There were seven other wolves with him, which would make me fighting him more difficult. But not a problem if I was willing to take them all down. I could, with my magic. But I wasn't sure I wanted to use that much power. The thought of killing wolves who might not deserve it made my stomach churn. There'd been too much death already.

"She's at another camp, but if you give me a couple of days, I'll have her here," he said.

"Lucian," I hissed. "How could you?"

I was standing on the grass in front of the house, while Kate, Willow, and Lucian stood on the porch behind me.

"We had a deal. If you can't pay, I'll take my payment in the blood of your pack," Dax said.

The wolves around him bolted ahead, flying past the farmhouse out into the fields beyond. I knew the other feral shifters were probably in the little huts and campers. They were innocent. They had nothing to do with this.

"Dax, call them back. There are kids out there," I yelled.

Dax grinned. "I know. But this is the deal we made."

"Lucian!" I raced back up the steps. "What the fuck, Lucian. Do something!"

He was pale and simply blinked at me. I grabbed his shoulders and shook. "Lucian!"

After a few hard shakes, his eyes refocused, and he nodded. "Yes. Something. We have to fight."

"Go after the others. I've got Dax," I said.

"Willow, Kate, help them," I said.

Willow was already in wolf form and Kate looked terrified, but she shifted and followed Willow. Lucian finally shifted and ran from the house.

"Just me and you," Dax said. "Where should we start? Fight and make-up fucking? Or should we shift?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Fucking is never going to happen."

Hands splayed wide, I allowed the magic to dance in my palms. It tingled and glowed, a warm and reassuring feeling. It wasn't foreign or scary anymore.

It had become a part of me.

"You want to play dirty, then?" Dax said. "I'm game. Magic tricks and flashing lights. Sure. Knock yourself out."

"I'll do it, Dax. I will kill you right here if you don't call them back," I said.

"Go ahead. I dare you." He stretched his arms out by his side, palms open as if showing me he was unarmed.

My brow furrowed. He knew how strong this magic was. He knew exactly what I could do. Last time I'd threatened him, he'd let me go rather than risk death. Why was he doing this? What was his point? Did he really think I'd spare him? Was his ego that big?

"You don't have the balls," he said.

Anger surged, making the glow from my hands more intense. "Balls aren't going to help you with this, dickhead. Call them back. Last chance."

"I don't think I will."

With gritted teeth, I turned my magic toward Dax and released everything I had.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WHEN THE LIGHT FADED, Dax was still standing. Smoke billowed around him and his bare skin was pink and angry. Otherwise, he was unharmed. I stared at my hands in disbelief, then looked back up at him. How had my magic failed? Had something changed?

Dax strode toward me, that manic smile wide on his face, making him look completely mad. “You are not the only one who can use herbs and magic to your advantage. You can no longer hurt me. But I’m going to give you two options. You come back with me, back to your pack, as my bride, or I’ll give the order to end the lives of every single one of the shifters here. My wolves are holding back for now, but the second I give the command, they will attack.”

“Something is wrong with you.” This went beyond the history between us. It wasn’t just the fact that I would never be with him, it was the fact that he had completely snapped. “Do the elders know you’ve lost it? How long do you think they’re going to support a mad alpha? They’re going to put you down.”

“What elders? There are no elders anymore. I eliminated the elders and soon no elders in the other packs as well. We don’t need a bunch of ancient fossils telling us what to do. Times have changed. It’s time for the wolves to be unleashed.”

Anxiety knotted in the pit of my stomach and my chest felt heavy as I took in his words. “What did you do?”

“What I had to. They were holding us back, darling. They were afraid. You should have heard their suggestions for how I was supposed to handle you and Xander. The Umbra wolves aren’t the only ones who wanted to get

rid of the fae. Once they realized those herbs hadn't removed your powers, they voted unanimously to take you out. What did you want me to do? Allow them to live after they disrespected my mate?"

"You are *not* my mate. You know that. Me and you will never be." I regretted the words as soon as I said them, but only because I didn't want to piss him off and have him make the wolves attack.

"Didn't you hear what I said? I saved your life," he said.

I licked my lips while I tried to think of something to say to appease him. "We can figure something else out. Some way that benefits both of us."

"You fucked him, didn't you? The Umbra alpha. Xander said he thought you shared a bond with him, but I didn't want to believe it. Doesn't matter, he's probably dead by now, anyway. And if he's not, I'll make sure it happens. Me and you are endgame. He's a distraction and I forgive you."

"Forgive me?" I scoffed. "It is never going to happen between us. You have got to stop this insanity."

He took a step toward me. "It's okay. You'll see it clearly once he's dead. He's clouding your judgment."

"You need to stop threatening my mate." The words came out calm, but there was a warning in my tone. It didn't matter what Dax said to me, but his repeated comments about killing Madoc were too far. All of this was too far.

Dax reached a hand toward me, and I batted it away. "Don't fucking touch me."

"So cute when you're angry." He lunged forward and caught me in an embrace, pinning my arms to my side.

With a scream, I broke free of his grip and released all the pent-up rage I had bottled away. Anger toward the way I'd been treated by my pack. Hatred for Dax and all he'd done to me. The pain I felt while I was away from my mate.

I had never felt anger like this. It exploded through me, white hot fury driven by something primal and ancient. There was no thinking, no logic. My power came like water bursting through a dam; an unstoppable force rushing through my veins. All I could see was blinding light and all I could feel was heat as intense as the sun. It was as if I was on fire, unable to control anything. It burned fast and bright, a rushing explosion of light. Then it slowed as if I'd used every last drop.

I collapsed my knees, panting and dizzy as the light subsided. Hands pressed to the earth, I tried to steady myself as my eyes adjusted. Dax was

laying in the grass, several feet away from me, his eyes closed. Smoke curled up from his red skin. He looked like he'd been burned, but even from here I could see the steady rise and fall of his chest. The fucker still wasn't dead.

Shaky, I tried to stand but collapsed back to the ground. Whatever I had done took every piece of me. Howling sounded in the distance, and I was reminded of the threat to the feral wolves from Dax's minions.

Desperate to help, I heaved myself up, only to sway and collapse. Then everything went dark.

MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, and I took a couple steadying breaths before I remembered what had happened. I was sprawled out in the grass, and everything ached. Even my skin hurt. The blast I had created was some of the most intense magic I'd ever done.

I sat up slowly, but still had to wait for the dizziness and nausea to subside before I could stand. As soon as I was on my feet, the full memory of the event crashed into me, and my heart raced as I moved in a slow circle looking for Dax.

Some of the grass was flattened and charred in the space where he had been, but he wasn't there anymore. Had I killed him? I recalled that he'd been breathing when I checked, but there was no guarantee he had remained breathing. Though if his pack found him dead, I probably wouldn't be here.

Anxiety twisted in my gut, and I turned toward the farmhouse. There were no signs of my friends or any of the feral wolves. Moving as quickly as I could, I jogged past the house, toward the huts and the campers.

Everything seemed uneven, and I could barely keep myself going in a straight line. The world was still spinning and twice I had to pause to throw up. I knew using magic came with a price, but what I had done had left me helpless and in no shape to fight. I couldn't let my temper get the best of me again. I was no use to anybody in this state.

The little huts were a lot farther away than I realized, and I had to slow to a walk to ensure I could actually make it there. I wanted to call out, to see if anyone was still here. If anyone was still alive. But I didn't know what I was walking into, and I wasn't about to alert healthy enemy shifters to my location.

It was eerily quiet. Even the wind had ceased. My pulse kicked up, and I started to wonder if maybe I was alone out here.

I finally neared the huts, and now I saw they were in a circle formation, similar to the way the tents had been set up in the campsite. I stopped walking when I saw the carnage. It was as if someone tossed me in a bucket of ice-cold water and held my head under the water. I felt like I couldn't get any air.

Dead wolves littered the ground, crimson blood was splashed over the yellow grass. A few shifters in their human form were sprawled out near the huts, still wearing their clothes. They hadn't even had time to try to shift before the Shadow Wolves had taken them. I think my cheeks were wet with tears, but I was so numb the only reason I knew I was crying was because my vision was blurry.

The feral wolves were peaceful. They didn't deserve this. Grief mingled with anger, and I latched on to the rage bubbling under my skin. Feeling the hate for my old pack swell was the only thing that got me back to my feet.

With a heavy heart, I moved into the middle of the battlefield and began to check for any survivors. I checked each of the fallen for a pulse. Several of the wolves had a familiar scent that I'd been surrounded by since childhood. Shadow Wolves. It wasn't just dead feral wolves here. This had been one hell of a fight.

My heart felt heavier as I moved from shifter to shifter. Not a single one had a pulse. Since they had fallen in their wolf form, I didn't know who they were. I only knew that the four fallen Shadow Wolves were not Xander or Dax. They were the only members of my old pack I was confident I could recognize in their wolf form. I didn't even know if Kate or Willow were among the victims.

After I had checked everyone, I surveyed the damage. Four fallen Shadows, three fallen feral wolves, and five fallen feral shifters still in human form. It was a tragic and needless loss of life, but it could have been a lot worse. I wasn't sure how I was still walking around. Everything felt like a dream. I felt like I was walking through hip deep mud. My whole body felt stuck, my emotions locked down to keep me from losing it entirely. This must be shock.

Seven wolves had arrived with Dax, which meant only two survived in addition to him if he was still alive. They had come here looking for Xander's mate, but I couldn't help but feel like this whole thing was my fault.

"Ivy?" a timid female voice sounded.

I turned to see Tasha standing near one of the huts. She was naked and

covered in blood and scratches, telling me she had been part of this battle.

“Thank the gods you’re alive,” she said. “It happened so fast. Willow told me you were with Dax. Tell me he’s dead.”

“I’m not sure. He was passed out and then I passed out and then he was gone.” Guilt squeezed my insides. I should have been able to take him down. It could have prevented so much destruction. If their alpha was gone, the Shadow Wolves would have left. They wouldn’t have been able to cause this much damage.

“I’m so sorry. I should have done more.” The numbness was wearing off and a throbbing ache built in my chest. Breathing was difficult. How was I even supposed to process all this?

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said.

“Where are the survivors? Please tell me there’s some,” I said.

“We saved all the children and most of the others,” she said. “They’re already packing up to flee.”

“Kate and Willow? My friends? Are they...” My throat felt thick, and my voice failed me.

My stomach rolled, but there wasn’t anything left for me to vomit. For all I knew, my best friend was one of the fallen wolves. I couldn’t even identify her wolf. What kind of friend was I? What if something happened to Willow? She’d accepted me and she was Madoc’s best friend. I couldn’t take anything else away from him. I’d already taken his father.

“They’re alive. We split up to look for you.” She looked around.

The relief I felt sent me to my knees. They were alive. I was so incredibly grateful, but my gratitude was marred by guilt. My friends were alive, while so many others were not. I looked up at Tasha. “I’m so sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

“If you want to blame someone, blame me,” she said. “They came here looking for me.”

“What?” I stared at Tasha as if seeing her for the first time. “Oh gods, you’re Xander’s mate.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SUDDENLY, Tasha's words the night before I was to break my bond made sense. She'd gone through that loss, but she couldn't break the bond. She'd felt the emptiness of being away from her mate every day for years.

"I thought for sure you were going to recognize me. We passed each other in the halls at school before I was sent away."

"All this time," I said. "I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't matter. We all do what we must to keep those we love safe. I know you understand," she said.

"I do, but it's time to put an end to this. You and Xander deserve to be happy," I said.

"Look what they did!" She gestured toward the fallen.

It was like a battlefield, and I knew she was probably blaming herself. "You didn't do this. This is the work of a madman, and it's why we have to put an end to this. Even without you here, the feral wolves aren't safe."

"I know," she whispered. "But today, *this* was my fault."

"No. Dax made a choice. A good leader doesn't have to purchase loyalty with bribery and fear. And a good leader certainly doesn't attack a group of unarmed civilians." I was furious at Dax before today, but now I couldn't even find the words to express how much I hated him. I really hoped he was dead, but I don't think I was that lucky.

"We have a plan to put an end to this, but I need your help," I said. "The feral shifters have to take a side. They have to stand against this."

"That's not my call," she said.

"Where's Lucian?" I asked.

Tasha's shoulders slumped and her eyes traveled to one of the fallen

wolves.

“Fuck.” I had been upset with Lucian when he’d said he’d bring Xander’s mate to Dax, but he’d been covering for Tasha the whole time. He didn’t deserve to die like this. None of them did.

“I wish we had more time to mourn, but they might come back. We have to make some decisions. They’ll listen to you, won’t they?” I asked.

“We aren’t an official pack. Things don’t quite work that way around here,” she said.

“You were second to Lucian. I could tell,” I said. “Ignore the titles. You were one of their leaders.”

“I’m an enforcer, not a leader. I know my strengths. And I know I’m not in a good place right now.”

“Ivy!” Kate’s cry was piercing, and I only had a moment to react before her arms were around me. Tears streamed down her face. “We thought you were dead.”

“Nobody thought to check in front of the house?” I asked.

“We didn’t see anyone there when the battle was over,” she said as she released me.

They must have missed me since I was laying in the grass. “I’m not dead. Are you okay?”

“I’m alright.” She was covered in dirt and had blood smeared across her face. “Where’s Dax? What happened?”

“I used magic and passed out. So I’m not totally sure,” I admitted.

“That must have been what stopped the attack,” Willow said as she joined us. “Glad to see you’re alive. Madoc would have had my head if I let something happen to you.”

“What do you mean *stopped the attack*?” I asked.

“They had two fighters left, and they were relentless. Pretty sure they’d have fought to the death and taken a few more of us along with them. But out of nowhere, they left. I’m guessing your old alpha called them back,” Willow said.

“Thank the gods for that little bit of luck, at least,” Kate said.

“We need to get out of here. It’s not safe,” Willow said.

“I agree.” I turned to Tasha. “You said they’re already working on evacuating?”

She nodded.

“Get the survivors loaded up. They need to get off grid. Is there someone

who can coordinate that besides you?" I asked. "Who do you think could lead them?"

"I think Lenore could handle it," she said.

"Take me to her," I said.

We all followed Tasha to where the rest of the feral shifters were gathered outside one of the rusting campers. Several were bandaged and injured, but they all looked like they'd recover. Nearby, pickup trucks and beat-up cars were being loaded by other shifters.

"Is Lenore here?" I asked the group.

A woman who was tying a splint on the teenager I'd met when I arrived stood. She was probably in her early sixties, though it was hard to tell with shifters. Her silver hair was in a bun on top of her head, some loose strands hanging around her face. She locked icy blue eyes on me. "I'm Lenore."

She had a black eye that was nearly healed and dried blood all over her arms. She'd been fighting in the attack, but she was recovering quickly. That was a good sign. She would protect those who couldn't fight.

"Can you lead the non-fighters someplace safe for a few days? Dax might return and I don't know what the Umbras are up to yet," I said.

She glanced at Tasha.

"You heard her," Tasha said.

Lenore looked back at me. "I could go with them and keep them safe, but you asked for the non-fighters. I'm a fighter."

"Which is why I need you to protect those who can't protect themselves," I said.

"What about the others?" she asked.

"Anyone who can fight is welcome to join me," I said. "You can't run forever."

I turned my attention to the feral wolves. "I'm looking for volunteers. Fighters. Shifters who are tired of running. I'm hoping it won't come down to a fight, but we can't let the Shadows get away with their plans."

"What about the Umbras?" A male shifter with flaming red hair asked. "The Shadows usually leave us alone."

"Not anymore. Their alpha is crazy," I said.

"This isn't our war. Let the Umbras and Shadows kill each other off," someone else said.

"Look, you don't know me, and you don't owe me anything. But I have a plan and I think we can put a stop to this with minimal violence. However, I

need help in case things go wrong. If you think this war isn't going to impact you, you're in denial," I said.

"What kind of help are you looking for?" The redhead asked.

"Back up, mostly. Like I said, I need some support in case things go sideways," I admitted.

"She's the Umbra alpha's mate," Tasha said. "We finally have someone who can talk some sense into these assholes."

"Why should we listen to you?" A female shifter said as she approached. She had a bleeding cut down the side of her face. "They came here for you. If we had just handed you over, none of this would have happened."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked. "Dax came looking for a fight."

"Just take her to the Shadows and be done with it," the female shifter said.

"She's been one of us for years, Carrie." Lenore stepped in front of Tasha. "What if your ex-husband came looking for you? Are we supposed to hand you back to him?"

"That's different. He beat me," she said.

"We welcomed you and we'll protect you," Lenore said. "Just as we do for all members of our pack."

"We're not a pack," Carrie said.

"We are, though," Tasha said, stepping out from behind Lenore. "Don't you see it? We take care of each other and protect each other. We celebrate together and we cry together. But we don't get the protection or stability of the other packs. Don't we deserve that?"

"We do," the redheaded shifter said. "She's right. Just because we don't have the title doesn't mean we're any different."

"Madoc Umbra is different," I said. "He's going to lead the Umbras in a new direction. We just need to get through this, then we can start repairing things."

"Why would we trust him?" Carrie said.

"Because he's like us." I knew it was a risk to tell them, but even Madoc's own pack now knew. "He's part fae. He's got a gift and everything. He's not like his father."

I held up my hands, calling to my magic. It was weak and came out in a pathetic sort of sparkle across my fingertips. The small force made me feel lightheaded. Quickly, I closed my hands, cutting the magic off. "The Umbras want me dead for what I am. The Shadows want to use my magic for their

benefit. We're more powerful than them. It's time for us to stop being afraid."

The redheaded male stepped forward. "I'll help."

A few other shifters joined him, nodding at me in support. Slowly, one by one, most of the feral wolves were lining up with the others.

Finally, Carrie stepped forward. "I would like to live somewhere with a permeant house and a school for my babies."

"You deserve that," I said. "Everyone does."

"So, this plan of yours? How's this going to work?" Carrie asked.

"Well, if everything goes as I hope, I just need you there as support. If it goes wrong, we fight our way out and flee to live another day." I didn't want to get into too many details since I hadn't exactly asked Tasha or Xander for their help. And they were both key to my idea.

"Just tell us when and where," one of the shifters said.

"Meet me at the Umbra mansion at sunrise and I'll tell you everything," I said.

"You heard her," Tasha said. "Let's get the kids out of here and get our fighters ready."

"No, you're going with me," I said.

"What? I can't go with you. You saw what happened," she said. "They're hunting for me."

"You're the key to ending this whole war," I said.

"How?" she asked.

"If Xander knows you're safe, he can challenge Dax," I said.

"That's your plan?" She looked skeptical.

"It's the best way to prevent more loss of life," I said.

"That could work," Willow said.

"Dax survived your fae magic and you want to send my Xander after him?" Tasha asked.

"Xander doesn't need his magic to win. And something is wrong with Dax. He's not himself. We can't afford to take another path to defeating him," I said.

"Does Xander want to challenge Dax?" Tasha asked.

"I'm not sure, honestly. He wasn't willing to challenge Dax if it meant putting you in harm's way." I knew Xander would have years of built-up aggression toward Dax. Like me, he'd been bullied and blackmailed. It had to end.

“Tasha, Dax told me he got rid of the elders. I don’t think he means he dismissed them. I think he might have killed them,” I said.

Tasha covered her mouth with her hand. “Xander’s father.”

I nodded. “If that’s the case, I’d guess your safety is the only thing keeping Xander in line.”

“You sure?” Kate asked. “You think he would do something like that?”

“You should have seen him, Kate. Something was very wrong with him. He’s completely on edge. And he said he was using magic. Something that made it so mine couldn’t hurt him,” I said.

Kate’s mouth pulled into a tight line, then she shook her head. “Protection draught. The stronger they are, the more side effects.”

“There’s just some magic you don’t mess with,” Willow said.

“What would that mean for a fight, though?” Tasha asked. “If he’s got magic on his side?”

“I’m sure it’s specifically against fae magic, but we can’t be sure,” Kate said.

