

EMILIA HARTLEY



A CURSED PROPHECY

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 1

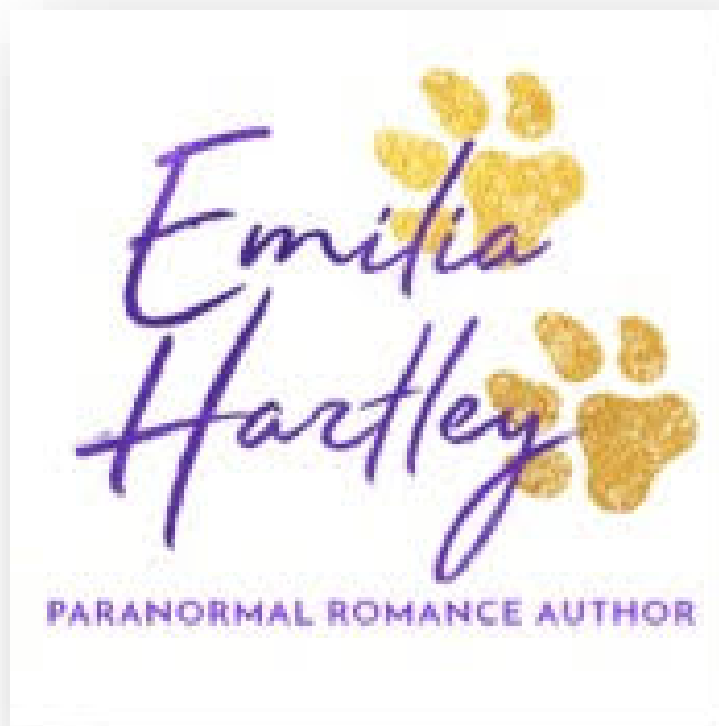
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My Alpha had to remind me that I was nothing more than a dog, lowest of the low in his pack. He towered over me. His lips seemed to be drawn in a permanent disgusted scowl—at least they were whenever I was around.

I couldn't help what I was. If anything, I blamed the witch who breezed through town, staying just long enough to drop a prophecy bomb, a couple of years before I entered this world. It was as if her words had brought me into being.

Not that anyone had known it at the time. When I turned thirteen, and it came time for my first shift, I'd thought that I would change into a wolf, like my father. But fate had a different plan for me. I'd shifted into a black hound, instead. After that, the burden of a dangerous prophecy got pushed onto my shoulders. I had thirteen years of blissful ignorance, which didn't seem like enough in hindsight.

Especially when Alvin, my Alpha, had me sharing every little detail about my personal life with him. I had no privacy, no sense of personal space. Today, Alvin was pissed because I'd forgotten to give him my work schedule for the week.

To prove his power over me, we'd been standing in complete silence in his dining room for the past twenty minutes. I couldn't lift my gaze. I couldn't speak up. All I could do was stand here and wait for him to dismiss me while the minutes ticked past.

Nervous apprehension slithered up my spine. I reached into my pocket and pressed the button on the side of my phone to peek at the time. My shift

at Bad Moon Café had started ten minutes ago.

I stifled my groan.

“What’s the problem, Vanessa?” Alvin asked.

In the doorway, his son chuckled. Harvey leaned against the doorjamb with his arms and ankles crossed. The sly smile on his face told me he was enjoying this punishment like the weirdo that he was. Of course, Harvey had to inherit all his father’s perverse pleasures.

The pack hadn’t always been like this. The pack I knew as a child had been a warm family. Alvin had invited my parents over for Thanksgiving the year that we couldn’t afford a meal of our own. He’d welcomed us and any others who needed the help.

His paranoia had gotten the best of him since my thirteenth birthday. I wish I could say that I didn’t blame him, but I’d been dealing with the short end of this prophecy for a while now, and all of my empathy had gone out the window.

Alvin gripped my jaw and forced me to look at him. The power of his gaze kept me from looking him in the eye. I had to settle my sights on the weird mole near his nose. Why the mole and not his nose? I wasn’t sure.

“I asked you,” Alvin growled, “what’s the problem?”

I sucked my teeth to keep my treacherous tongue busy, but it didn’t work for long. “That mole on your cheek might be a problem if you don’t get it checked. Do you ever wear sunscreen? Or do you think your farmer’s tan is sexy?”

Wasn’t that the title of an old country song? Alvin didn’t give me time to remember. He delivered a slap across my cheek that made the room spin. My head snapped to the side. After several heartbeats, the pictures on the wall stopped moving.