“I can’t lose him again,” Tasha said.

“If we don’t get rid of Dax, you already have,” I said. “It’s a matter of time before he gets Xander killed or does it himself.”

“I haven’t seen him in years,” she said, her voice shaky.

“Far too long,” I said. “We can’t keep doing this. We can’t keep the packs so divided. The feral shifters deserve to feel safe. To build homes if they want. To live freely in the city or in the Fringes or wherever they want. This is our chance to unify things. Xander would be a good leader. He’d work with Madoc to get the other packs on board. We could change everything.”

“The Umbras would never allow that,” Tasha said.

“They will. Trust me. Madoc is nothing like his father,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll do whatever you need,” Tasha said.

I pulled her into a hug. “Thank you.”

“How can I help?” Kate asked.

“And me?” Willow asked.

I released Tasha, then turned to my other friends. “Kate, I need you to get the message to Xander. We need to get the packs to attend the original meeting. That’s where he’ll challenge Dax. He won’t be expecting it. He’ll go in prepared to attack the other pack, but with so many witnesses, he won’t be able to refuse. It’ll have to be a clean fight.”

“Got it,” Kate said.

“Willow, can you help bring the feral wolves tomorrow? Just in case there are any issues getting through Umbra territory. I’d feel better if they had you with them,” I said. “They can travel with the Umbra pack to the meeting so the Shadows won’t know who they are.”

“Of course,” she said.

“I want to get Tasha to Madoc. We have to keep her safe and away from the Shadows,” I said.

“You know, I think we might just pull this off,” Willow said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“YOU SURE YOU TRUST HER? Your friend, Kate?” Tasha asked as we pulled away in her car.

“Yeah, I do.” I looked at Tasha. “Don’t worry. She’ll find a way to talk to him, and Xander has Dax’s ear. He’ll get him to go forward with the meeting.”

“And you think he wants this?” Tasha asked. “To be alpha?”

“I think he wants to be free of Dax. And he wants you,” I said.

She was quiet for a while, and I figured she was processing everything. This was a lot for her. She hadn’t seen Xander in years.

“What about your mate? Now that he’s alpha, does that change things? It’s rare, but I’ve seen mates rejected. Even after the bond is complete,” she said.

“It’s going to be fine,” I said, more to myself than her. This had to work. If we couldn’t pull this off, the packs were going to destroy each other.

Tasha sped down the road and I gripped the armrest until my knuckles went white. I was going to have to stop letting other people drive me. Most shifters liked speed, but I got squeamish when we went over eighty. After the amount of magic I’d used, we had decided it was safer for her to drive. Now I wasn’t so sure that was the best call.

At least we were making good time.

The sun was low on the horizon, meaning we had a shot at being back before sunset. I couldn’t wait to feel Madoc in my arms.

“You okay over there?” Tasha asked.

“Yep.”

“You look like you might throw up,” she said.

"I'm good," I lied.

She chuckled. "Xander didn't like to go fast, either."

"He's going to be so happy to see you," I said. "Maybe he'll be less moody."

"No, he's just moody." She glanced at me. "How is he?"

"Physically, he was alright when I was there. But he needs you. And he needs to get away from Dax's toxicity. It's enough to ruin anyone."

Her brow furrowed, and she looked deep in thought.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"It's been a while. My hair is shorter, and I've lost a lot of weight," she said.

"He's not going to care what you look like, I promise you. Everything he did was to keep you safe. Someone does not do what he did if they were worried about how their mate looked," I said.

"What do you mean by that? What has he done?" she asked.

"Please don't ask. Just know he didn't have a choice," I said.

"Like you, with the false bond." She shook her head. "Makes me want to stab Dax myself."

"Get in line," I said through gritted teeth. The more time passed since I'd last faced him, the more confident I was that he was still alive. He was like a fucking cockroach.

"He didn't touch you." It wasn't a question. And it almost sounded like an accusation.

"No."

"Why?"

"He wanted me to go with him." A shiver ran down my spine. Being with Dax was the most disturbing thing I could imagine. Never again.

"He's still hung up on you?" She sounded surprised. "Not that you're not pretty."

"I didn't take it that way," I said. "I've made it clear to him that it's never going to happen, but he's obsessed. I think it's a game to him. A conquest thing."

"He wants your power," she said.

"That too. He thinks he could weaponize me. Who does that? Who thinks like that?" I asked.

"An absolute psycho," she said.

I let her words rattle around my mind. She was right. Dax was even more

insane than I realized. Whether it was the magic he'd used or that he'd gone farther into the deep end on his own, he was worse than ever. He wasn't going to play by normal rules.

That made him more dangerous and less predictable.

"And you want my mate to fight that asshole?" Tasha asked.

"He can do it," I said. "Xander trained me for a while. He's good."

"Tell me about it. Your training," she said.

I could tell she was looking for a distraction, so I explained our time in the woods. I told her about how he'd helped me find my magic and how he'd tossed the tea. She seemed to enjoy my stories, and the mood in the car was considerably less grim.

As we neared the city, traffic increased and more cars filled the road. I helped Tasha navigate. Anticipation built, and I found myself impatient to arrive. Madoc had to be waiting for me.

Willow's phone was destroyed in the fight, so we had no way of warning him, but I trusted him. I trusted our bond. I was feeling more confident again that everything would work out between us.

Suddenly, a car slammed into ours and the airbags exploded with a deafening bang. We both screamed as the car tipped to the side. The windows shattered, and I raised my arms to protect my face. Shards sliced my arms, but I didn't feel any pain among the chaos. We rolled until we landed hard in a ditch on the side of the road.

Smoke billowed out from the airbags, making it difficult to see. Coughing, I released my seat belt, then turned to Tasha. "You alright?"

Her head was against the seat, and her eyes were closed. Blood oozed from cuts on her face. *Shit*. I gently touched her shoulder. "Tasha?"

When she didn't respond, I pressed my fingers to her neck. Her pulse was strong. Relieved, I unbuckled her belt so I could get her out. She'd probably wake up as soon as her body had a couple of minutes to heal.

"Hang on, Tasha." I forced my door open and stepped out to find a group of people gathered.

"Are you okay?" someone asked.

"I'm fine, I'm okay," I said.

"Nothing to see here, folks. Let's give her some space. Back to your vehicles, please," a uniformed police officer said as he walked through the crowd.

"I'm fine, really," I said. "I just need a phone so I can call someone."

As the gathered humans dispersed, a few lingered behind. One of them made my blood go ice cold.

"Thanks, James, we've got it from here," Cavan told the cop.

"You sure, boss? I'm happy to help," he said.

"Maybe just give us some space free of onlookers?" Cavan asked. "This is pack business."

"You got it." James climbed out of the muddy ditch.

Three males I didn't recognize stood behind Cavan, all of their eyes locked on me. I glared back at them, my hands already tightening into fists in anticipation.

"I figured you wouldn't stay away long if you survived the Shadow attack," Cavan said.

My brow furrowed. How did he know about that? I didn't think Willow would have told Cavan where she was going or that I was going to meet her there. Even if she had, how would he know we'd been attacked?

Someone told him.

"You're working with Dax," I said.

Cavan smirked. "You've been a common problem for both of us."

"If you're working with Dax, you're just as deranged as he is. If you think Madoc is going to go along with that, you're fucking crazy," I said.

"Let me worry about my brother," he said. "He's not going to be your problem for much longer."

"Whatever Dax promised you, he's lying. He's not good for anything," I said.

"That's just it sweetheart, all that madman wants is you," Cavan said. "And all I have to do in return is break that mating bond between you and my brother."

My eyes widened. Erwin might not have told Cavan the details, but Dax hadn't held back.

"That's right. I know about your relationship with my brother. But once I kill him, the bond will be gone and you'll be someone else's problem," Cavan said.

"You'd never be able to beat Madoc," I said.

"That's the beauty of it; I don't have to. I just need to show everyone else what he really is." Cavan cocked a brow. "You think I didn't get that juicy detail? Your ex told me everything. And I'm going to use it all to bring Madoc down."

“No, you’re not,” I said as I balled my hands into fists.

“You’ll come with me peacefully, or I’ll make you come with me,” he said.

All four males advanced, and I backed up until I was pressed against the car. “Really? Four against one? You really are a fucking coward.”

Cavan cocked a brow. “You’re bating me.”

“Yeah, I am. You liked beating the shit out of me when I was helpless in the dungeon. Now that I have a shot at defending myself, your plan is to have your boys help you take me down?” I clicked my tongue. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that you’re afraid.”

Cavan laughed. “You think you can take me? Even with your fancy hands, you’re way out of your league here.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged.

“I’m not here to kill you,” he said. “I’m taking you back to show everyone just how damaged Madoc is. Part fae and mated to the shifter who killed his own father. I should be thanking you. I couldn’t have brought him down this easily on my own.”

I’d been worried about the damage I’d cause Madoc, but I had pushed the thoughts aside. The Umbras would have to accept him. We weren’t planning to hide forever, and Madoc was going to be a great alpha. They’d have to see that. Nobody wanted Cavan. “Then let’s go. Take me Madoc. Let’s see what the elders have to say. I don’t think it’s going to turn out the way you think, though.”

He chuckled. “So eager to be my prisoner again? Maybe you like it rough.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Don’t flatter yourself. I want to see Madoc. I don’t care how I get there.”

“Nah. I think I’ll have some fun with you first.” Cavan lunged forward, his fist making contact with my face before I could dodge. My head snapped to the side and pain burst across my face.

He wound up to punch again, but I ducked and skittered away from the car. He growled, spinning to face me. Shoulders heaving and eyes gleaming, he smiled. Cavan and Dax were cut from the same cloth. Both got off on hurting people and would take power any way they could.

Just another bully.

I was done with bullies.

I could feel my magic bubbling, but I shoved it away. I needed to fight

him the old-fashioned way. I needed him to know I kicked his ass without magic. And if I was being honest with myself, I couldn't kill him for Madoc's sake.

I'd already taken his father. What kind of monster kills their mate's father? I wasn't sure Madoc could forgive me if I also took one of his brothers. Even if it was Cavan.

Fists up, I dodged his next blow, then landed a punch in his gut. He grunted, but rallied quickly, getting a hit into my ribs. I hissed out a breath and shoved the pain aside. His next two punches missed me, and he swung wildly in frustration. I swept my foot under his, knocking him to the ground. While he was down, I managed to get a kick in his side before he caught my leg and pulled me on top of him.

He grabbed me, pinning my arms to my side, then pulled me down to his chest. I was straddling him, held tight against him in a very awkward and rather inappropriate embrace. "Let me go."

He grinned. "I kind of like feeling you against me. I can see why Madoc couldn't let you go. I bet you're a tiger in the bedroom."

I spit in his face.

With a roar, Cavan rolled, so I was on the ground and he was on top of me. Mud squished up around me.

"That was stupid," Cavan snapped.

"Was it, though?" With my new position, I could kick. And I landed a blow right between his legs.

"Fucking bitch!" Cavan released me and I scrambled to my feet, sliding around in the mud a few times before I got my footing.

Just as I straightened, Cavan slammed into me, knocking me face first to the ground. The mud squished, and we slid several feet away from the car. Coughing, I spit mud from my mouth and wiped it from my face.

Cavan grabbed my wrists, holding them behind me. "Wait until they see you. You're going to bring Madoc down and I won't even have to lift a finger."

I squirmed, trying to get free of his hold. He had his knee in my back and all my movement did was make me sink deeper into the mud. Desperation kicked in, and I could feel my magic simmering below the surface. I had more control than before, but I knew if I used it, I'd probably kill him.

Cavan deserved it. He was a monster. But he was Madoc's brother.

"Let me go, Cavan. I've been holding back. This is your only warning."

Let me go now.” My magic was right there. Ready to explode.

“Don’t make me do this,” I said.

“You’re in no position to be threatening me right now,” Cavan said.

Warmth spread through my fingers, and I knew my magic was breaking free. Hoping I could control it well enough to hold back from killing him, I concentrated on creating a small burst of energy.

Just as I was about to release my magic, something cold touched my wrist and searing pain shot through me. A matching sensation encircled my other wrist, and I gasped as my magic was closed off involuntarily.

White hot pain radiated up my arms from the point of contact and it took me a second to realize that Cavan had bound me with fae iron.

“Not so feisty without your magic, are you, you filthy fae bitch,” Cavan said. He yanked me up by my bound wrists until I was on my knees. Until that moment, I had forgotten just how much bigger he was than me.

Between my survival instincts and my magic, I thought I had a shot. But I didn’t realize he had come prepared with a weapon I couldn’t fight. The pain was making me nauseous, but I couldn’t give up now.

Carefully, I rose to stand and then went to kick Cavan. He easily caught my leg and pulled, sending me to the ground, landing hard on my back. It knocked the wind from my lungs, and for a moment, stars danced in front of my vision.

Cavan towered over me, a look of disgust on his expression. “The longer you wear that iron, the weaker you’re going to get. Don’t even bother trying to fight it. Soon enough, everyone is going to know what you are and what Madoc is. They’ll know what you did to our alpha, and they’ll realize how dangerous it is to have any living fae. Then this whole pack will be mine, and I will make sure I tie up any loose ends where the fae are concerned.”

“You’re a monster and a coward,” I said. “Everyone is going to see right through that. Even if you somehow managed to gain power, you won’t be able to hold it. You’re weak and desperate. It will cost you.”

Cavan kicked me in the side, and I grunted. The only good thing about the iron was the pain was so intense, the kick didn’t even register.

“Greg, carry her to the car. Marcus, grab her friend. We’re taking them home. It’s time for everyone to learn the truth about my brother and his traitor of a mate,” Cavan said.

A large shifter scooped me up, and I was vaguely aware of him wrinkling his nose as he held me close to him. I was caked in mud and in the short walk

to Cavan's car, Greg now looked like he'd also been rolling around in the mud.

"Is she still breathing?" I asked the other shifter, Marcus, who was carrying Tasha in his arms.

She was still unconscious, which might have been a blessing. As far as I knew, Cavan didn't know who she was or why she was valuable. If she had been awake, she would have tried to fight and she would be bound in iron as well.

"Like I give a fuck," Marcus said.

The two of us were unceremoniously shoved into the back seat of a waiting sedan. Cavan and one of his goons occupied the driver's seat and passenger seat. The two that had carried us didn't get in the car. I wondered if they'd been left behind to take care of the mess.

I stared at Tasha, trying to discern if her chest was moving. When I finally caught the faintest sign of her breathing, my shoulders sagged in relief. There wasn't much I could do about the fact that I was bound in iron and covered in mud, but at least Tasha was still alive.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Home." Cavan glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "I cannot wait for the council to find out just how deep my brother's deception went."

He turned back to the road and pulled the car off of the shoulder onto the street. We weren't far from the Umbra Estate, but it felt like an eternity as the pain from the iron increased.

Cavan hadn't been lying about that. The longer I sat here, the more intense the agony, and the more nauseous I felt. My head was starting to throb, and concentrating was getting more difficult by the second.

"I always knew there was something off about Madoc. I never fell for my dad's load of crap. Madoc was the golden child. He could do no wrong. Our whole future rested on him. Now that his secret's out, his time is over." Cavan tossed another glance over his shoulder. "If not for you, his secret might have stayed buried forever. I suppose I owe you a thank you."

"Don't flatter yourself. Why do you think your dad went to all that trouble to hide Madoc's secret?" My words were starting to slur, and it was getting more difficult to breathe. "He saw you for what you are. He'd rather risk having a fae as alpha than have you as his legacy."

"Stop talking, murderer," Cavan said. "Even if they ignore his mixed blood, he can't talk his way out of his mate being responsible for the alpha's

death. In fact, it makes what you did worse. Technically, you joined our pack when you completed your bond. That means you're not just a murderer, you're a traitor."

"I will never apologize for defending myself," I said.

"I know you won't. That's why it's going to be so easy for you to help me bring my brother down."

CHAPTER TWENTY

TASHA GROANED, and I turned to see her eyes flutter open. She squinted into the dim light of the car and looked around before her eyes settled on me. “Where are we?” Her voice was hoarse.

“Just follow my lead,” I whispered. “It’s going to be okay.” My stomach lurched, and I swallowed down the rising vomit. The iron was getting worse by the second, but I was determined to stay strong. Especially now that Tasha was awake.

“Are you awake back there?” Cavan asked.

“Who are you? Where are we going? What happened?” Tasha asked.

What I wouldn’t give for the ability to communicate with her without speaking. The only good thing about her being unconscious was the fact that Cavan didn’t realize how important she was.

“So many questions. For now, you’re my guest. If you answer my questions correctly, you will remain my guest. If you answer them wrong, I’ll clamp some new jewelry on your wrists, just like your friend,” Cavan said. “We’ll find out just how many fae my useless father left alive. He had one job. Couldn’t even get that right.”

Tasha’s eyes dropped, and I knew she was looking at my bound hands. Cavan seemed to know a lot more than we realized about the fae.

“It’s difficult to know how to respond to your questions when I don’t even know who you are,” Tasha said.

“If you tell the truth, none of that matters,” Cavan countered.

“Touché. My name is Tasha. Now tell me yours. It’s only common courtesy.” Tasha’s voice was stronger now, and she sounded confident.

“My name is Cavan. Tell me, how do you know my friend Ivy?”

Tasha glanced at me, then turned her eyes toward the front of the car. “She came to the feral wolves for help. I guess I’m a sucker for a sob story, and I offered to give her a ride.”

The car pulled in front of the large iron gates that led to the Umbra estate and I nearly blew out a breath of relief. He wasn’t going to get much more out of Tasha before we got to our destination. And as long as Madoc was here, I was confident we would figure a way out of this mess.

Cavan rolled the window down and pushed the button on the call box. The crackly voice came through the speaker. “No one in or out. We’re on lockdown.”

“Let me in you fucker, it’s Cavan.” The gate swung open without hesitation and Cavan pulled the car forward.

“So, Tasha, tell me how did Ivy convince the feral wolves to help her?” Cavan asked.

“They wouldn’t help her. That’s why I felt bad and agreed to give her a ride.”

“You realize that if you’re aligned with her, you’re working against me?” he said.

“I thought you said she was your friend.” Tasha rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed with Cavan.

I suppressed a smile. It was nice to see how easily Tasha saw through Cavan’s bullshit. Hopefully, the other shifters in the Umbra Pack would do the same.

“I can tell you’re smart. Which means you should understand that I could snap your neck and nobody would bat an eye,” Cavan said.

Tasha stared at him. Her jaw set, her chin high. She wasn’t letting him get to her. “Just ask what you want to know instead of beating around the bush with useless small talk.”

“Okay, I can appreciate that. Tell me what happened when Ivy arrived at the feral wolves. Everything.”

Tasha sighed as if this was the most boring conversation she’d ever been a part of. I had to hand it to her; she was good.

“Ivy arrived ranting about the drama the packs got themselves into, but the feral wolves don’t play that game, as you know. Unfortunately, the Shadow Wolves are assholes. They attacked us. When the dust settled, the feral wolves decided to flee. I offered Ivy a ride home. Like I said, I’m a sucker for a sob story.”

Cavan stopped the car in front of the house. "So you don't care if we're planning to wipe the Shadow Pack off the face of the earth?"

"Why would I? It's not my business. Honestly, we're supposed to be neutral, but if someone wanted to take those bastards down, I'd cheer," she said. "Serves them right for being a bunch of cowards."

Cavan turned back to look at us. "Tasha, I think you and me could strike a deal. I'm about to become the new alpha of the Umbra Wolves and I respect the feral wolves' policy of isolation. If you can speak on their behalf and assure me that they will stay out of this conflict, I'll give you my word that we will leave your people alone. You just need to tell me where they're located, and we'll make sure we keep the fighting far away from them."

"Are you serious?" I knew Tasha had this under control, but I also knew it would look suspicious if I sat here and said nothing. "Tasha, you can't trust a word this asshole says."

"You're an Umbra Wolf now. You lost your shot at being feral when you fucked my brother. Which means, you're a traitor that I get to deal with later," Cavan snarled. "Stay out of this."

"You know full well I'm not going to sit by while you harm innocents," I said.

"You're making this worse, little wolf," he said.

"I can't wait for someone to put you in your place," I said, but my words came out in a whisper. It was getting harder to concentrate as the iron continued to burn against my skin.

"Tasha, I have no interest in harming your pack, but I can't guarantee my wolves will be able to tell the difference between friend and foe when things escalate. This is going to be a full-on war," Cavan said. "I need to know where the civilians are to protect them."

"You're a liar," I said. At least I think I said it. My vision was going dark around the edges and I felt like I was sitting on a boat, floating up and down on waves.

"I think you and I have some things to discuss," Tasha said.

"Tasha, you can't trust him," I said.

"Like I'm supposed to trust you? You were a Shadow Wolf yourself. How do I know you're not working for them? Maybe you're the one who led them to us." Tasha said.

I wanted to say something, but I was seeing double now, and my eyelids were growing heavy. My head throbbed, and I wasn't sure if I could continue

sitting. My body wanted to lie down, to close its eyes, and give in. It was taking everything I had to stay awake.

“Jared, please take our guest to the study. I’ll meet with her as soon as I take care of this traitor,” Cavan said.

The two males stepped out of the car, and Tasha gave my hand a quick squeeze. “Hang on.”

I tried to nod, but I wasn’t sure if I made the movement. She stepped out of the car just as I heard the door next to me open.

“Come on, little wolf.” Cavan scooped me up, carrying me like a bride. I wanted to fight him and run. I had to find Madoc, but the fight was gone. It was as if all my energy had seeped away.

We passed by splotchy blurs of color, and all the sounds were as if they were in a tunnel from very far away. It was a struggle to keep my eyes open, but it didn’t matter much at this point. I couldn’t make out any details.

There wasn’t any pain anymore. Just an overwhelming desire to sleep. I was numb, unable to comprehend what was going on. The warmth of Cavan’s body against mine was replaced by something cold and hard. Before I could take it in, I let my eyes close.

When I woke, I raced to the bucket in the corner of the cell to empty the contents of my stomach. Hair stuck to the sweat on my forehead and my clothes were drenched. It felt like someone had turned the temperature up to a hundred degrees.

Once I was done retching, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and looked around. The cell looked as it had the last time I’d been here.

Feeling defeated and uneasy, I carefully walked toward the pallet and sat down. My head felt like it was floating away from my body. I knew I had a high fever, but my hands were no longer bound.

Angry red scabs circled my wrists. The iron had cut through my skin, and while it looked like it was healing, it wasn’t as fast as it would be from a typical injury.

I leaned my head back against the stone of the cell, then turned so I could press my cheek on the cool surface. Turning my head from side to side, I took a few minutes to let myself gather my thoughts.

How long had I been in here? Did Madoc know I was back?

Of course, he didn’t. He’d be here if he knew. Which meant Cavan was plotting something and keeping the fact that I was here secret.

Or Madoc wasn’t here.

Or he was hurt.

That thought was enough to get my heart racing. I jumped from the cot, ignoring the spinning in my head as I moved toward the bars. Careful not to touch them, I looked out. "Hello? Anyone there?"

The sound of dripping water echoed in the dark hall. I could see open doors for the cell across from me and next to me. There weren't any other prisoners down here. If Cavan hadn't told anyone I was here, there'd be no reason for anyone to come down.

My brow furrowed. There had to be witnesses to him carrying me. Madoc was alpha now. Wouldn't the other wolves in the house have said something to him?

"Hello?" I called again.

Swaying on my feet, I headed back to the cot. I wasn't in any shape to defend myself if Cavan was the one who showed up. Still sweaty and light-headed, I laid down on the cot and went to sleep.

This time when I woke, someone was carrying me over their shoulder, and it wasn't my mate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FAE IRON WAS CLASPED on both my wrists before I was dropped unceremoniously on the ground. My hands were not bound together this time, and I had the freedom to move my arms around, but the burn of the iron was already making me feel fuzzy and sick to my stomach.

Karl, the huge shifter who had once guarded my door, was standing next to me, his arms crossed over his chest. He was the one who had carried me here. Next to him stood Cavan, a malicious grin on his lips. I should have known this was his doing.

Quickly, I scanned the room for Madoc, and my heart deflated when I didn't see him. I knew he wouldn't be here before I even looked. There was a void inside, an empty space where he should be. I didn't feel like he was in danger, but I couldn't know for sure. All I could do was remind myself that the time his life had been threatened, I'd felt all his pain. Nothing like that had happened, and I told myself that he was still alive. He just wasn't here right now, and I needed him.

Madoc? I needed him so badly. Where was he?

No Madoc, no allies. Just bloodthirsty Cavan and a giant of a shifter who was good at taking orders. My heart raced, and I worked to steady my thoughts. This wasn't a good situation, but I had to maintain my wits. The iron was making that damn near impossible.

I looked down at my wrists and noted the red welts expanding from the points of contact with the bracelets. It was difficult to concentrate, but I forced myself to look around the room, taking in my surroundings before I decided my next steps.

I was in a meeting room of some sort. In front of us was a long table lined

with empty chairs. To either side were rows of smaller tables. In the back of the room, next to the double doors, were stacks of chairs that would be pulled out and set up to accommodate large groups. Apparently, our ragtag group today wasn't worthy of having a place to actually sit.

In addition to the doors we'd come through, there were three other exits in the room. Another set of matching double doors behind the long table, and two single doors on either side. It was obvious this room was typically used for larger gatherings, but I wasn't sure if I was still inside the Umbra estate or if I was somewhere else. A little voice inside urged me to run, while an opposing voice reminded me that I wasn't in a position to get very far. In addition to my utter failure the last time I had attempted to escape the Umbras, I had the added difficulty of the matching bracelets on either wrist.

I knew I couldn't go far with this iron attached to me and I wasn't sure what the long-term damage would be. If it wasn't removed, would it kill me? I knew it would incapacitate me, but I wasn't sure just how far the damage would go.

"Is the iron necessary?" I bit out.

"Just a precaution, darling," Cavan said.

I was having serious regrets about holding back when we fought. If I had just killed him right away, I wouldn't be in this position right now. I would also have to face my mate and tell him that I had killed both his father and his brother, and I didn't want to cause him that kind of harm.

"Are you saying you don't think Karl is capable of stopping me?" I asked.

"I might be very good at my job, but I'm not cocky enough to think I can take down a half-fae." Karl glared at me with a look of contempt.

"Your boyfriend told us everything. You're not just some mutt with a drop of ancient fae blood. Your dad was straight up a full-blooded, otherworldly fae. A true and vicious monster. Even if they could somehow overlook Madoc's impurities, no one is going to be stupid enough to underestimate you," Cavan said.

"Where is Madoc?" That was the other reason I couldn't leave. This was Madoc's pack. He was alpha now. But where was he? "I'm sure he's eager to see how you've been treating me."

"He's still off running patrols. But don't worry, we're going to make sure the elders know everything about both of you by the time he gets back," Cavan said.

As if Cavan's words had summoned them, the double doors behind the long table opened and a group of older male shifters filed in. I swallowed hard as each of the figures' eyes found me. Every one of the elders wore a similar disgusted expression when they saw me.

To be fair, I looked like I had been rolling around in mud, which I practically had thanks to Cavan. I wasn't sure if the bruises and blood from my last several fights were visible or if the mud covered those. When I glance down at myself, I noticed there was a pile of dirt under me from the dried mud that had flaked off when I moved. I was incredibly grateful I hadn't had to look at myself in the mirror.

Karl's large hand grabbed my upper arm and yanked me to my feet. "On your feet. Show some respect."

The jolt of movement sent a new rush of pain from the iron, and I gritted my teeth to prevent myself from crying out. I couldn't give them the satisfaction of knowing just how agonizing these two metal circles were.

"What is the meaning of this, Cavan?" the elder who took the center seat asked. He was younger than I expected for an elder, possibly only a few years older than Madoc. He had dark hair and olive-toned skin dotted with dark stubble. He had the beginnings of lines around the edges of his eyes, but that was the only indication to show that he had at least a few years on me. I had never seen an elder so young, especially in the role of lead elder in that center chair.

"I requested an audience with the elders, Morgan. I'm not sure why you are here," Cavan said.

"Your brother appointed me before he left on patrol. What I don't understand is why *you* are requesting an audience with the elders without the approval of your alpha," Morgan said. He glanced at the other gentleman on either side of him.

My eyes traveled to each of them in turn, taking in their serious expressions and trying to get a read on them quickly. Morgan was by far the youngest. The two elders on either side of him were all old enough to be my father or grandfather. I wondered if one of them had been displaced in the seat of honor for Morgan's appointment or if someone had been removed. Either way, if Morgan was Madoc's choice, I knew he was my best chance.

I wanted to rush forward to him and explain everything. But there was a protocol to the way this all worked, and I'd only have one chance to make a good impression. The state of my appearance was already a strike against me.

I couldn't afford to look like the crazy one in this room. Cavan needed to take that title so they would believe what I had to say. I knew Cavan would spill most of the truth as it was. All I had to do was smooth it over to buy me some time until Madoc returned.

"After this meeting, Madoc will no longer be alpha. I'm here to present evidence against our alpha and move for a vote of no confidence in his rule." Cavan approached the elders. "He is not the rightful heir to lead this pack."

"If what you say is true, only a coward would bring up such charges while their alpha was not present to defend himself," Morgan said.

"There wasn't time to summon him back. Besides, his judgment will be clouded based on his relationship to this creature." Cavan threw a nasty look my way.

I wanted to say something to defend myself, but it was taking everything I had to pull myself together. At this rate, I wasn't sure I'd be able to put together a coherent sentence.

The iron biting into my wrists was affecting my perception of reality. The room appeared to be stretching and distorting, and I was having a difficult time concentrating on what Cavan was saying. I wasn't sure how much longer I would maintain lucidity, and I needed to be concise in my defense when I finally spoke. I worked to keep myself calm and block out the pain while also trying to stay awake. My body wanted to shut down, to sleep through the pain instead of having to endure. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let Cavan win.

"We don't have time for this," Morgan said. "In case you haven't noticed, we're on the brink of war. Whatever issues there are between you and your brother can wait. We're not here to do your bidding. Our job is to advise the alpha, not pander to your insecurities."

"Good. You can help me then. Because Madoc is not eligible to be alpha. I am my father's oldest blood heir. Because that female right there is also Madoc's mate. And she's half-fae. Which means Madoc isn't my full brother. One of his parents isn't mine. Which means he's ineligible to rule this pack." Cavan wore a grin like a cat who'd just eaten a canary.

I think the elders were speaking to each other, but I couldn't tell if the whispers I heard were in my head or happening around me. Everything felt like a dream. I wasn't sure I was going to make it long enough to speak when they called on me. I had to do something now. I couldn't afford to wait. Shaky and unsteady, I inched forward, keeping my steps small on a floor that

felt like it was rippling. I licked my lips, desperate for any kind of moisture in my dry mouth as I neared where Cavan stood in front of the elders.

“Get back here,” Karl hissed, and I felt his grip around my arm. It didn’t take much effort at his pull to knock me off balance and land on the ground. I’d be embarrassed if it weren’t for the fact that I was already covered in mud and seeing stars. There wasn’t much to feel self-conscious about when I was struggling simply to exist.

“Release her!” someone called. “Remove her bindings.”

“You have no idea how dangerous she is. That’s a terrible idea,” Cavan said.

“While the alpha is away, the elders hold the power. Not you,” Morgan said.

I heard hisses of argument but couldn’t make out the words. Someone helped me to my knees and I let out a relieved breath when the fae iron fell away from my wrists. The damage had been done, and I knew it would take time to recover, but at least I wasn’t in extreme pain anymore.

Someone else handed me a cup of water and I didn’t even stop to wonder if their intentions were good before I downed most of it. My stomach tried to reject it and I had to force myself to swallow down the rising bile. After a few deep breaths, I tried a sip of water, going slower this time and my stomach tolerated it much better. After I had finished the cup, I looked up to see Morgan standing in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Is it true what he said?” Morgan asked.

“She’s a traitor and a half-breed,” Cavan hissed.

“You said your part. I want to hear it from her,” Morgan said.

“He’s right, I’m half-fae.” It wasn’t much of a secret. The reaction I’d had to the fae iron would be enough to give me away. With a wince, I gently rubbed my wrists, hoping they’d heal quickly, but they were still showing damage from the previous bout in the cuffs.

“What about Madoc?” Morgan asked. “Is he your true mate?”

My lips parted, but words failed. What was I supposed to say? It was the truth, but Madoc’s pack didn’t know yet. This wasn’t our plan. We wanted to get past the Shadow Pack threat, then share the truth. There were so many other pressing issues. Would they really want Cavan at the helm during a war? Cavan was already working with Dax on some level. What else was he hiding?

“There’s no rule that states a shifter must be pure shifter to hold the title of alpha,” a male voice said.

I looked toward the long table. One of the elders was standing, his hands flat on the table as he leaned over it to look at us. His hair was pure white, and he was likely the oldest member of the group. “If Madoc is part fae, as you suggest, that does not deter him from being our alpha.”

“It does if he’s not our father’s son. My mother wasn’t fae.” Cavan held up the fae iron bracelets. “See? The iron does nothing to me. Which means, my mother had an affair.”

“She didn’t,” I said. “It was your father. He had a part fae mistress.”

“You think my mother would raise another female’s child?” Cavan scoffed. “He really got in your head. What other lies did he tell you?”

“It’s true,” the white-haired elder said. “I was there when your mother lost her child. She was in such deep mourning, she agreed to take in your father’s bastard as her own. I was also there when you were born, Cavan. And you, Karl. As I have been for nearly every Umbra child born in the last forty years.”

“You’re a doctor,” I said.

He nodded. “And you are Madoc’s mate, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“This is bullshit. Doctor Smith is just trying to cover for Madoc. You can’t possibly believe him,” Cavan shouted.

“He’s earned the respect he has,” Morgan said. “Which is more than I can say for you.”

Cavan laughed. “Fine. We do this the hard way. You want to let Madoc rule? Go ahead. Wait till I tell the whole pack that his fae mate is the one who killed our father.”

Gasps came from the elders, and my jaw tightened. I knew this was coming, but I wasn’t ready. I was never going to be ready to discuss what I’d done to Erwin.

“You said it was the Shadow Wolves.” Morgan approached, his eyes narrowed. “How convenient that your story changes now as you want to get rid of your brother’s mate.”

“Erwin tried to kill me.” I probably should have kept my mouth shut. I could have denied it and made Cavan look worse, but something inside me was pushing me forward. I wanted them to know just how terrible Erwin was. I wanted them to know the truth.

“What?” Morgan asked.

I could feel their eyes on me, but nobody else spoke.

“He didn’t want me to be with Madoc. We tried to break the bond, but we couldn’t go through with it. Erwin knew, but he suspected that we completed it even though we told him we’d broken it.” The words spilled out.

“Breaking a mating bond is a crime,” Morgan said.

“I know. We thought it was the best option, given what I am. What Madoc is.” I shook my head. “We couldn’t do it. The bond was too strong.”

“Erwin supported this?” Another elder asked. “He asked you to break the bond?”

I chuckled as nervous energy surged. “He wanted to kill me. Madoc offered to break our bond as an alternative.”

“I see,” the elder said.

“So once he knew you had completed it, he tried to kill you again?” Morgan asked.

“Yes. He took me out that night on patrol and sent the others away. He used an alpha command on me to test me.” I had to stop talking and regain control of myself. Reliving the events was making my eyes burn and my throat tighten. I hated what I’d done, even if he had deserved it.

“See? She admits it. She killed him,” Cavan said.

“He had the ability to use an alpha command on her, and you think she killed him?” Morgan sounded suspicious.

“I did deal the fetal blow,” I said.

Morgan’s jaw tightened.

“A Shadow Wolf attacked and bit Erwin’s throat. There was so much blood...” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “But he still went after me, and I reacted to protect myself.”

“Would you do it again?” Cavan asked. “If it happened again, would you still attack him?”

I opened my eyes and glared at Cavan. “Yes. Because it was him or me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“YOU HEARD HER.” Cavan lunged for me but Morgan was between us in a heartbeat.

“You are not in charge here,” Morgan said, his tone like ice.

“Madoc’s mate is a traitor. He can’t be left in power. He was probably in on it,” Cavan said.

“You know that’s a lie,” I said. “Madoc did everything he could to protect his family and his pack. Where is he right now, Cavan? Did he go after me? No. He’s protecting his pack. As he should. This pack is everything to him. His family is everything.”

“And you are part of that family,” Morgan said. “She has more power than you do, Cavan. Step back.”

“She is a murderer! You can’t possibly be sucked into her bullshit.” Cavan growled and his eyes flashed dangerously.

I kept my chin high and stared at him defiantly. My magic and my wolf were closed off right now as my body recovered from the iron, but they wouldn’t be gone forever.

“Enough!” Dr. Smith called. “The elders will investigate this very serious charge. In the meantime, return her to the dungeon. We will reconvene when Madoc returns.”

“No. Please. I can’t go back there.” I’d spent far too much time locked up lately.

“We’ll allow you time to get cleaned up first, but I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about that,” Morgan said. “You’ll be safe there, and Madoc should be back by sunrise.”

I had no idea what time it was, but I knew the feral wolves would also be

here by sunrise. If I wasn't there to greet them, what was going to happen? Had Tasha escaped here already? Or was she still somewhere in the mansion?

There were so many questions, but I knew if I asked about her, it would draw attention to her that she didn't need. My only hope was that Cavan had bought her stories that she wasn't my friend and let her go. She was going to have to take over for me if Madoc wasn't back in time.

"Fine. Lock her up. I've got other business to deal with anyway," Cavan said.

"If you'll follow me," Morgan said.

I kept my eyes on Cavan as I walked after the elder toward the double doors behind the table. Once we were far enough away from him, I allowed myself to look ahead. The other elders were already gone and the whole thing felt off. They didn't seem to think it was a big deal that I was part-fae or that I'd killed Erwin.

We passed through the doors and I immediately recognized the standard Umbra opulence. We had been inside the mansion. This house was even bigger than it looked on the outside.

"This way," Morgan said as he turned down a long corridor.

"Aren't you worried I'm going to run?" I asked.

"I know you won't, Ivy," he said.

I tensed. I'd never shared my name with him. "Fuck. This is a trap, isn't it? You're working with Cavan."

Morgan stopped walking and a smile spread across his face before he broke out into laughter.

"What's so funny?" I stared at him while he slapped his knee and continued to laugh. It didn't strike me as evil villain laughter and I probably should have run, but it was just too odd.

"Seriously, working with Cavan?" He wiped a tear from his cheek. "Oh, I'm going to have to tell Madoc that one."

"Um, okay." I still had no idea what was going on.

"When we were kids, I used to toss Cavan in the trash can when he was being a punk. He's still got a little man complex, even though he's much bigger now," Morgan said.

"I'm missing something," I said.

"I already knew the whole story. The whole council knew. Madoc told us everything after you called Holden," Morgan said. "We just didn't expect Cavan to pull this."

“Why did you make me go through all that, then?” I was furious. How dare he?

“Because we needed to hear it from Cavan. We needed his intentions. Madoc didn’t want to believe it, but now we know he really has been trying to overthrow him and gain control of the pack,” Morgan said.

“I could have told you that and I’ve only known him for a few weeks,” I said.

“There’re certain things that have to be done to appease the old timers,” Morgan said.

“Like throwing me in a dungeon?” I snapped.

The smile faded. “I’m afraid I’ll have to follow through with that. While I know you acted in self-defense, I have to get the rest of the council to officially rule on that before we can release you.”