I slowly inhaled, using the moment to shove my rage back down.

The prophecy said that the Barghest, the black dog that brings ill omens and storms, would be the Alpha’s undoing. I couldn’t help but wonder if all prophecies were self-fulfilling, and that witch foresaw Alvin’s steady decline into cruelty. I wished she hadn’t tampered with fate. I wished she’d never step foot in this city.

What kind of witch visited Syracuse, of all places? This part of New York didn’t have a whole lot to boast. Syracuse was technically part of the rust belt. That was what made it such a great place for supernaturals,

though. We took over the parts of the city that had once belonged to big manufacturers and reshaped it into our own neighborhood.

I guess that's what drew the witch in, but I still wished she'd gone anywhere else but here. Maybe then, my life would be different. I wouldn't have to give my Alpha my schedule and warn him about any activities a week ahead of time. Though I was twenty-two now, I still felt like a child.

Alvin studied me long and hard. His upper lip curled, but not before I saw his breath shudder out of him.

"Don't forget this again," Alvin said, waving my work schedule in front of my face.

Biting my tongue, I nodded. Alvin gestured for me to leave before turning and exiting through the far door. I spun on my heel, eager to escape.

Harvey still blocked the nearby exit, though. He grinned down at me. Before I could backpedal, he reached out. My flinch filled me with shame as Harvey laughed. He tucked a black curl behind my ear.

"You're a stupid mutt, Ness Blackmaw," he said, softly. "You'll learn to heel at some point."

My stomach churned. I clenched my teeth as I felt them begin to elongate. The hound in me thrashed to break free. She would rip Harvey a new asshole just for touching me. She wanted Harvey's blood more than anything. The Alpha's son crossed every boundary I'd ever set and laughed while doing so.

"I'm late for work," I muttered.

Proud of himself, Harvey straightened his spine and lifted his chin as a grin spread over his lips. "Oh, I know. If I keep you here long enough, you won't have to worry about that. You'll lose your stupid job slinging coffee. Then I'll whisper in my father's ear that you're planning something devious. He'll keep you here twenty-four seven. I'll be able to use you as my footstool once we break you."

My teeth shoved against one another, trying to shift even though I kept my jaw clenched.

"The only thing around here that's going to break is your ego when you realize that being a dick isn't ever going to make up for the micro-penis in your pants."

Heart pounding in fear, I ducked under Harvey's outstretched arm as he reached for me. I bolted into the hallway and twisted toward the front door.

Even though I burst outside, I wasn't free until I could get to my car. The ancient sedan awaited me.

"Don't fail me now," I whispered as I turned the key in the ignition.

The engine turned over just as a wolf leapt out of the door and charged down the driveway. I put the car into reverse, waved goodbye to Harvey, and hit the gas. I sped backwards. The car bounced as I hit the road. There, I put it into drive and yanked the wheel so I could speed away.

Harvey let out a pissed-off howl, but I turned the radio up and ignored him. Maybe there would be hell to pay for telling the Alpha's son that he had a small dick, but I was always paying the price for things that were out of my hands. At least now, I had actually done something to deserve my future punishment.



BREATHLESS, I stumbled into Bad Moon Café with an apology on my lips. I was a half-hour late because of that asshole. The aroma of coffee and baked goods enveloped me in a warm hug that almost eased away the fear still clinging to me.

Violet wasted no time, sticking her arm out over the counter. In her hands was a plastic cup filled to the brim with chocolate-laced espresso. I groaned and snatched it from her. That first sip of hazelnut mocha filled me with a renewed will to live.

Violet laughed and shook her head. Her blonde shag shifted, revealing her pointed ears. Violet Murdock wasn't pack. She wasn't a shifter at all. Yet, she was family. Everyone here at Bad Moon Café was family to me.

They knew my favorite drink and always had it ready for me before my shifts. They knew exactly what I needed and when.

Behind Violet, Cerri hummed to herself. Though her full name was Cerridwen, she preferred to be called Cerri by her friends. Her cloud of blonde curls was bound into a low-hanging bun. A green bandana rolled into a headband graced her head like a crown. She gave me a soft smile as she took off her apron.

"Don't worry," she said. "I covered for you."

My brow furrowed. I glanced at the clock. For fuck's sake, I was later than I'd originally thought. "You didn't have to do that. It's not your job to

—”

Cerri cut me off. “Stop fretting! I have your back. I always will.”

Grateful tears burned my eyes. Though Cerri hadn’t shifted yet, she was pack. She knew about everything.