He moved farther down the hall, and I followed, my annoyance growing with each step. “Why all the bureaucracy?”

“It’s the way things are done,” he said.

“It’s stupid,” I said.

“Take it up with your mate when he gets back,” Morgan said. “From the way he talked about you, I knew he’d burn everything down if you asked him to.”

My heart skipped a few beats. That wasn’t what I wanted. Or maybe it was. “Where is he, for real?”

“He wanted to go after you, but Willow said she’d get you. He’s on patrol. The Shadows have attacked several shifters who live on the outskirts. They’re getting braver by the day.” Morgan stopped in front of a room and opened the door.

“I need to see him as soon as he returns,” I said. “I have a solution. Something that might help us avoid more bloodshed.”

“I can promise you, the first thing he’s going to do when he returns is break you out,” he said. “This is the old servants’ locker room. Everything you need is in there. I’ll wait here so I can show you to the cell when you’re done.”

I wrinkled my nose. The idea of waiting in the cell was appalling, but at least it wouldn’t be long.

Inside the locker room, I found a pile of clean scrubs in various sizes, along with towels and bars of soap. The water pressure was terrible, but I’d have been fine with a garden hose to get this mud off.

I didn't feel clean when I left, but I was better. Mostly because I knew Madoc would be back in a matter of hours.

FOOTSTEPS WOKE me and I sat bolt upright. "Who's there?"

"Ivy?" Tasha's voice answered.

I stood and ran to the bars. "Tasha!"

"Hold on, let me get you out of here," she said.

"Careful, the bars are fae iron," I said.

"Fucking assholes," she said as she fumbled with a set of keys.

"How did you get those? What's going on up there? Have you seen Madoc?" I asked.

"Calm down," she said. "One question at a time."

"The elders said Madoc was on his way. What's going on?" I asked.

"Cavan isn't going to wait for Madoc to arrive. He's got other plans for you," she said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," she mumbled.

"Did he hurt you?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She hissed in pain as she pulled the door open, then shook out her hand.

"How did you get the keys?" I asked.

"Please, for the love of the gods, just don't ask," she said. "Just trust me. We have to get you out of here now."

"Okay," I agreed.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

I nodded. The lingering grogginess from the iron was gone, and aside from the mild ache in my head, I didn't feel too bad. The shower and short rest had helped. With each step toward the stairs, I was feeling more like myself.

This was too easy, though. Shouldn't there be someone guarding a prisoner or were they so sure I wouldn't run? Where was Karl? He seemed to be my usual guard. Why wouldn't Cavan station someone to watch over me?

"I'm sorry, but you're going to have to tell me how you know all this. How do I know I'm not walking into a trap? Why did Cavan just let you

roam freely around the house? I want to trust you, I do, but..."

She huffed. "I wouldn't trust you if it were reversed, either."

I stopped walking. "Tasha, what's going on?"

"If you tell a soul, I will kill you," she said.

My brow furrowed. "Tell anyone what?"

"I fucked him, okay? He's got the classic villain monolog thing going on. He spilled everything as pillow talk. I grabbed the keys when he fell asleep. But seriously. I want that secret to die with him. If your mate doesn't kill Cavan, I'll do it myself," she said.

"Get in line, girl," I said.

She quirked a brow. "You had your chance, and you blew it. You're soft. You couldn't kill him."

I licked my lips and looked down. She was right. I had the opportunity to take him out, but he was Madoc's brother and I just couldn't. I'd already taken his father from him.

"We're wasting time," she said. "We gotta go. The feral shifters will be here any minute. We need to sneak outside and wait for them. With reinforcements, we can approach to find Madoc."

The two of us headed down the hall and up the stairs, pausing at the door to listen for movement. We stood in silence for a few moments, then I carefully turned the doorknob and opened the door a crack. Holding my breath, I waited.

No new sounds. No signs of movement.

Cautiously, I opened the door wider and looked both ways before skittering out. Tasha and I made it to the front door and quickly pulled it open.

Standing on the front porch, as if he'd been waiting there the whole time, was Cavan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CAVAN SMILED at us with a knowing expression. He'd been waiting for us to get out here. He knew what Tasha was after the whole time.

The sky was streaked with pink, and the world was bathed in the warm light of the sunrise. The feral wolves would be here any minute, but right now, it was just us and Cavan.

"Where's Madoc?" I demanded.

He took a step closer to us. "He's not returned yet, but you won't be here when he arrives. Imagine how heartbroken he'll be when I tell him how I had to stop your escape. I just don't know my own strength sometimes. I didn't mean to kill you."

My magic simmered to life, and I didn't need to look down to know that my hands were glowing.

Cavan's eyes moved down, then back up. He lifted his arm and held up a gleaming dagger. I didn't need to touch it to guess what it was made of. "You think you can harm me before I harm you?"

Tasha charged him and I saw Cavan's eyes go wide before the two of them tumbled down the wide stairs leading from the expansive front porch.

I chased them down but didn't make it before Cavan stabbed Tasha in the side with the dagger. She howled in pain.

Cavan lifted the dagger to stab her again, but I crashed into him, knocking the dagger free. Tasha grabbed it. Blood gushed from her side despite her free hand pressed against the wound. She already looked pale and beads of sweat had formed on her brow.

"I don't need that to kill you both," Cavan snarled. He lunged for me, but I dodged him. Quickly, I turned and landed a punch to his jaw. Shooting pain

spread from my knuckles up my arm and I hissed out a breath.

Unfortunately, the hit didn't do much to slow him down, and he responded by nailing the side of my face with his fist. My head snapped back, and I stumbled, but managed to avoid falling. Stars danced in my vision and it took me a second to regain my bearings.

Cavan had moved away from me, so he was out of my immediate reach. Tasha closed in, dagger in hand. Smoke curled up from her hand. The dagger's metal was burning her, but she wasn't letting go.

"How many of you am I going to have to kill?" Cavan said. "That dagger is poisoning you. Just drop it."

Tasha looked unsteady on her feet and I wasn't sure if she could even handle a blow. The blood was still oozing out of her side, the iron wound not healing at all.

"Leave her alone. You've done enough damage to her already. You know it's me you want," I said.

Cavan turned slowly, completely taking his eyes off Tasha. Clearly, he didn't see her as a threat at all. And I had hit on the truth. He'd enjoyed hurting me when I was a prisoner and I think he wanted to keep hurting me for the sheer pleasure of it. He was a sadist and by far more monstrous than any of those with fae blood that I had met. He couldn't be allowed any position of authority. He was too dangerous.

"You're right, little wolf. It's always been so much more fun to fight against you. You're feistier than when we first met." He moved even closer to me and I could feel the two parts inside me, both wolf and fae, begging for release.

My wolf wanted to rip his throat out, and the magic wanted to explode and annihilate everything in its path. After what I had done when I lost control around Dax, I wasn't sure I could risk releasing that much power while Tasha was so near. There was also the fact that the magic had drained me, leaving me vulnerable after using it. I had to be in control of my emotions before I could count on that as a weapon. So I let my wolf take over.

My clothing split as I leaned into the shift, my body responding on pure adrenaline and memory. I caught an amused chuckle from Cavan before he began the change.

Cavan's wolf was massive. Not as large as his brother's. Probably even smaller than Dax, but compared to him, I was like a pup.

His lips pulled back, showing fangs as he growled. Hackles raised, ears flattened against his head, I saw him tense, pulling back onto his haunches before launching at me.

I reacted on instinct, the wolf side taking point. Quickly, I ducked, then jumped away from his attack. With ease, I spun around to keep him in view.

Cavan had been the one who told me to use my small stature to my advantage. He had told me to dodge and avoid and then go for an artery. It seemed poetic that I was going to end his life using the advice he once gave me.

I charged, fainting to the right before going left. Cavan shifted his weight to avoid me, falling for my trick. I leaped onto his side, digging my claws into his shoulder and back. He howled in pain and tried to throw me, but I held fast, tearing into his skin and leaving deep cuts in my wake.

He fell to his side and rolled, knocking me from him, but I had caused plenty of damage before he got rid of me.

I scrambled up, realizing for the first time that we'd drawn a crowd. Several shifters were approaching with caution, but none of them stepped forward to offer assistance. Shifters liked the entertainment of seeing others get the shit beat out of them. It was like a fight outside my old high school. Everyone wanted to watch.

Cavan's wolf growled and came at me, claws extended. I dodged twice, then tried to attack on my own, but this time he caught me. He dragged his claws down my back and I howled as shooting pain tore through me. I wriggled free, using my small size to go between his great paws and get out of his reach.

He came at me again and I narrowly avoided his teeth before sliding behind him and leaping on him from behind. Going for the artery, I bit down on his neck, but I barely got my teeth in before I was thrown from him. I landed hard on my back, the fall sending shock waves of pain through my wounds.

Cavan's wolf landed on top of me, pinning me to the ground. I struggled to break free, but he held fast. I swear he was smiling as he glared down at me. All he had to do was bite my neck and it would be over.

Desperate to save my own life, I snapped my jaws and tried to wiggle free. Every movement irritated my injuries, sending fresh waves of pain that I did my best to ignore. Cavan's wolf bared its teeth and snapped its jaws inches from my face. He was toying with me, trying to show his dominance

before he ended my life. If he could sense my emotions, or scent my fear, he was getting exactly what he wanted.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a figure moving toward us. Tasha approached with the blade raised. Cavan noticed it at the same time and quickly released me to turn his attention to her. He knocked her down, and the blade dropped into the grass.

I raced forward, making as much noise as I could in the hopes that Cavan would turn his attention away from Tasha.

It worked.

The huge wolf met me head on, the two of us on our hind legs, front paws reaching out in an odd embrace. Cavan's wolf was so much larger than mine, and he easily took hold of me and brought me to the ground.

I managed to wriggle free and got enough distance that I could turn back to look at him. Panting and in pain, I wondered how long I could keep this up. He was stronger than me and more experienced at fighting. I had to hope he'd wear out faster if I had any chance of beating him.

"Cavan! Enough!"

My heart practically exploded from joy when I recognized the voice. Reacting on instinct, my wolf turned away from our attacker to look at her mate.

Cavan didn't hesitate. Teeth bit down into my back as claws ripped down my sides.

I howled and collapsed under the weight of the huge wolf on top of me.

"Get off her now." Madoc's tone was terrifying. It was also an alpha command.

Cavan wasn't gentle as he tore his claws out of me and moved away. I lay on the ground, panting. Everything hurt and my vision was blurry. I could smell the strong, coppery scent of my own blood and knew I was losing a lot of it. Even with faster shifter healing, I was in no shape to do much of anything.

"I've got her," Tasha said. "You deal with him."

Madoc's eyes met mine, and I managed a weak nod. I trusted Tasha. She'd helped me and I didn't want him to take his eyes off his brother.

I could feel Madoc's reluctance, but he turned his attention away from me and marched toward Cavan.

"Shift back, you coward," Madoc said. It was another alpha command.

I could hear the cracking of Cavan's bones and I got a little bit of

satisfaction knowing the change was painful.

Tasha dropped down next to me. The oozing wound on her side was no longer gushing blood. She was finally healing. “Can you shift back?”

My wolf wasn’t sure she wanted to shift back. I could sense her hesitation. She was worried Cavan would come back for us.

After a few deep breaths, I managed to calm all the parts of myself. The wolf, the human side, and the fae magic. It was a tangle of emotions and frustration and fear. I knew I needed time to heal, and some medical treatment for the more severe wounds.

“Go ahead,” Tasha said. “I’m not going to let anyone get to you. Shift so I can take a look at those injuries.”

I wanted to tell her she needed to worry about her own injuries. My wolf made an annoyed huffing sound.

“I know,” she said. “Just listen to me, okay?”

Exhausted, my wolf finally eased into the shift back to human. With a shudder, the change started.

As soon as I was back in human form, I turned all my attention to Madoc. I didn’t care if I was bleeding or that the mere thought of standing made the wounds on my body ache and sting. I needed to know he was okay.

His eyes found mine, and he nodded. I could feel the relief at him seeing me alive. I felt the same. They’d kept us apart, but while we’d been away from one another, the bond had intensified. I felt a deeper connection to him than I had yesterday. I wondered if that would continue our whole lives.

We had to get through this nightmare first to ensure we had lives to live together.

“Everything is already healing, but you’re going to hurt for a while,” Tasha said. “Can you stand?”

I turned to her and extended my hand. She helped me get to my feet, and I tried to hide the pain in my expression.

“See? She’s fine. No harm, big brother,” Cavan said. “Look at me. I’d say she got in a few blows of her own, too.”

“You threatened her with fae iron,” Tasha said.

“You told me she ran away to hide with the feral wolves,” Madoc said. “You said you’d leave her be.”

“She killed our father, Madoc,” he said. “You’re blinded by a piece of ass.”

“Watch your words, Cavan. That’s my mate you’re talking about,” he

said.

“You’d take this traitor over your pack?” Cavan pressed.

“The only traitor I see is you,” Madoc said. “She’s *mine*. She’s under my protection. When dad tried to kill her, he knew he was digging his own grave.”

“You can’t be serious. You know what she is,” he said.

“The same as me.” Madoc looked around at the gathered group. “Did you hear that? The fae blood that runs through her veins also runs through mine.”

Murmurs sounded around us, and I realized the group had expanded. How had so many shifters gotten here so quickly?

Then I noticed it wasn’t just Umbra Wolves watching this unfold. The feral shifters were here as planned. Many of them were watching Madoc, but a few had their eyes trained on me and Tasha. I got the sense that if anything happened to either of us, the feral wolves wouldn’t stay on the sidelines.

“You back off, you apologize to my mate, and you fall in line or you’re done,” Madoc warned. “The only reason you’re still breathing is because you’re my brother.”

Cavan laughed. “You’re fucking hilarious. You think everyone else is going to accept this? Accept you?”

Madoc’s hands balled into fists. I could feel how much effort it was taking him to hold back.

“Who’s with me? Don’t be afraid to step forward,” Cavan called. “Who wants an alpha with fae blood and a murderous mate?”

Nobody in the circle moved.

Cavan growled. “Fine. I’ll do it myself.”

“Are you challenging me?” Madoc asked.

“What if I am?” Cavan asked.

“Then I’d have no choice but to kill you,” Madoc said.

“You’re too soft. You know you’d hold back and I’d win,” Cavan said.

“I nearly killed you,” I snapped. “What makes you think you can take your brother? He’s offering you a chance you don’t deserve. Take it if you know what’s good for you.”

Cavan’s upper lip twitched, but he kept his eyes on his brother. “I never wanted to claim the pack like this.”

“You’ve been bloodthirsty since the day you were born,” Madoc said.

“Let’s do this.” Cavan turned away from his brother and took a few steps away before turning to face him

The audience buzzed with whispered conversation, and the energy around us flared like a torch being ignited.

Shifters did love a good fight.

“Madoc, be careful,” I said.

He nodded, then turned his attention back to Cavan.

I knew what would happen next. I knew they’d both shift, and they’d fight until someone was dead or tapped out. It couldn’t be Madoc. He had to win. But I knew Cavan wasn’t the type who would be willing to tap out. He’d make his brother kill him. Could Madoc do it?

I’d seen his dark side, but never against his brother. This was so much worse than anything else he’d had to endure. I knew it would be a challenge for him.

Madoc tossed his clothes to the side, and I took all of him in. Every sharp edge, every curve of muscle, every scar. He was perfection, and he was mine. I needed him to get through this. Then I was going to make him take those clothes off again.

Cavan was crouched low, as if waiting for Madoc to shift first. The scrapes and bites from my claws and teeth weren’t bleeding anymore, but he was a mess of blood and dirt. He wasn’t going to be in top form, yet he’d still challenged Madoc.

I heard the snapping of bones as Madoc initiated his shift. I watched, transfixed by the way his body flowed through the transformation.

Suddenly, Tasha was on top of me, knocking me to the ground. I barely had time to register that Cavan had come at me with the knife before a blur of fur tackled him to the ground.

Scrambling to my feet, I watched as Madoc’s wolf tore into Cavan’s throat. Blood sprayed and Cavan’s eyes went blank.

Madoc was back in human form, covered in his brother’s blood. He stared out at the gathered shifters. “Anyone else have a problem with me or my mate?”

The silence was deafening.

Cavan had tried one last time to kill me. Madoc didn’t hesitate to choose me over him.

“Anyone who disrespects my mate will suffer the same fate,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HOLDEN STEPPED AWAY from the onlookers toward the center of the circle. “If any of you have a problem with them, you’ve also got a problem with me. This is your chance. Speak up or get the fuck out.”

Willow joined him. “Same with me. Madoc and his mate have my full support.”

I smiled at my friends, grateful for them being here and standing up for us.

Nobody moved. It was as if the entire group was holding a collective breath. Even the feral shifters were silent.

I walked over to my mate and set my hand on his upper arm. He looked over at me and smiled. His face was covered in blood, but I’d never seen him look more powerful. He’d done it. He had claimed his birthright.

Nothing had gone according to our plan, yet it had still worked out. At least so far. There was still the Shadow Pack to deal with.

Madoc pulled me against him, and he kissed the top of my head. “I was so worried about you, but I should have known you’d figure it out.”

“I’m sorry about your dad. And your brother,” I said.

I could feel him tense for a moment, then he relaxed. “They had a choice. We all have choices. They weren’t going to let us live. This is bigger than us. I have so much to tell you.”

“Hold that thought,” I said. “I brought some friends.”

Madoc looked at the crowd. “The feral wolves?”

“They want to help. I’ve got a lot to tell you, too,” I said. “I have an idea how to stop this war.”

“We need some time alone,” he said quietly. Then he released me and

faced the crowd. "Thank you all for coming. Please, feel free to wait inside the house or on the grounds. Holden, can you find some food and drinks? Make sure everyone is taken care of. After I get cleaned up, we'll meet with the elders. My mate has a plan."

Warmth spread to every inch of my body. Madoc hadn't even heard what I had to say, but he believed in me.

"You were right about him," Tasha said. "Makes me glad I saved your life."

I laughed. "Thank you for that. I owe you."

"Anything you want, it's yours," Madoc said to Tasha. "I can't even tell you what I'd do if she'd been taken from me."

"I understand," Tasha said. "Ivy's already given me more hope than I've had in years. That's enough."

"We're going to reunite you two soon," I promised.

"All three of you need to get cleaned up and then I'm going to check those wounds," Willow said. "You can talk later."

I wasn't in a hurry for Willow to poke at my injuries, but I'd bear just about anything for a little time alone with Madoc. We had so much to catch up on.

Willow led Tasha toward her bedroom, and Madoc took me to a suite that I was guessing was where he stayed when he was at the Umbra Estate.

Which was now his.

The reality of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks. He was the new alpha. His dad and Cavan were dead. Both of them because of me.

I'd done so much to try to help Madoc keep his family and his pack, but I'd also cost him so much. Without me, he'd have transitioned to alpha later, possibly in a more peaceful way.

Though, I had to wonder if the earlier demise of Erwin had resulted in more lives saved. I hated that I didn't feel bad that he was gone. I only felt bad for the harm I caused Madoc and I hated that the blood was on my hands.

Madoc closed the door behind us, then held my face in his large hands. His eyes scanned me, taking in all my injuries. "I can't believe they did this to you. I'd kill him again if I could."

I set my hands on top of his. "I never meant for it to happen this way. I didn't want anyone to get hurt."

"I know." He shook his head. "I shouldn't have left you alone. I never thought my dad would try to kill you like that. You don't have anything to

feel bad about. He brought this on himself. Even with me as part fae, he couldn't see past his prejudice."

"I know what your family means to you," I said.

He lowered his hands and rested them on my hips. "I never knew how dangerous my father truly was. Cavan had always been so open about his beliefs, but my father hid so much. Probably because of my blood. Now, I know the truth. I just have to hope he didn't poison my other brothers."

"Where are they? Are they safe?" I asked.

"They're out on patrol, but I'll call them in for the meeting with the elders. They need to be here, they need to hear this from me," he said.

"I'm so sorry." I didn't know what else to say or do. Did he want comfort, or did he want me to agree with him?

"Cavan nearly killed you," he said. "I told you I will always protect you. I don't care who they are. You are mine, and I will always keep you safe."

My heart swelled, and flutters filled my chest. I never thought I'd be able to count on anyone besides myself. Everything had changed for me in the last few days. I knew Madoc would be there for me, no matter what. "How did I get so lucky?"

I wanted to kiss him, but his mouth was still covered in his brother's blood. That was taking things a little too far.

"We should get cleaned up," he said. "I want to make sure those bites aren't too deep."

Madoc was a bloody mess, same as me, but I was grateful that most of it wasn't his blood. I wasn't quite as fortunate. Most of my injuries were already healing, but I'd endured a lot since I parted ways with my mate.

Hand in hand, Madoc walked me through a simple bedroom. A king-sized bed with a crisp white quilt was bracketed by two simple nightstands in dark wood. A wardrobe and a window completed the room. It was nice, but it wasn't nearly as ornate as the rest of the house.

Out of all the Umbras, I'd gotten lucky enough to be paired with the most simple and down to earth. I had to wonder if Madoc's other brothers were more like him or Cavan. I hoped they were like Madoc. I supposed I'd find out soon enough.

The bathroom was just as clean and simple as the bedroom. Everything was white tile and stainless steel. White fluffy towels were neatly stacked on a shelf near the shower.

I caught sight of the two of us in the mirror as we passed and if there were

ever two people who were the opposite of this clean, modern bathroom, it was us. We were nearly unrecognizable with the layers of dirt and blood. It was hard to imagine that I was the same woman who'd left her pack just a few days ago. I didn't feel the same in a lot of ways and I never would have pictured myself here.

The shower was large and spacious, with a rain shower head coming from above. We took turns lathering each other up and scrubbing all the blood off. The water running to the drain was bright red for a long while.

When it finally ran clear, I took a deep breath, feeling more like myself. Madoc's jaw was dusted with dark stubble and he had purple circles under his eyes. I was sure I looked just as exhausted. Even so, he was still the most handsome male I'd ever seen and the only person I wanted to be here with. I didn't even have to wonder if he felt the same way. I just knew.

When his gaze found mine, I felt like I was home. It didn't matter if we were at the Umbra estate, or Madoc's apartment, or in the back of a car somewhere. As long as we were together, we'd figure things out.

He leaned down, his lips finding mine. The kiss was everything I needed. My mouth devoured his as if he was my only source of sustenance. His tongue flicked into my mouth. We met in a tangle of teeth and lips and tongues.

Warm water flowed over us, our hands exploring, gripping, and caressing. I pressed my body against his, my breasts flattening against his firm chest. He was already hard, his cock pressing against my hip.

The two of us had nearly died. And I needed this to celebrate that we were still alive.

Madoc's calloused hands grazed across every inch of my skin. Little sparks seemed to appear in his wake and my whole body tingled. Each caress was gentle and soothing until he gripped my hips and pushed me against the wall. Drops of water caught in my lashes and steam billowed around us in clouds. The tile was cool against my bare back but inside, I felt like I was on fire.

I pulled Madoc closer until his hardness was almost painful against me. Digging my fingernails into his back, I urged him forward. I needed to feel him inside me. "Please."

His eyes were heavy with lust and his lips curved into a hungry smile. He dragged his thumb across my lower lip. "I was so worried I'd never get to touch you again."

My hands slid up his back and I tangled my fingers into his hair. “You’re stuck with me. Forever.”

“Thank the gods,” he said.

He ran his fingers over the bite on my shoulder and a low growl escaped his throat. “This isn’t my mark. Nobody will ever harm you again.”

I guided his hand to the faint marks from where he’d bitten me. They were nearly healed and unless you were looking for it, they were difficult to see. “Focus on this. On us. I’m not letting anyone separate us again.”

“I thought I was supposed to take care of you,” he said.

“We agreed we’d take care of each other,” I said. “But if you don’t fuck me soon, I’m going to have to take care of myself.” I wrapped a leg around his thigh, ready to climb him if I had to.

He made an entirely different kind of noise. Raw and desperate and laced with desire. He gripped my thigh with his large hand, his fingers pressing hard into my flesh. I gasped as he entered me all at once. His thickness filling me completely, making me yelp.

Expert fingers circled my clit as he thrust in and out, driving me closer to orgasm with each movement. My back slammed against the wall and I could barely catch my breath as Madoc continued to drive into me. Tension built low in my belly, the sensation making my breath shaky. I held on to his shoulders for support and let my head lean against the wall as all reason left me. There was nothing else except the building pleasure and the feel of my mate’s body against mine.

My breathing grew more rapid and my moans turned into cries, louder and louder. Madoc’s fingers worked their magic while each thrust drove me closer to the edge.

With a self-satisfied smirk he leaned down, his lips brushing against my ear. “Come for me, sugar.”

It was as if he’d thrown a match on gasoline. I screamed as an explosion shattered inside me; waves of pleasure roared, coming like shockwaves after an earthquake. I was still feeling the echo of my climax as Madoc finished with a groan. He pressed his forehead to mine and we both stared at each other, panting for a moment to catch our breath.

I closed my eyes, savoring the feel of his body against mine. It didn’t matter which pack I belonged to or what came next. As long as we were together, I could handle whatever the Shadows threw at us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

EVEN THOUGH MADOC was standing right next to me, Holden wouldn't leave my other side. I felt like the incoming shifters probably weren't going to harm me, but after all the hostility I had experienced from Erwin and Cavan, I didn't ask my old boss to leave.

Guilt squeezed in around me, making my breath shaky. I wasn't sure I was ever going to forgive myself for what I'd done to Erwin or the role I'd played in Cavan's death. Madoc hadn't brought it up, but there was so much else to deal with. I hoped that when the dust cleared, I would be able to help him through the grief that he had to feel. They might have been awful, but they were his family.

Pushing the thoughts from my mind, I glanced at my mate. We'd both been through so much to make it to this point. We were a day away from the meeting and everything was still scheduled to take place as planned. The Shadow Wolves hadn't attacked again, but I knew they were biding their time. There was no way Dax was going to settle this peacefully. I just had to hope our plan worked. It was all riding on the hope that they'd begin with an illusion of peace rather than attacking at first sight of us. If I was wrong, a lot of shifters could get hurt.

Madoc squeezed my hand and offered a reassuring smile, but I could feel the tension radiating from him. We were both uneasy about what came next.

Things were already changing, though. This time, I wasn't the only female in the war room. Willow looked positively thrilled to be standing at Madoc's other side. Like Holden and Madoc, she'd been protective of me. It was strange having this whole group who seemed to actually care about it. I wasn't used to it, but I had to admit, it was nice. The four of us were silent as

we watched the other invited guests file in.

Both of Madoc's brothers approached, hesitating at the doorway. They weren't usually in attendance when I'd been here with Erwin. I wasn't sure if it was because they were younger, or if Erwin didn't want them there for another reason.

Madoc dismissed himself and went to meet them. They exchanged words I couldn't hear, and guilt gnawed at my insides as I watched them. I'd taken so much from them.

I was vaguely aware of the elders, the Senka alpha, and a few others taking positions around the large table as I continued to watch the remaining Umbra family. Their conversation looked serious and intense. Whenever one of them looked in my direction, I met their gaze unfaltering. Madoc's brothers were part of my family now, if they were willing to have me.

Madoc and his brothers walked back to where I was standing and Willow greeted each of the younger boys with a quick hug. Then the two of them turned their attention to me. I swallowed hard, not sure how I was supposed to react or what I was supposed to do. My first instinct was to apologize or express my sympathy at their loss, but that was incredibly complicated.

"I'm glad we finally get a chance to formally meet," the older of the two said. He extended his hand, and I shook it. "I'm Maynard. I'm sorry for what you had to go through when you joined our family."

My eyes widened a moment, taken off guard by the welcome. "I'm sorry too. For everything."

"We knew what our father was, what Cavan was," he said. "If it wasn't you, it would have been someone else."

It wasn't exactly comforting, but I'd take what I could get. I nodded, not really sure how to respond.

The second brother offered a weak smile, and I smiled back even though my throat stung with unshed tears. I could never undo what I had done to these two. "I'm glad you completed the bond. And I'm glad that someone finally stood up to that asshole."

Maynard elbowed his brother. "Griffith," he hissed.

"What? It's not a secret. Everyone knew how terrible he was, but nobody was brave enough to stand up to him." Griffith glanced at Madoc. "Not even you."

"You're right. I should have done more, but I'm not going to make that mistake again." Madoc clapped his brother on the shoulder. "No more hiding.

You don't have to pretend for him anymore and you'll never have to pretend for me. From now on, we all get to be who we really are. Shit, I'm part fae and not even your full brother."

"You're always going to be our brother," Griffith said.

"We've got your back, Mad," Maynard said. "And he's right, Griffith, no more sneaking around for you."

I wasn't sure exactly what they were talking about, but I saw Griffith visibly relax. From his words, I could tell he'd been in a lot of pain and much of that pain had been caused by his own father. It seemed Erwin wasn't different from Preston in how he had run his pack and raised his family. I knew Madoc would break that cycle, and once Dax was out of the picture, there was hope for the Shadows as well.

The two youngest Umbras moved into position next to Willow, who wrapped her arm around Griffith and pulled him close to her side. Whatever he had gone through, it was a lot, and he was going to need time to heal and grieve. They all were. But there was no time for that now. With any luck, we'd be able to start rebuilding things after the meeting tomorrow night.

The room grew quiet, and all eyes turned to the door as Tasha and a handful of feral wolves step through the doorway. She held her chin high and walked forward with confidence, but I noticed that her hands were shaking. She claimed she wasn't a leader, and I knew this wasn't easy for her, but she was stronger than she realized. Now it was my turn to step away from the table and I went to greet her. "You clean up well."

"Same for you," she said. Then she leaned close and lowered her voice, "They're all staring at me."

"They're not used to having women in this room," I said. "And you carry yourself like a fucking queen."

Her cheeks flushed, but her smile looked genuine. I hooked my elbow through hers and led her to the table. "Everyone, I want you to meet the key to ending this whole nasty business with the Shadow Pack."

"Since when do feral wolves get a voice at the table?" one of the elders asked.

"The feral wolves aren't even a real pack. They have no loyalty and they don't understand things like honor," someone else said.

"Take a good look around you. Everyone in this room has been through hell the last few days because of conniving, lying, brutal alphas desperate for power. You cannot tell me any of the packs deserve to consider themselves

above any other,” I said.

“Let them speak,” Morgan said. “it’s time we give everyone a voice. Things have changed, things should change. All of our packs, our way of life, is under threat right now. If we can’t come up with a solution to this, we’re going to face devastation like we have never seen before.”

“We have a solution, a way to reduce bloodshed and end this conflict so we can move on to bigger problems,” I said.

“Let your alpha speak for you. The war room is not a place for females,” one of the elders said.

I cocked a brow and turned my attention to the elder. “If you have a problem with me being here, you can leave.”

“Maybe you don’t understand our ways yet,” he said, his tone condescending. “In the Umbra Pack, the ladies run the household and the men run the pack.”

My jaw was tense, and internally I was shaking with rage. This is why nothing got done. Why we had so many petty conflicts in so many terrible power-hungry alphas. Instead of moving forward with the times, shifters were stuck in the stone ages. “Is that so? How’s that working for you?”

“Enough,” Madoc said. “This is *my* pack. And Ivy is *my* mate. She’s my other half. When she speaks, it is the same as if I were speaking. We will no longer silence members of our pack based on archaic tradition. It’s the same thinking that kept my father hiding me. We’re moving forward and I’m not putting it up for a vote.”

I smiled at Madoc. I loved him even more fiercely every time he spoke. He was going to bring the change the packs needed.

“We do not dismiss females in our pack,” Maverick, the Senka alpha, said. “The best for the job should be the one you want on the job, correct?”

The elder grumbled but turned away from me without saying another word.

“I agree,” Madoc said. “Please, continue, Ivy.”

I nodded. “As I was saying, we can fix this without major involvement of our forces. Hopefully, without any Umbra, Senka, or feral shifter blood. “

“And how are we supposed to do that?” the elder who seemed to hate me sneered.

“We throw our support behind one of the Shadow Wolves when he challenges their alpha during the meeting,” I said.

“You know someone who would do this?” Maverick asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why is he waiting, then? Why not just challenge him so we can avoid this mess?” Maverick asked.

“Because he was being blackmailed,” I said.

“Dax would have killed me if Xander stepped out of line. Xander is my mate. But clearly, I’m not dead,” Tasha said.

“With proof that his mate is alive, and with shifters willing to protect her while he completes his challenge, the tables change,” I said.

Murmurs rose around the table, and shifters turned to discuss this information with their friends. Nervous flutters filled my chest as I waited for responses. It was such a simple plan. Too simple, maybe. But it could work.

It had to work.

“I don’t understand why any of us are needed then,” Maverick said. “If this Xander challenges Dax, they’ll have to fight. That is our way.”

“Dax doesn’t exactly follow the rules.” I looked around the room at the faces staring back. They seemed skeptical, but they didn’t know Dax like I did. How could I make them understand?

“We don’t need a lot of shifters with us, but Dax might refuse to fight, or he might try to kill Tasha instead. He’s a loose cannon. There’s no telling what he’ll do.” They hadn’t seen him at the feral camp. He was far more unhinged than he ever was. I was hoping that helped make it easier for Xander to fight, but what if Dax did something crazy instead?

“He’s a boy who became alpha too soon. Why are we even bothering with this? Either we’re at war, or we let them alone to deal with this themselves,” Maverick said.

“He killed his father,” I said.

The room went silent.

“You didn’t know that, did you?” My brow furrowed. Had they all thought Holden did it? “He killed all the elders in the Shadow pack.” I shivered, still not wanting to believe he’d actually done that. “He used a false bond against me and planned to use my magic to help him take over all the other packs. He doesn’t just want the Shadows; he wants all the shifters. And he’ll do just about anything to get what he wants.”

“But you think this other wolf can take Dax down? What happens if he loses?” One of the elders asked.

“Ivy is my mate,” Madoc said. “So I can say with confidence that if someone kept her from me and threatened her life, that someone would be

shredded to ribbons the first chance I got.”

I couldn't help but smile. I'd do the same for him.

“Revenge is a powerful force,” Maverick said.

“Are we in agreement, then?” Madoc asked. “We go in support for this alpha challenge, and we stay out of it unless something goes wrong.”

Murmurs of affirmation went up around the table, then fists slammed down over and over. I was swept up into the energy and the hope. I grabbed hold of Tasha's hand and squeezed. She was still shaking, but she wore a look of determination on her face. “If Dax kills Xander, none of them will have to lift a finger, because I'll kill him myself before they can even reach him,” she said.

“Don't worry. If Xander's in trouble, I'll break the rules myself. I won't let anything happen to him. I swear it to you,” I said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE CONVOY of cars stopped a mile away from the designated meeting place. It was a neutral space, ancient and warded against magic. None of us would be able to shift and only the six we'd agreed to bring would enter. The rest of our allies would wait outside the wards, there as witnesses, if we could get Dax to agree to the alpha challenge.

We were closer to Shadow territory than Umbra, and I felt an odd sensation as I realized this space was similar to me. I wasn't Shadow anymore, yet I didn't feel like I was an Umbra, either. Maybe after the dust settled, I could figure that out. For now, I pushed the thought aside. It was time to focus. We had to get Dax to agree to this and get him out here where he'd have too many witnesses to run away.

Madoc gripped my hand, and we moved ahead. All of us silent in our approach. There were so many ways this could go wrong. What if Dax wasn't even there? What if he didn't bring Xander as one of his five allies? Then there was the nagging fear about Kate. She'd never contacted us and I had no way of knowing if she was safe.

My phone was long gone, but she could have contacted Willow or Holden. We were walking in blind, with nothing more than the hope that she had been successful in communicating the information to Xander and that nobody had harmed her. I hated the waiting, but at least that was just about over.

"You're worried about your friend, aren't you?" Tasha asked.

I glanced over at her as we trudged through the woods. Madoc had released my hand and was taking the lead with Maverick. Willow was behind and Holden was at my side. Once again, I was surrounded as if I was the

weakest member of the group. Or maybe it was for Tasha's sake this time. We couldn't let anything happen to her. Although, Holden had been by my side most of the time since Cavan's death. I think he was still trying to fulfill his agreement with my mother.

"Is that your gift?" I asked, realizing I had never found out what the fae blood had gifted her. "Can you read minds?"

"Please never read mine," Holden said with a grumble.

Tasha chuckled. "I can't read minds, no. But I can feel emotions in detailed clarity. You're radiating sorrow and concern. I'm guessing that has to do with the friend that was sent to find Xander. Or maybe it's for us."

"We haven't heard from her," I said.

"I'm sure she's fine," Holden said. "She's a smart kid. She knows it would be a risk to contact you when we're on our way. Have a little faith. Remember what I told you? Let people help you."

I was still concerned about Kate, but Holden's words did make me feel a little better. Kate could take care of herself. She was smart. She probably didn't feel safe calling. I really, really hoped she was okay.

Cold washed over me as if I'd just been dipped in ice water. I sucked in a breath. As quickly as the sensation came, it subsided. I knew we had just entered the warded space and my heartbeat quickened. This place was supposed to be sacred, neutral. But I wouldn't be surprised if Dax violated the agreement.

While we couldn't shift inside the small, enchanted area, there were plenty of other ways shifters could kill each other. I knew the group waiting just outside the wards was armed to the teeth, and the six of us entering all had weapons. It was supposed to be a diplomatic discussion, but it was a farce. No sense in hiding the fact that we'd defend ourselves if needed. The blade strapped around my ankle wasn't going to be enough if things got completely out of control, but all I had to do was make it outside the wards to have access to actual power.

Ahead was a clearing surrounded by trees that reminded me all too much of the faerie circle. In the center of the ring, Dax, Xander, and four other shifters waited to greet us. I frowned at the sight of Dax. I didn't think he was dead after our last encounter, but I'd be lying to myself if I hadn't secretly wished he was. He smiled; a wicked curve of his lips that looked far too amused. My heart thundered against my ribs, and I was certain Dax and his friends could hear it. Perhaps that wasn't the worst outcome. If they thought I

was nervous, it might reduce their suspicions for what we had planned.

As we neared, I caught the glint of something silver at Dax's side. Like us, he wasn't hiding the knife he wore at his hip. It was a small and unassuming weapon, but I didn't have to touch it to know what it was made of. It wasn't our original plan for me to attend this, but Dax had guessed I would be here. I wasn't sure if Erwin's death had changed his plans or if he changed his mind after we faced off at the feral camp. If only my magic had worked against him, none of us would be standing here right now.

We stopped a few feet away from the Shadow Wolves, and I kept my eyes on them, knowing Holden, Tasha, Willow, Madoc, and Maverick were all doing the same. We all knew better than to underestimate Dax and his friends.

"I see you brought back our wayward Shadow," Dax said. "That will make all of this go much easier. You return Ivy to us, and we go back to the way things were. We stay on our land, and we mind our business. You can't ask for a better deal," Dax said.

I opened my mouth to tell him he was insane, but before a word got out, Madoc closed the distance between our groups and had his hand around Dax's throat.

The remaining Shadow Wolves closed in around my mate, drawing their weapons.

"Madoc!" I called. "Let him go. That's not what we're here for."

Madoc made a feral sound that reverberated down to my bones. Part of me wanted to let him tear Dax to shreds, but that would make war inevitable. We'd worked too hard to try and find a solution to this that would result in less innocent blood being spilled. None of us standing in this circle counted as innocent, but if Madoc killed Dax like this, the conflict wouldn't stay between those of us here. It would ripple beyond the two packs, and with alliances, it would spread to all the shifters.

I wasn't a prophet, but it didn't take a gift of sight to know that the consequences of our actions today could be catastrophic if we didn't play things right.

"Listen to your mate," Willow said. "Put him down. This is supposed to be peaceful, remember?"

Madoc snarled, his whole body tense.

"I'm not going with him, you know that." I extended my hand toward Madoc, but I didn't dare move closer to Dax. I knew him too well to let

myself get pulled into a trap. While I was standing with the others, he wouldn't grab me.

Madoc lowered Dax to the ground. The Shadow alpha coughed and sputtered as he caught his breath. He looked up at me and a wicked smile spread across his lips. I turned my attention from him, focusing instead on my mate, who was walking back toward me. Suddenly, the three shifters I didn't know lunged for Madoc, all three of them digging silver blades into his back at the same time.

My eyes widened, and I screamed as I raced forward to defend my mate. Moving on instinct, I grabbed the knife at my ankle and charged. Madoc fell forward, landing on the ground, the three blades still stuck in his back. I wanted to go to him, to remove what was probably fae iron from his body, but the other three shifters turned their attention to me.

Behind me I could hear the sounds of fists against flesh, followed by grunts and yells. I knew the others were also fighting, but I couldn't look back to see what was going on with them. One of the three shifters peeled off, headed toward the fight I wasn't paying attention to, leaving me with two to take out before I could help Madoc. They had new blades in their hands, prepared to come at me the same way they had taken down my mate. My heart felt like it had been torn to shreds, but if I was going to help him, I had to eliminate the threat first.

"Cowards!" I shouted as I charged forward, ducking low just as one of the two shifters swiped his knife at my head. He missed, and I dug my own knife into his side quickly before pulling it out. He groaned and covered the wound with his hand, then blindly swiped his own weapon my way, but he was unsteady from my attack. I kicked him as he landed on the ground and I didn't waste time turning on my other threat. I knew the first shifter wouldn't stay down for long, but the other shifter was already closing in on me.

He was smarter in his path of attack and he ducked low, giving me little time to jump out of his way. His blade caught my side but managed to only cut through my tee. He rounded on me again, weaving the blade wildly. The second shifter was back on his feet and both of them were closing in on me. *Shit.* I needed help, but a quick glance toward my friends told me I wasn't getting any.

The two shifters approached cautiously. Neither of them looked like they knew how to use a knife, not that I had been trained in how to use a knife, either. They were Shadows like me, but I didn't know them. They were older,

so they could have been raised in the pack or they joined later. If they grew up in the pack, I knew how they'd been trained. We'd been taught to fight with fists and feet in human form and I knew most of the shifters in my pack felt more comfortable using their teeth and claws as wolves. There had to be a way to use that to my advantage.

They both charged, and I spun to avoid the first knife, then dropped to slice across my attacker's thigh. He yelled and staggered, giving me time to flee his fist, but the second shifter was on me. His knife tore across my upper arm, leaving a scorching trail as it cut through my skin. I screamed in agony as searing pain spread from the point of contact through my arm. Any other knife, any other kind of material would have hurt, but the feel of that iron entering my bloodstream was on a whole different level. I'd never felt pain like this.

My attacker leered at me, enjoying the pain he'd caused. "Filthy fae bitch. You're lucky the alpha wants you alive," he sneered.

Panting and gripping my injured arm, I perked up at his comment. These two weren't trying for lethal blows, which meant they were just trying to distract me. I risked a glance at Madoc who is still laying on the ground. I had to get those knives out of him, and now I knew I wasn't in mortal peril.

I tossed my knife to the ground and lifted my hands in the air. "I'm unarmed." My two attackers looked confused and when they glanced at each other, I bolted for Madoc. Dropping to my knees at his side, I quickly removed all three knives and threw them as far as I could so they couldn't be used to cause more harm. Blood gushed from the open wounds, and I knew he was in desperate need of healing quickly I pulled one of the packets of the healing poultice Willow and I had made from my pocket and dumped the herbs over his back, hoping some of them landed on the injuries. I barely had time to empty the satchel before the two shifters yanked me away from Madoc.

I hissed in pain and yanked my injured arm away. "I'll go with you. Just let go of that arm."

To my surprise, the one shifter released my arm while the other held fast to my uninjured arm.

A heavy weight settled deep inside, and I glanced at Madoc. Why was he still unconscious? I had to hope what I did was enough. The iron was gone, and he had the herbs, but he still wasn't waking. What had they done to him?

I had seen him struck by fae iron in the past. I'd seen him endure more

than this. He should be awake. The only thing keeping me from completely exploding in a ball of rage was the fact that I could see his back rise and fall as he breathed. An empty feeling filled my chest, the place where my wolf or my magic should be. We needed to get out of here, away from these wards that were keeping us from using our gifts.

I let the shifter hold me, dragging me by the arm, away from Madoc. I could have struggled, I could have tried to fight them, but I knew they didn't plan to kill me. Madoc was in danger and so were my other friends. There was no way the same consideration applied to them. The shifters attacking the others were likely going for the kill. I needed to put an end to this before someone got hurt. Or worse.

My captor whipped me around and I got to see the rest of the fight. Dax had a knife at Tasha's throat and Xander was unconscious on the ground, iron cuffs around his wrists and a gag in his mouth. Fuck, Dax had come prepared.

Willow, Holden, and Maverick were fighting against the other three shifters Dax had brought with him. They looked evenly matched, as fists went flying and blows were exchanged. It was like watching one of the fights at the Howler. A straight up brawl that would last until someone was too tired to continue or someone was knocked out. This needed to stop. This wasn't the plan. Why hadn't Xander challenged Dax?

Panic gripped me. Was Kate okay? Had she even made it back to the Fringes? What if she'd talked to Xander, and he turned her down? Everything was falling apart. I had to do something.

Despite being in Dax's grip, Tasha looked calm and determined. She managed a slight nod at me, and I swore she was sending me her thoughts. She wanted me to ruffle Dax's feathers. To see how far I could push him toward the edge. It wasn't a terrible plan, but it was risky while she was in his grip. That knife against her throat was probably fae iron. Even if it wasn't, a sliced throat wasn't something a shifter could heal from, no matter the metal used to make the blade. Her eyes widened. *Do it*, they seemed to scream.

Pushing aside my fear, I locked eyes with Dax. He grinned as if this was what he'd been waiting for the whole time.

"Let her go, Dax. This isn't about her. It's not about any of them," I said.

"You're right," he said, his tone unnervingly calm. "Stop!"

The shifter gripping my arms froze in place and the three who were attacking my friends stopped fighting. Willow punched the male in front of

her in the face before stepping away from him. He growled at her but didn't retaliate.

"Release her, Dax!" I shouted. "This is supposed to be a diplomatic negotiation. What the fuck is wrong with you? This isn't about them, anyway. It's certainly not about some random feral wolf."

He laughed. "I know you know who she is. And kudos to you for finding her. Very impressive. You wanted Xander to turn against me, right? That was your whole goal. You figured if he saw her alive, he'd join you. Fight for you. With two of you, with your power, you'd be unstoppable. I had planned to use the iron cuffs on you, but I'm flexible. So now Xander and your mate are out. What's your next move, darling?"

My chest tightened. I desperately wanted to ask him what they'd done to Madoc, but that would give Dax leverage. It took all my willpower not to look over at him to make sure he was still breathing. The connection between us seemed to hum in the background, so I knew he was safe enough for now. If I showed just how much he meant to me, Dax could send his minions to end his life. The only reason Madoc was still alive had to be because Dax couldn't wrap his head around how intense and all-consuming a mating bond was. He had no idea that I would do anything to save my mate.

"If this is between us, you let her go. The two of us don't need to involve anyone else," I said.

"I tried that last time we met. Remember how that turned out? Your magic doesn't work on me anymore," he said.

I spread my arms away from my body. "Magic doesn't work in here at all for any of us."

"True. I suppose I didn't need all those potions if we were just going to be in here," he said. "But I wasn't about to underestimate you. I made that mistake with Xander." He tossed a dirty look at the bound, passed out half-fae on the ground.

Like me, Xander had intense power. Far surpassing that of either of our mates. I glanced at Tasha, pain squeezing in on my heart at what she was having to endure. Her mate was so close. After all this time, he was right there, and she couldn't go to him. She had to be dying inside.

"What is this all about, Dax?" I asked. "You attacked the Umbras, then demanded a meeting. We both know you don't have the resources for a war. We both know the cost shifters will endure if you do this."

"I told you," he said. "I'm taking back our power. A thousand years ago,

we didn't live in hiding. I'm done with all that," he said.

"Humans outnumber us a thousand to one. You really think they wouldn't just hunt us for sport?" I shook my head. There were a lot of reasons we stayed hidden, and Dax wasn't stupid. But he was delusional.

"We're stronger than them. Especially you. You could take a thousand with one flash of light," he said.

"The other shifters are never going to support this," I said.

"I need you to support me in this, Ivy. Because I don't want to hurt you. I want you by my side. You'll be my queen. We'll rule together." He sounded so deranged. How could he possibly believe any of this?

"Dax, you need help," I said. "The elders told you this was a terrible idea because it is. It can't be done!"

"I killed the elders. The Shadow elders. The Tari elders. I'll kill the Umbra elders and the Senka elders and anyone else who questions me," he said.

Holy shit. He was even more disturbed than I realized. "Dax, how could you?"

I heard a low rumbling growl and saw Maverick prickle. If he could shift, he'd be in wolf form right now.

Tasha squeaked, and I noticed that the blade was pressing in tighter against her throat. A trickle of blood ran down her neck.

"You have two choices." Dax watched me intently. My pulse raced and my mouth went dry. I knew where he was going with this. "You can help me on my quest to return shifters to their rightful place, or I will kill your friend."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DAX'S KNUCKLES were white as he squeezed the handle of the knife. Tasha's lower lip trembled for a moment, then she swallowed and lifted her chin. "Go ahead and do it. Don't let him win, Ivy."

I couldn't let him kill Tasha, but I couldn't agree to go with him. I could lie. Say I'd help him, then run beyond the ward. I'd get my magic back, and I could defend myself. If he followed, maybe I could end it. Maybe whatever he'd taken to protect himself had worn off.

Of maybe he'd kill her anyway.

If I wasn't planning on keeping my word, I definitely couldn't count on him to follow through on his. We were playing a dangerous game. One we knew would make both of us lose.

"You let her go and I'm willing to hear you out," I said. "I will leave with you, and I will listen to your plans."

"Not good enough," he said. "But you probably would sacrifice her, wouldn't you? I mean, Xander would tear you apart when he woke, but you wouldn't even feel bad about sending her to her death."

"That's not true," I said.

He scoffed. "I know you don't feel even the slightest remorse for lives you took."

"No, you're wrong," I said. "Please, let her go."

"I'm not wrong. I know you. Better than you know yourself. You and me, we're cut from the same cloth. I felt it that night when we fought. You'd have killed me if I let you." He lowered the knife and shoved Tasha away.

I let out a shaky breath of relief.

Willow raced forward and grabbed Tasha, leading her to the group I'd

arrived with.

“Killing her wouldn’t bother you.” Dax nodded to the shifters standing near my friends. Three of them walked away, leaving two to guard the others. My heart nearly stopped as I realized where they were headed.

“I agreed to go with you,” I said. “Call them back.”

“I don’t think so. You see, as long as you’re feeling that connection to him, you’ll never be free to feel your true feelings for me,” Dax said.

“You are insane,” I shouted. “There was never anything between us! It was a false bond, you psychopath.”

The shifters were nearing Madoc, and I couldn’t stand there doing nothing. I didn’t care what Dax would do to me or anyone else, I couldn’t let any more harm come to my mate.

Darting around the slow-moving shifters, I dropped beside Madoc and draped myself over him. “Back off.”

“Now, isn’t that sweet?” Dax said.

“I will tear all your throats out if you so much as lay a finger on him,” I hissed.

“I’d almost like to see that,” Dax said. “Should we test her?”

His cronies chuckled and out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the remaining shifter headed over to where we were gathered. My friends were unguarded. Now, my heart was racing for a whole other reason.

I caught Willow’s eye, but she didn’t even need the encouragement. She and Tasha were already on the move, headed toward Xander.

I needed to keep him distracted. “You like deals, Dax. I know you. You live and die by promises and bargains. Make one with me. To spare his life. Please.”

Dax lifted a brow in surprise. “I wasn’t expecting the *please*. But I do enjoy hearing a woman beg.”

Gross. Just like Erwin. Maybe Dax was right. Maybe I didn’t feel remorse for his death.

Even as anger built, I swallowed back my pride. I could play along if it bought my friends some time. I could do this to save Madoc. To stop a war.

“Dax, I’m begging you, if you ever cared about me at all, please. Please, let him live,” I said.

He knelt next to me and lifted my chin with his index finger. I suppressed the shudder that ran through me from his touch. I wanted to tear him to shreds, to watch him bleed. But I had no weapon, no magic, and was

outnumbered. Even with those odds, I'd try if it was just my life on the line. But this wasn't just me. This was Madoc. I'd come too far to lose him now.

"Tell me what you'll give me for his life," Dax said.

A lump rose in my throat, and my skin crawled at the intimacy in his tone. It wasn't hard to know where his mind was.

His shifters laughed. "Make her get on her knees," one of them said.

"She should show you what she'll do for you," another said.

I wanted to punch all of them in the teeth.

"So? What's it going to be, darling?" he purred.

"An alpha challenge."

I sucked in a breath and whipped my head to the side to see Xander standing behind Dax. Tears welled at the sight of him, alive, on his feet, looking healthy. I had no idea how Willow had managed to help heal him so quickly, but I wasn't going to question it.

Dax tore his gaze from mine and rose to his feet. His hands curled into fists as he slowly turned to face Xander. "What was that?"

"You heard me. I demand an alpha challenge. The Shadow Pack is mine."

"You can't be serious," Dax said. "You don't stand a chance against me, and you know it. You can't use your fae magic. Wolves only, remember?"

"I know what I'm doing," Xander said.

"I don't have to fight you," Dax said. "You're not even a full wolf."

"That doesn't matter," I snapped. "Especially not in the Shadows, and you damn well know it."

Dax's hand twitched, then he took off, grabbing Tasha again before anyone could react. He was fast, but he didn't have a weapon this time. Tasha bit down on his arm, and Dax released her with a howl. He slapped her across the face, but Holden pulled her back, and he and Maverick moved between Dax and Tasha.

Xander growled, the sound a deadly warning. "If you touch my mate again, I won't wait until we can shift. I'll kill you here." He lifted his hands, showing the sparks of magic filling his palms.

My eyes widened. How was he doing that? This place was supposed to be free of magic. I hadn't felt a reaction when I'd gotten mad.

Quickly, I looked at Madoc. He was still breathing, and the blood had stopped from his wounds. I still didn't know why he was unconscious, but he was as safe as he could be for now. And he'd be safer if I could call my magic.

I stood, moving closer to Xander. As I closed the distance between us, that familiar pull I felt from him seemed to ignite my own magic, like a spark being thrown on gasoline. It had been dormant, but now it sizzled under the surface.

Warmth spread from my belly, rising through my chest to my arms. My hands glowed, familiar sparks like little bolts of lightning danced on my hands. "Give me a reason, Dax."

His upper lip curled, and he bared his teeth. "This is a sacred place. You violate it with your magic."

"And an alpha challenge is absolute," Maverick said. "You will accept or we will remove you ourselves."

"You can take him," one of Dax's shifters said. "You're a real wolf. He's half-breed trash."

"If he's a real wolf, I'll take the trash any day," I snapped.

The wolf who'd come to Dax's aid growled. I turned my magic toward him. "You have something to say to me?"

"Put it away. No magic in an alpha challenge," Dax said. "Outside the wards. Right now. You and me. No magic. No back up. Just us."

I knew why Dax wanted to do it now. He'd weakened Xander with the fae iron, but Xander didn't look like he was concerned.

"Let's go," Maverick said.

I closed my palms, sending the magic away. "Before we go, you need to tell me what you did to Madoc."

Dax grinned. "You like that? We tested something new. Turns out, ash is even more deadly for fae than iron. Good luck finding all those splinters."

I charged at him, and Holden grabbed me, holding me back from attacking. "Not the time. We'll fix this. But he's Xander's problem now."

"I'll be back for you after I win this," Dax said. "Maybe your mate will be dead by then and the two of us can go back to the way things were."

"You're fucking delusional," I spat.

He grinned, then turned and walked away, following his allies out of the clearing toward the edge of the wards. Maverick stayed on their heels.

"You coming?" Tasha asked. She and Xander were standing next to me, their hands clasped. It almost looked like no time had passed between them, but I knew they'd have so much to catch up on.

"I want you out there," Xander said. "But I understand if you have to stay."

I glanced from Xander to Madoc.

“Are we doing this?” Dax called.

Tasha squeezed my shoulder, then she and Xander walked away.

Willow grabbed my hand. “Go. Support your friend. I’ll help Madoc.”

“I can’t leave him,” I said.

“You can. They need you there,” he said.

“Didn’t you feel what happened when you two were next to each other?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

I felt something, but how had she known? “I always feel something around him. Like a pack connection. It has to just be a fae thing.”

“Do you feel that with other fae?” she asked.

I shook my head. I didn’t feel it with Tasha or any of the other feral shifters.

“I don’t know what that was, but there was a surge of magic. I could almost taste it. I don’t know if it means anything, but I think you need to be there,” she said. “I swear to you, I will do whatever I can to get Madoc back on his feet and out there with you as soon as I can.”

Holden had been watching us in silence. He cleared his throat and extended his hand. “He’d want you to go. And he sure as hell wouldn’t want you to see him like this.”

My heart nearly shattered, but I crouched down and kissed Madoc’s forehead. It was damp with sweat. Throat thick, and eyes burning, I fought against the rising tears. Accepting Holden’s waiting hand, I let him hoist me up.

We walked in silence until we broke through the wards. Tears streamed down my cheeks. “He wouldn’t have left me.”

“He did, and he has. He knows you can take care of yourself, and he knows that sometimes duty calls. But he’d also drop everything to be at your side. And he knows you’d do the same. He’s safe right now and Willow’s right. There’s something unnatural about you and Xander. I don’t know what it is, maybe it’s just a fae thing, but he needs you right now. If he wins, we all win,” Holden said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WE DIDN'T HAVE to get far beyond the wards before finding the rest of the shifters who had followed us here. Only, the group was a lot larger than we intended. I went rigid as I noticed the sight of several familiar faces from my old pack mingling with the Umbra elders and the feral wolves. There were more feral wolves now too than there had been originally at the Umbra estate.

I scanned the group for any signs of weapons or threats, but everyone seemed to be standing there waiting. They parted as we approached, falling back into a semicircle. They already knew why they were here. They knew there was going to be an alpha challenge, and they had come to watch. But how had they found out?

Whispers followed in our wake and eyes were trained on us before darting back to where Dax waited a few feet away. The group seemed to swallow us whole, reforming the circle around us. Maverick found some of his pack and joined them in the crowd, leaving me with Tasha, Xander, and Holden. Dax grinned from where he stood with his entourage, that wild look still lingering in his eyes. It was too much for me to hold. I had to tear my gaze away.

Not wanting him to know he'd rattled me, I looked through the crowd with purpose. Kate had to be here somewhere. Her face wasn't among the group, but I caught sight of her parents. Both stood on the sidelines, Kate's mom's hands were clasped at her chest, and her brow was furrowed as she watched me. I believed Kate when she told me she didn't know what was in those herbs, but her mother had been the one who made the tea, and she would never have made a recipe based on someone else's word without

knowing what it did.

I frowned, hating the uncomfortable sensation in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't sure how I was going to address her. Kate's mom had been kind to me growing up and helped both Kate and I get on our feet when we transitioned to our own place. Right now, that wasn't the highest priority because if they were here, and the other Shadows were here, Kate must have been successful. She had to be the one who told everybody. But where was she?

A rumble went up through the crowd as Dax moved to the center of the circle. I half watched him as I continued my search for my best friend. With Madoc still injured, and Kate missing, I didn't have the focus I should. Xander was going to need me. I didn't know if I actually believed that, but Willow made it sound so compelling. If Kate was here, she'd find me. It took all my willpower, but I switched my focus to helping Xander.

He and Dax were glaring at each other, and it was a matter of getting someone to officially call the challenge and monitor it. Typically, that role was held by an elder. But Dax had taken out all the Shadow elders. Did his pack know that? Did they know he was responsible for so much destruction? Or had he blamed the Umbra's or someone else? What had he done to my old pack while I was away?

I could feel Dax's eyes on me as I turned to Xander. Tasha was by his side, still gripping his hand in hers. The two of them deserved time to rebuild what they had lost, but it had to wait. She was going to have to let him go while he fought for his life and his pack. I felt terrible for what I asked him to do, but I knew he would make a better alpha than Dax. Anyone would make a better alpha than Dax. Well, that wasn't true. Cavan had taught me that. But Xander cared about people. He'd helped me as much as he could, even though it meant putting himself and his mate at risk.

"You're going to have to challenge him again. Out here in front of everyone." I looked him up and down, checking for superficial injuries. Aside from the welts on his wrists, he looked relatively unscathed. "I'm sorry that I'm asking you to do this. Especially so soon after the iron."

Xander released Tasha's hand and took a step closer to me. "He told you what he did, didn't he?" I could feel a surge of energy and glanced down to see sparks dancing on Xander's hands. Under Xander's calm facade, I could see the tension in his jaw, the murderous gleam in his eyes. Xander looked positively dangerous. There was a calculating and violent energy to his presence, and I knew that when he fought Dax, he wasn't going to hold back.

“I’m sorry about your father.” It didn’t feel like the right words, but I truly was sorry, even if their relationship had been strained.

“My father wasn’t a whole lot better than the rest of them, but he didn’t deserve the coward’s death Dax gave him and the rest of the elders.” There was a note of a growl in his tone.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to help.” My heart ached for Xander and for everyone else in my pack. They had been through so much, and they deserved better. “Does the rest of the pack know the truth?”

Xander nodded. “But no one was brave enough to step up.” He glanced at Tasha, then looked back at me. “Even I backed down like a coward. I stood by and did nothing. Not until today, not until I saw that you were safe.” He smiled at Tasha, and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I am safe. And nobody is separating us again. I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

“You did what anyone in your position would do. You protected your mate.” I offered my hand, and he took it. A surge of energy ignited in my palm, met by an equal surge from Xander. My eyes widened as I felt our magic mingling. It should have been dangerous, it could have been dangerous, but it wasn’t. I didn’t know what it meant, but I knew Willow was on to something. There was some kind of connection between us. Something that made us different but also made us the same. I couldn’t explain it, but I could feel it.

I squeezed his hand, then released it. I know he had felt the strange reaction, but neither of us commented. There wasn’t much we could do about it now, anyway.

Tasha rested her hand on Xander’s shoulder. She lifted her chin. “It’s time.”

Dax’s friends had finally left his side, and he was standing shirtless in the center of the crowd. His glare was like ice, but he had that same crazy, unhinged look to him that I had seen when he attacked the feral wolves.

“Don’t bother with your magic,” I said. The challenge was supposed to be in wolf form anyway, but I wasn’t sure if Dax would play dirty. “He’s using something that blocks the magic.”

“He’s gotten worse since you left. More detached from reality, more dangerous,” Xander said. “It’s time to end his reign of terror.”

“Are we still doing this? Or did you come to your senses?” Dax called.

“We fight,” Xander called. “Alpha challenge for the right to lead the

Shadow Pack.”

The shifters around us were silent, making the whole thing feel surreal. Usually, they enjoyed a fight. The typical cheers and betting were absent. It was as if they knew how much hung in the balance.

“My old friend. I never thought you’d be the one to betray me.” Dax circled Xander. “But I suppose I should have known it would happen, eventually. You can’t trust a fae.”

A few whispers sounded, and I winced. Xander’s true heritage was out now, and he wouldn’t be able to hide. It might make things more complicated for him when this was over. But maybe not. Even the Umbra elders had accepted someone with fae blood. Although, their alternative was Cavan.

“Get her out of here,” Holden told me, inclining his head toward Tasha.

I threaded my arm through Tasha’s and led her away from the center into the crowd. We could watch, but we couldn’t participate. If we did anything to interfere, it could threaten the results of the challenge. The rules of an alpha challenge were clear: one on one, wolf form, fight until the death or until one shifter surrenders. I think we all knew this would be a fight to the death, no matter what.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement and turned to see Kate frantically waving to me as she pushed her way through the shifters. My heart leaped and I let out a choked sound that was somewhere between relief and excitement. My best friend slammed into me, pulling me into a bone-crushing hug. Then she turned to Tasha. “I’m so glad you’re both safe.”

“I was so worried,” I said.

“Dax had his goons on me round the clock. I couldn’t even make a call. Until he left, I couldn’t do anything. But once he headed here, I let everyone know what was going to happen. Or at least what we were hoping would happen. I never even got to talk to Xander. I’m so glad you got through to him.” She glanced toward the circle where the two shifters were staring each other down.

“You never asked him?” I looked back at Xander. The determination on his face told me everything I needed to know. He wanted this. And he was going to take it. My chest swelled with pride. It was better this way. If he wanted to take down Dax and claim that role of alpha for himself, he was going to be stronger in this fight.

“This is his choice, then,” Tasha said. “He’ll win. If he wants it, he’ll find a way.”

Holden stepped between the two shifters. “I will officiate today unless anyone objects.”

Dax and Xander stared each other down, but neither of them flinched or acknowledged Holden’s presence in any way.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, but no one came forward to replace Holden in this role. After several heartbeats, Holden seemed satisfied. He scanned the crowd as he began to explain the rules. “No outside interference. Wolf form only. It’s a fight to the death.”

I tensed. Holden didn’t even offer the option of surrender. We all knew that’s how this was going to play out, but I’d never seen a situation where it wasn’t mentioned as a possibility.

“Where’s Madoc?” Kate asked.

I winced. “Beyond the ward. Dax and his friends hit him with ash splinters. I didn’t even know they had those resources. Willow is with him, trying to help.” *And I left him there.* My heart was heavy with guilt, and I tried to remind myself that Willow was better suited to healing than I was.

“Maybe I can help. Maybe my mom can help.” Kate’s eyes found mine. “I asked her about the tea. She knew. She said Holden told her they’d kill you if they thought you could use your magic. I know it was wrong, but I believe it came from a good place.”

I didn’t care about any of that right now. If she could help Madoc, nothing else mattered. “You really think she can help him?”

Kate looked a little surprised that I didn’t even press the other issue, but she nodded.

“Go.” I gave her a little nudge. “Take her and go. Right through the ward, they’re in a circle of trees. He’s there with Willow. Please hurry.” Kate nodded, then started to weave her way through the crowd.

“Thank you!” I called after her.

Even if they couldn’t do anything, it helped ease some of my tension to know that Willow wouldn’t be alone watching after him until I could get back to him. *Please be safe.* I couldn’t lose him after everything we’d been through. But that wasn’t enough. We still wouldn’t be safe if Dax remained in power.

If Xander didn’t win, this would never end. We would never be able to start rebuilding the things that were broken. And I would never be safe. I turned my gaze back to the ring where the two shifters had just tossed their clothes to the side. Tasha grabbed my hand, and we watched in silence as

Xander and Dax shifted into their wolf forms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

HOLDEN BACKED AWAY and the two massive wolves circled each other; teeth bared, hackles up. I could feel that strange connection with Xander, like my magic recognizing his even though he was in his wolf form.

I ignored it, not really sure what it meant. Maybe we'd figure that out later, or maybe it didn't matter. If he didn't defeat Dax, we'd have bigger problems on our hands than a strange feeling that he might not even notice himself.

"Please tell me I didn't just get reunited with him only to lose him again," Tasha said.

I kept my eyes locked on the wolves. "He can do this. He's stronger, faster, less emotional. Dax fights with his feelings, not logic. It's his greatest weakness, but I never realized it until this moment." It was something we had in common. Emotions got the better of me more than once, causing me to lose control of my magic. It could feed my power, but it was wild and unpredictable if I let my feelings take over. Just like Dax.

He was the first to charge, claws raised and a roar sounding as he leaped onto Xander.

Xander twisted, throwing Dax before rounding on him and landing a swipe of his claws across Dax's face. The alpha growled and snapped his jaw, just barely missing the other wolf. Xander charged forward, in what looked like an effort to pin the other wolf, but Dax wiggled free, throwing Xander to the ground in the process.

Dax's wolf clawed at Xander's neck, tearing into his flesh. Blood oozed and Xander's wolf yelped before returning the action and getting his own chunk of Dax.

The two wolves continued to grapple, clawing and biting and spinning in a flurry of teeth and claws. They took turns with who was on the offense and who was on the ground. They were more evenly matched than I hoped, but neither of them was able to get the better of the other. This continued for what felt like hours, when in reality, only minutes had passed. I wanted it to be over, but both wolves looked like they were still holding on. They were both scratched up and bloody but showing no signs of slowing their vicious dance.

Finally, Holden stepped in. "The rules require a break if the match exceeds time. Back up. Give some space."

My brow furrowed. I'd never seen that in an alpha challenge. They were usually over so quickly. Tasha gripped my arm, but I resisted looking over at her. I didn't want her to read anything in my expression. I hoped it would come across as impatient, but I was starting to worry. Xander still looked strong, but so did Dax.

The brawling wolves parted, facing off while their backs rose and fell in heavy pants. Tasha dug her fingernails into my arm hard enough to draw blood. I didn't say a word and did my best to ignore the pain. I couldn't imagine how she felt right now. If I had to watch Madoc fight for his life, I wasn't sure I could stand by and do nothing.

My thoughts flickered to him for a moment and I reached inside to feel for that connection between us. I swore I could feel him, and I sucked in a relieved breath just before Holden called for the fight to resume.

The wolves threw themselves at each other, teeth gnashing, claws gleaming. Fresh red blood dotted the compressed yellow grass. Though they were both injured, neither of them showed any signs of relenting. Were they holding back? I really thought I would see one of them rise to a position of dominance. My hope was that Xander would take the lead, but I was surprised to see that neither of them had. Was Xander still recovering from the fae iron? Was that why his blows were matched every time?

They parted again, this time without instruction. Both wolves seemed to be catching their breath. It was the first true sign that they were growing weary.

I risked a peek at Tasha. Her face was pale, her body rigid. "He's got this."

She nodded without tearing her eyes from her mate. Growling brought my attention back to the fight, and I held my breath when Dax pinned

Xander. Gasps and a few horrified sounds finally broke free from the nearly silent onlookers. When Xander broke the hold, the crowd seemed to breathe in unified relief.

That was what they'd been waiting for. Why they'd been so silent. I couldn't help but feel a smile tug at my lips as I realized they were all hoping to see Xander as the victor.

The crowd seemed to press in closer the longer the fight went on. They were growing restless and the scattered murmurs and quiet reverence at the start of the battle were scaling up by the minute. They were done keeping their favorite to themselves.

Hoots and hollers sounded as the shifters continued trying to tear each other's throats out. The subdued crowd from the beginning now sounded like typical shifters. My heart raced, and I was swept up in the excitement of the moment, even though dread weighed in my gut. For most of these shifters, this was part of life. Alpha challenges happened, though I knew it was rare for the alpha to be removed in such a manner. In the few alpha challenges I'd seen, the favor went to the alpha. This time, there were only a few who roared when Dax had the upper hand.

I finally risked taking my eyes off the fight to look around at the crowd. I should have assessed it sooner, just in case there were any threats. Instead, I saw money changing hands and people whispering in groups. The initial surprise of the event itself and its unusual location had worn off and now shifters were behaving as shifters.

In a way, it was an oddly reassuring sight, something that felt more normal and made this battle feel less life and death than it was. I just wanted it to be over, and I needed it to go the way we wanted it to. I squeezed Tasha's hand as I turned my attention to the fight. Xander looked like he had the upper hand now. Dax was moving a little bit slower and had managed to avoid fewer of Xander's attacks whereas Xander was still dodging more frequently.

I was pretty sure Tasha was holding her breath next to me. "He's going to win." I wasn't sure if I was saying it for her benefit or mine, but with each passing second, I had to remind myself not to hold my own breath.

The crowd gasped as Xander tumbled into them, knocking a couple of shifters to the ground. The circle that had retracted expanded again, giving the two fighters more space.

Suddenly, an overwhelming surge of pain swelled and my vision

momentarily went dark. I felt the bond between me and Madoc tighten and tense as another surge of pain splintered inside my head. My knees buckled and Tasha caught me before I could go down.

“What’s wrong?” Tasha asked, her tone frantic.

Gasping for breath, I forced myself to straighten and concentrated for a moment on that bond between Madoc and myself. There was an echo of pain, but the bond held strong. Something had caused him incredible pain, but whatever it was, it seemed to be passing. I glanced at Tasha, my mouth dry.

“Is it Madoc or Xander?” she asked.

I didn’t think my connection with Xander was that strong, but I knew this wasn’t about him even if it was. This was Madoc. The bond suddenly hummed to life, warmth surging through me as the tense connection blossomed back to what I knew was its usual stable self. It felt strong, whole, unmarred.

This bond was still unfamiliar in a lot of ways, and I was learning by simply trusting my instincts. It was all I had to go on since no one had ever explained it to me and Madoc and I hadn’t had time to explore it in any depth ourselves. My shoulders eased, and I blew out a breath of relief. “Madoc. Something happened, but it’s better now.”

She didn’t look like she believed me, but she turned her attention back to the fight and so did I. We were just in time to see a large wolf bounding forward. Dax’s wolf, and he wasn’t chasing Xander. Frantically, I searched for the other wolf, who was clear on the other side of the circle, laying on the ground.

“Xander!” Tasha screamed and made a run for him. I held her fast. She couldn’t interfere.

“Get up, Xander!” I shouted.

Everything happened so fast. The crowd was a blur, confused voices and strange laughter clouded around us as Dax’s wolf leaped for Tasha. I didn’t have any time to think as I shoved her aside, getting the full brunt of Dax’s claws in my chest as he threw me to the ground. I landed hard, claws digging into my flesh. I hissed against the white-hot pain, forcing myself not to give in to the darkening of my vision. My stomach lurched, threatening to empty.

Gasps and screams that sounded like they came from far away reverberated as I tried to make sense of what was happening.

Dax snarled, his fangs an inch from my face. I winced against hot breath and spit before turning to try and get him off me. More pain as the claws

yanked from my body. I cried out, then pressed my palms to my bleeding wounds.

"I got ya," Maverick said as he helped me to standing. "Hurts like a mother right now, but it'll heal fast."

"Thanks," I said.

Dax's wolf wasn't interested in me, though. He walked away, leaving my body aching. Every breath hurt, and I was pretty sure I had at least one broken rib. That was going to take time to heal and make it harder for me to fight against him, but if he was going to play dirty, so was I.

Holden was in front of Tasha, screaming at Dax's wolf. When the alpha didn't pull back, Holden shifted, his clothes ripping to shreds. His wolf was golden brown and nearly as large as Dax's. He snarled at Dax from his protective position in front of Tasha. Her eyes weren't on her attacker, though. She was looking elsewhere. I followed her gaze and saw Xander's wolf rising. He was injured, but he wasn't dead. Dax had violated the protocol, coming after Tasha instead of finishing the fight.

"We need to take him out," Maverick said.

No. Everything we'd done was to end this in an alpha challenge. If Dax was killed by a member of another pack, it was going to be war. We had to finish this. Xander needed more time. "Protect Tasha. I have an idea." I didn't wait for him to respond before I raced toward Xander.

I had a feeling Dax was going to play dirty, but the fight had looked clean from where we all watched. I was kicking myself for not checking it earlier, but if Dax had managed to smuggle in some fae iron, Xander could be recovering from that instead of fighting at his full strength. Xander's wolf limped forward, shaking his front paw. He hadn't shifted back to human form, but he seemed a little dazed and out of it.

He hesitated as I approached, but I reached my hand out, trying to reassure him. "I can help. This isn't over. This is a fight to the death, remember?"

With the gathered crowd around Dax and Tasha, Xander couldn't see what was going on, but I was sure he could feel the fear in his mate. I had to be quick. This fight had to get back on track now or we would lose the possibility of trying to prevent war.

One of Xander's shoulders was pouring blood. The fur was matted and soaked in crimson. It looked so much worse than any other injury. I touched the wolf's shoulder, my hand growing warm as if my magic wanted to burst

free. I pulled my hand away, terrified that I was going to hurt Xander. That wasn't what I wanted. He wasn't a threat, and I wasn't afraid of him, yet maybe the general fear of everything else was making the magic grow.

I scan the wolf quickly, careful not to touch him again, looking for anything that shouldn't be there. As I suspected, a small piece of iron was embedded in his shoulder blade.

I yanked it out, and Xander snapped his jaws at me.

"I'm helping, so stop complaining," I snapped. I held up the little piece of iron for him to see, then threw it outside the circle.

I didn't see anymore and after a few shakes of his paws Xander seemed more alert. That iron wound was going to take time to heal and had probably drained him of some of his strength. At the thought, my hand started to heat again, and I closed my fingers into a fist, trying to send the magic away.

It persisted, warm and comforting, not sparking and angry. It wasn't my usual magic. Something about it was different. I wasn't sure why I did it, but I put my hand on his injured shoulder and I released the magic.

Xander's body glowed with an intense light and I gasped as I felt my energy, my light, the magic I held inside of me, transfer to him. It was as if I was giving him a boost, sending that charge of strength from myself to Xander. When the light faded, I took my hand away, a little shaky and surprised at what had just happened.

Xander's wolf huffed, and he lowered his head as if bowing before taking off with a bolt of speed. Everyone had been so distracted by the shifters holding back Dax that no one had witnessed what happened between Xander and me. I couldn't explain it, but I knew I had given him strength or healing or something.

The shifters in their human form parted as Xander tore through them to get to where Dax was being held off by half a dozen shifters in their wolf form surrounding Tasha.

My heart swelled at the sight. The elders, or possibly even some Shadows, were keeping Tasha safe. It didn't matter who they were; there were other shifters who saw the wrong in the situation and had taken it upon themselves to protect someone else. There was hope, shifters who wanted to see things done differently. Xander growled, turning Dax's attention away from his mate.

Furious anger seemed to radiate from Dax in waves as he charged Xander. His movements were sloppy and clumsy; he was so blindly focused

on moving forward he didn't notice the subtle shifts in Xander's movements. Dax was fighting with his emotions. He'd been using tactics before. Thinking and reacting with intention.

I grinned. This was it. If Dax continued to fight with feeling, with emotions taking the lead, he was doomed.

Xander's wolf was faster, more agile. When Dax lunged, Xander gracefully evaded. He rounded on Dax, striking hard and easily bringing the other wolf down. I'd never seen anything like it before. It was flawless. Dax looked like a baby wolf, who had just learned to shift, trying desperately to hold his own against a trained and experienced fighter.

Xander came at Dax again and again; evading the attacks and landing blow after blow. Dax's wolf was a bloody mess, and he staggered as he moved, slowly attempting to avoid the attacks in vain.

Holden entered the makeshift ring in human form, completely naked. He tracked the progress carefully, pacing up and down to follow the moves. Dax was slowing, bloody and battered. If he was going to surrender, he needed to do it soon.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and saw Tasha inching toward the edge of the crowd. I made my way to her.

She took my hand in silence and the two of us watched as the battle drew to its inevitable close.

Even though Xander was winning, I could hear her pounding heart over the din. Suddenly, Dax's body shuddered and his wolf gave out, leaving him naked, battered, and broken in his human form in the middle of the grass.

Blood oozed from wounds in his face and bruises bloomed across his skin. He struggled to breathe; I'd never seen him look this awful. Xander's wolf stood nearby, body tense, as he growled at Dax. His muzzle was covered in Dax's blood, and the look in his eyes was pure hatred.

"Are you surrendering?" Holden asked. "Do you yield?"

Dax's upper lip twitched and his hands balled into fists. He couldn't win this. He had to know it was over.

Chanting started, some people crying for mercy while others were calling for Xander to finish things permanently. Shifters did love a good brawl.

Someone tossed something to Dax, and I caught the glint of metal seconds before Dax wrapped his fingers around the hilt of a knife. He lunged forward, intent on trying to deliver a fatal blow to Xander. I released Tasha's hand and raced forward, prepared to disarm Dax myself, but Xander beat me

to it. In a flurry of claws and teeth, blood sprayed, and Xander claimed his place as the new Shadow alpha.

CHAPTER THIRTY

SOMETHING BROKE JUST a little inside at the sight of Dax's mangled body. It wasn't mourning exactly; perhaps more like relief, strained by guilt. He'd caused me so much pain and it was difficult to believe it was over. I knew in the long run this was for the best, but I wondered what it said about me that I wasn't sad that he was gone.

Xander's wolf shuddered as the fur retracted. His bones cracked, his body lengthened and twisted as he returned to human form.

He was bloody and bruised and the place on his shoulder where I had removed the shard of fae iron was caked in dried blood. It didn't appear to be bleeding anymore while other areas were still dripping red. Whatever I had done with my magic seemed not only to have fixed his injury, but also gave him a boost of strength. I should have felt guilty about cheating, because technically, we probably did. But we weren't the only ones. Dax never followed the rules, and I couldn't find it in myself to be guilty about what I'd done. Taking out Dax was the plan. It was going to save so many lives. We'd been too late for the Shadow elders, but we prevented far worse.

Holden approached Xander and lifted his fist in the air. He shouted something about him being the new alpha, but I couldn't hear it over the roar of the crowd. I was happy for him, happy for all the Shadows. Relieved that it was over. But my mind was elsewhere.

Nobody noticed that I slipped away and headed back to where I had left my mate. My pulse raced and anxiety twisted in my gut. He had to be okay; *he had to be okay*. I knew Tasha, Holden, and Maverick would help Xander. They'd get him cleaned up, explain what had happened, and start working toward a way to recover. Knowing the Shadows, this would result in a party

lasting until the sun rose tomorrow. The thought made me smile. All of them deserved time to celebrate.

I wouldn't be missed for quite a while and even if I was, I had fulfilled my obligation. We'd worked so hard to prevent a war, but I knew there was more work to do. It could wait until tomorrow.

I could see the trees in the distance, and it hadn't felt like this far of a walk when we first entered the sacred space earlier today. I picked up my pace, nearly at a jog in my hurry to get back to him. Before I could make it to the wards, several figures appeared out of thin air, emerging from the wards in front of me. Stopping dead in my tracks, I felt like my heart might explode.

Tears welled as I covered my mouth with my hand. Madoc was walking toward me. Actually walking, his gait normal. No limping, no sign of struggle.

My eyes searched for any signs of injury, for any lingering damage, but I couldn't see any. Willow, Kate, and her mother followed behind him, but I barely acknowledged their existence before racing forward to meet my mate.

He threw his arms around me, lifting me off the ground as we held each other tight. I covered his face in kisses, then pulled back, cupping his face with my hands as I studied his expression. "Never do that to me again. You scared the shit out of me."

He smirked, then answered me by pressing his lips against mine. It was a gentle kiss, full of gratitude. He lowered me to the ground, then wiped the tears from my cheeks. "It's alright. I'm never leaving your side again."

"Is it over?" Kate asked, her gaze in the distance, staring at the gathered group of shifters.

"You have a new alpha," I said.

I saw her shoulders visibly relax and her eyes closed for just a moment before she blew out a breath. "I can't believe it's over. I can't believe we pulled this off."

"There's still a lot of work to do to fix what was broken between our packs, but we have a path forward now." Madoc took my hand in his.

"Assuming that friend of yours is what you said he is," Willow said. "This could be the beginning of something great."

"Xander is one of the good ones," Kate said.

Madoc paused and turned to face the others. "Thank you again. I don't know what would have happened if those splinters hadn't been removed."

"Yes, thank you all. I'm sorry I didn't start with that. I don't know what I

would have done if I had lost him,” I said.

Kate’s mom stepped forward, and she set her hand on top of mine. Tears welled in her eyes, and she pressed her lips together in a line as if trying to steady herself. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know,” I said. “I understand.”

We had all done questionable things in the name of survival. At one time, I had thought that would be enough. All I wanted was to survive, to get by, to exist. Now I knew there was more to life than taking the path of least resistance. I wanted to experience, to find joy, to live.

Kate’s mom stepped forward and pulled me in for a hug. I dropped Madoc’s hand so I could embrace her. “I’m so sorry. I should have stood up for you. You were just a child.” I could feel her wet tears against my cheek.

“We all did what we were trained to do. What we thought was best. We all made mistakes.” I stepped back but kept my hands on her arms as I looked at her. “But we’re going to heal these wounds, and we’re going to fix things. It’s going to get better.”

And for the first time in my life, I believed it.

EPILOGUE

SUMMER SOLSTICE

CHILDREN SQUEALED as they ran past us, weaving around the adults without concern. I smiled at the sight of their carefree game. There was no way of knowing which pack the children belonged to, and that was what made me happiest. Kids were better at adjusting to changes than adults. They didn't care who their playmates' parents were or which pack they belonged to. They just wanted a larger group for their game.

I scanned the campgrounds, looking at the variety of colorful tents that filled in the spaces around the tents belonging to the feral shifters. The scent of campfire lingered, letting me know shifters were already busy making breakfast.

"You're up early," Madoc said, his voice groggy with sleep.

I let the tent flap close and looked at my mate. Blankets were tangled around his waist, leaving his muscular bare chest on display in the watery morning light. I climbed onto the air mattress next to him. "I could barely sleep last night. There's a lot riding on today."

He toyed with a loose strand of my hair. "You need to stop worrying. Everything has gone exactly to plan."

"I guess that's why I'm worried. I'm waiting for it to all fall apart," I said.

"It won't," he said.

"You decent in there?" A male voice called.

I jumped up and spun around just as the tent flap was pulled aside. "Why

do you look so damn guilty?” Holden asked.

“Why did you ask if we were decent then walk right in?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Cause I have the tent next to you and after the sounds I heard last night, I figured you’d both be too tired to do much of anything this morning.” Holden didn’t look amused.

My eyes widened and my cheeks heated. Had we been that loud? *Shit*. I hadn’t even thought about how thin the fabric of the tent was.

A pillow flew through the air and hit Holden’s face. He was laughing as he grabbed it and threw it back at Madoc.

“Is that what you came in here for?” I asked.

“Willow sent me. I guess there’s something going on in the common area,” he said.

I curled my hands into fists. I knew it. There was no way things could go this well.

“I’m sure whatever it is, we’ll fix it,” Madoc said.

“You might want to put some pants on,” Holden’s eyes flicked down to my bare legs.

“Right.” I was still in just Madoc’s tee I’d thrown on this morning to peek out of the tent.

Dressed, Madoc and I followed Holden toward the center of camp. The feral shifters had been kind enough to let us use their old campgrounds. Many of them still lived here, even though they’d joined the Shadow Pack when it was accepted as an official pack nearly nine months ago.

Things had been going so well. All the packs were at peace. We even got the Tari Pack on board. It hadn’t taken much coaxing once they found out what Dax had done. The biggest conflict had been getting other shifters to accept half shifters as official pack members.

Maverick had been instrumental in pushing that through. The Senka Pack alpha had become one of our closest friends. We saw him and his family often, but this was the first time we’d invited all the packs to one place.

Every alpha was here, along with their families and their inner circle. The invitation had been open and we’d gotten several hundred shifters who agreed to bring a tent and hang out for a weekend of celebrating the Summer Solstice as a unified group.

Pushback had been minimal, and most of the animosity had faded. The initial skeptics had withdrawn their complaints and things had been going so

well. Too well.

We stopped at the center of camp, where a group of mostly Shadow Wolves and feral shifters were gathered. A few shifters I recognized from other packs were present, but it was so early that many were likely still asleep.

Maverick appeared, bleary eyed and looking just as ready for a fight as I felt. "What's going on?"

"I have no idea." I turned to Holden. "What's happening?"

"Ask him." Holden pointed.

The crowd parted and Xander walked toward me, a wide grin on his face. He looked well rested and it was clear from his expression that he was up to something. I narrowed my eyes, trying to examine him for any clues as to what was going on.

"Why the fuck am I up so early?" Atsa Hathale, the Tari alpha approached, his shoulder length, jet-black hair sticking in all directions.

"Someone please tell me there's coffee," Madoc said.

"I called you all here," Xander said.

"Better be good," Atsa mumbled.

"Xander, what is it?" My pulse raised and anxiety twisted in my gut.

"Well, I didn't want to make this a big deal, but I wanted all of you here." Xander took a deep breath.

I held mine.

"Freya has agreed to officiate so Tasha and I can get married this morning," he said.

The tension melted away to elation and I bounced on my toes before lunging toward him for a hug. "Congratulations!"

He squeezed me tight, then released me, holding me at arm's length. "I'm glad you're happy, because I have a favor to ask you."

"Sure, how can I help?"

"You're the closest thing I have to family," he said.

My throat tightened. Freya had tested our magic after Xander claimed the alpha title. While we'd never know for sure, the connection we felt was most likely familial. Freya suspected that our parents were siblings, making us cousins. And honestly, even without the magic bonding us, he felt like a brother after everything we'd been through.

"Will you stand for me?" he asked.

"Of course. I would be honored." In a traditional shifter wedding, the

female joined the male's pack and family. The head of the male's household would stand to welcome the new member on behalf of the pack. Even though I wasn't technically a Shadow anymore, I would happily welcome Tasha to our strange little family.

When Madoc and I were married last month, Madoc's brother Maynard had welcomed me with a bone-crushing hug. I'd been nervous about that part of the ceremony, but after it was done, I truly felt like I belonged. I hoped I could do the same for Tasha.

"When is this wedding happening?" Madoc asked.

"Right now," Xander said.

Music began and I turned to see a trio of shifters playing violins. A pair of shifters unrolled a bolt of fabric making a path between the tents leading right to the center of camp.

"You planned all of this?" I asked, totally surprised.

The gathered shifters didn't need instruction to take their places on either side of the runner. The excitement and energy was palpable.

Madoc took my hand and leaned close. "If we're kicking off the weekend with a wedding, there's no way things won't go well. It's a good sign."

I smiled and I believed him. Maybe everything would be just fine. He gave my hand a squeeze. "Good luck."

He joined the spectators and I remained at the end of the runner with Xander. Freya emerged from the crowd, a pair of flower wreaths in her hands. She set one on Xander's head. "A nod to your fae blood."

"You helped him plan all this." It wasn't a question. "Who else knew?"

"Most of the Shadows," Xander said. "I'm amazed nobody told you. Not even Tasha."

"I had dinner with her last night. How did she keep that quiet?" I asked.

"We didn't want everyone to make a big deal," he said.

"It's time," Freya said, lifting her hands. The chatter quieted and I turned toward the runner to see Tasha waiting, her arm looped through Kate's.

I lifted my brows, a silent comment to Kate about how she'd managed to keep this quiet from me. She shrugged and offered a guilty smile. It made me laugh.

Tasha began her walk down the fabric runner. She was in a sheer, flowing pink dress that made her look like a faerie queen of a summer court. Absolute perfection for a summer solstice wedding.

As she walked forward, I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of

gratitude for the family I'd found and built. For a while there, I'd thought I'd given up everything for my mate. Now, I had him and a whole group of supportive people that I would kill for. And I knew they'd do the same for me.

Tasha and Kate paused in front of Freya, who placed the second floral crown on Tasha's head.

Kate handed Tasha off to Xander, then she stood next to me. "Sorry I didn't tell you."

"It's okay." I took her hand and the two of us sniffled together as Freya went through the ceremony. When it got to the part where I was to welcome Tasha, I released Kate's hand and embraced Tasha, saying the words Freya instructed.

When they kissed, cheers echoed through the clearing and my heart soared. The Shadow Pack and the feral wolves had gone through the process of becoming one in the eyes of the shifter councils, but this union made it feel even more real.

The music returned and dancing started. Even this early in the morning, the shifters were ready to party. And they'd continue to party for the rest of the day and late into the night.

We'd done it, we'd unified the packs and ushered in an era of peace.

Madoc slid his hand around my waist. "Think we should tell them now, or wait until later?"

"Let's give them their moment. We can wait," I said.

Madoc set a protective hand on my stomach. "We're going to be better parents." It wasn't a question, it was a promise.

I set my hand on top of his. "Yes, we will. And we're bringing our child into a better world."

THANK you for reading Ivy and Madoc's story! I hope you enjoyed it! Want to know what's next from Alexis? Turn the page to read a preview of *Obsession*.

OBSESSION PREVIEW

Chapter One

Today was ten years to the day since I was sold to the Crescent Pack. Ten years since my own mother signed the paperwork in blood, giving her one and only child to a ruthless alpha and his cronies to do with as they wished.

I suppose I should be grateful, some of the girls here were sold to the pack when they were much younger. I was thirteen when my mom couldn't afford to take care of me anymore. I tasted freedom longer than most humans around here.

My path was different in a lot of ways. Most of the other human women served as entertainment, rather than getting into official pack business. They were obedient and eager to serve. Hoping that one of the males would take them as a mate and raise their status.

That wasn't me. I was mouthy and sarcastic; never obedient. Even after daily beatings when I arrived, I didn't learn my lesson. But the pack hadn't purchased me for my appearance. It wasn't that I was ugly, I was pretty enough, but I never played up my looks. That wasn't my lot in life. I was going to get the fuck out of here, not end up trapped like my mom.

Growing up with a mom who made a living on her back taught me that looks fade. The older she got, the more she struggled to pay her bills. As she aged, her clients changed. They were less important, less attractive, and less wealthy.

So we had less.

I refused to be like her.

Sure, I liked sex as much as the next girl. But when I fucked, it was for

me. Not for them. I wasn't against my mother's profession; but I wanted a different path. I wanted to get the fuck out of here. Live in a human city, away from the monsters. Where people like me, people without magic, could blend in and live without fear.

Which is how I found myself here, crunching numbers and working on payroll for the Crescent Pack's many businesses. Most of them illegal. It was my job to make them look legal enough to keep the Supernatural Council out of their business.

Ten fucking years.

But only a few more months until I reached my goal. I'd have enough for the bribes to pay for transport out, in addition to a good chunk to help me find a new place outside the magical wards of Lost Harbor.

A knock on the door shook me from my thoughts and I jumped from my chair, expecting to see my boss.

When Ryder walked in, I slouched back against my seat. "What do you want?"

Ryder was the alpha's son. He was six-three of chiseled muscle and hard edges. His midnight colored hair always looked like he'd just had sex, and his green eyes could pierce to your very soul. Perpetual dark stubble covered his strong jaw, making his perfect soft lips stand out even more.

Every woman wanted Ryder; shifter and human alike. Which is part of why most of the women here hated me. Because for two years, he'd been mine. Now, he was a pain in my ass.

"Is that any way to greet your future alpha?" he asked.

I quirked a brow. "I'm not a shifter so you're not my alpha."

"You're pack property," he reminded me. "Even more reason for you to show respect."

"I might be pack property on paper, but you know better than anyone that I make my own rules," I said.

"You're going to get yourself killed with your insolence one of these days, Isla," he said.

"Good thing that's no longer your problem," I said.

"This is why we're not together anymore. You just don't know when to keep your mouth shut," he said.

"I thought you liked it when I opened wide." I formed my mouth into the shape of a large O, then closed it slowly.

"If you're offering..."

“I’d rather blow a vampire than go down on you,” I said.

“Still so bitter,” he said.

“You fucked six girls on the same night and expected me to be cool with it.” Most shifters had trouble with loyalty unless they found their true mate. It was one thing to have the occasional fling, it was completely different to attend an orgy the same night you tell a girl you want to marry her.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have turned my proposal down,” he said.

Okay, so some of that was on me. I might have loved him once, but even he wasn’t enough to get me to stay. In a million years, I never thought he’d propose. Our relationship was fun and we were good together until we weren’t. I couldn’t be his partner in the way he needed me to. I couldn’t be his arm-candy at pack events. Mindlessly smiling and taking orders wasn’t something I was capable of.

To be fair, I hadn’t broken up with him after he proposed. I just told him I didn’t want to marry him. After the six girl orgy? That’s when I dumped his ass.

“Why are you here, Ryder?” I asked.

“I wanted to see if you had a date for tonight,” he said.

“You know I don’t,” I replied. After getting involved with him, I learned my lesson. No more relationships. Nothing that might prevent me from reaching my goal. I didn’t want to be tied to Lost Harbor when there was a whole world waiting for me to explore.

“Maybe you’d want to go as friends?” he asked.

My brow furrowed. “Can we even be friends?”

He shrugged. “I miss you.”

“You miss me?” I was skeptical. He had a new girl every night. I knew because most of them went out of their way to tell me they’d been with him. As if I was supposed to explode into a jealous rage or something.

There was so much fucking drama in this pack.

Oddly, it never bothered me. Another reason I knew I shouldn’t marry him. Call me a hopeless romantic, but it seemed like you should care about your lover fucking someone else if you were meant to be together.

“I miss your pussy,” he said.

“Oh, there it is.” Even as I tried to play it off as nothing, tension coiled low in my belly. I hadn’t been with anyone since the break up and the toys weren’t quite cutting it anymore. Six months was a long drought.

As much as I didn’t want to go back to being with Ryder, I had to admit,

he was very skilled in the sex department.

I squeezed my legs together. The last thing I needed was him to smell my arousal. *Down girl*. Stupid shifters and their stupid good senses.

“Come on, it wasn’t all bad. Even you have to admit that the sex was spectacular. I get that you want your freedom, but it doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy each other’s company,” he said. “I know you’re not fucking anyone else.”

“Keeping tabs on me?” I asked.

“I’ll be alpha next year. I have to keep tabs on everyone,” he said.

“Just ask one of your groupies,” I said.

“Since my dad announced his retirement date, they’ve been non-stop. They all come with strings attached. Me and you, we could be about fucking. We were always good at that,” he said. “I already know you don’t want to marry me.”

“Ryder...” He was making me feel guilty. But there were dozens of girls who would happily pop out a whole litter of shifter babies for him.

“All I’m asking is that you consider it,” he said. “No pressure.”

“I’ll think about,” I said.

He grinned. “I’ll be wearing a devil mask at the party. Find me.”

“How appropriate and unoriginal,” I said.

“I knew you’d say that.”

“Won’t your other admirers miss you if you sneak off with me?” I asked.

“You jealous?”

“Do I look jealous?”

He dragged his tongue across his lower lip and raked his eyes up and down my body. I couldn’t smell arousal the way shifters could, but I didn’t need the extra senses to know what he was thinking.

An involuntary shiver ran down my spine and my traitorous vagina responded to his words. *Dammit*. He was going to know how wet I was already just thinking about us together.

It had been so long since I’d been with anyone. Too long.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said, his eyes dipping down as if he could see my pussy through the desk and my clothes.

“This doesn’t mean we’re a couple,” I warned.

“I don’t need a relationship to worship your body,” he said.

Holy fuck, I was in trouble.

“Don’t bother wearing panties.” He left the office, closing the door

behind him.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Calder writes sassy heroines and sexy heroes with a sprinkle of sarcasm. She lives in the Rockies and drinks far too much coffee and just the right amount of wine.



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