“But, Audra,” I said, more than a little nervous as I glanced around for signs of the café’s owner.

Both Cerri and Violet waved me off.

“Audra isn’t going to care so long as the shift was covered,” Cerri assured me.

“Besides,” Violet said. “You haven’t missed much. It’s been slow today. We spent an hour watching a crow try to seduce another crow.”

Cerri laughed. “He tried very hard, but I don’t think she was in the mood.”

I pulled my curls into a messy bun at the base of my skull. I wasn’t one for higher buns because I liked to wear my beanie most of the time. It beat trying to manage this mess I’d inherited from my mother.

While I washed my hands and got to work, Cerri hung around. She clearly didn’t have anywhere else to be, so the three of us chatted while we waited for Violet’s shift to end. There were a few customers in that time. Most of them were supernaturals because of Bad Moon’s proximity to Lakesedge, the supernatural neighborhood, but none of them were shifters.

When Violet’s shift ended, she and Cerri retired to the plush couch at the back of the café. The glowing moon on the wall above the couch was only three quarters illuminated. Audra had programmed the lights to change with the moon, which was both a blessing and a curse.

The days that the moon wasn’t illuminated filled me with relief. That meant I had time before the pack gathered again. The three-quarter moon left me with nothing but dread. In a few days’ time, the pack would gather for the full moon run once again.

The run was mandatory for all shifters who could change forms. For me, that meant I had to show up to my own bullying session. At least, I had a few days left until the next run.

The rumble of the muscle car's engine underneath me had become a comforting sensation in the past year. I gripped the gearshift and pushed it into a higher gear, so I could get through this part of town. Why I'd decided to take the back roads instead of the interstate, I didn't know.

Though the city held its fair share of interesting architecture and sights to behold, I preferred the dense array of trees lining the fields here. Syracuse amused me with its close proximity to nature. It seemed as if one step was all it took to transition between urban and rural neighborhoods.

But Syracuse was also home to Lakesedge, a dense supernatural community. I couldn't afford to linger and take in the beauty of this place, or else I'd be putting a lot of people at risk.

In the distance, a storm seemed to arise out of nowhere. Clouds that had been fluffy and white suddenly turned dark. Their grey underbellies crackled with energy that I could feel all the way over here.

Without thinking, I flipped the blinker and turned towards the oncoming storm. The smell of ozone drifted in through the vents. I breathed deep, savoring it. The beast within me woke and moved, but I couldn't let it out. Beasts like mine were all too easy to see in broad daylight.

The GPS on my phone told me that I was going the wrong way and needed to turn around. While I agreed, I couldn't bring myself to leave. The storm called to me.

It'd been a year since I left Thunder Pass. I missed it with my whole heart, but I still couldn't go back. I couldn't go back, and I couldn't stop

running. After what I did, the whole clan was likely out for blood. I knew for a fact that my younger brother wanted justice.

The clouds rumbled. Soon, they would unleash rain and lightning upon this small section of the world. I leaned forward and gaped at the sky above. Storms didn't just happen out of nowhere like this. If there was another storm dragon in the area, then I would have to leave soon.

This storm didn't smell like beast, though. It smelled like any other storm. Besides, the last dragon that could call a storm had been my father. I doubted there were many others left. I couldn't even do it.

If a dragon hadn't started this, then what had?

I pulled onto the side of the road, cursing myself and my damned curiosity the whole time. The moment I set foot on the asphalt, the ground seemed to take hold of me. It was like the area wanted me to stay.

"Fuck no," I grumbled, stomping forward.

An empty field sat between the road and the woods. Something dark emerged from the trees. As I stared at the beast, lightning slammed into the ground between us. I didn't flinch, didn't even blink. Lightning couldn't hurt me. The beast, however, startled and ran.

My heart thumped excitedly. Could it be?

The black hound galloped along the edge of the trees. The storm above followed in the hound's wake. Before it disappeared into the trees once more, it stopped and locked eyes with me. This was it.

I'd found the Barghest.

Once more, I cursed. I didn't want to stay in this city, but it seemed as though that decision had been taken from my hands. The creature would help me. That's what the witch in Virginia City had told me. She'd said that I had to find the Barghest and that then I would find rest—a strange mix of words, to be sure.

I watched the storm disappear with the hound as it vanished into the woods once more. The scent of ozone lingered, a reminder that I had no choice but to stay. I glanced back, as if I would find my brother bearing down on me now. He wouldn't be able to find me for months. I had time.

For now, I would have to find a place to stay and rest. Then I would hunt down this Barghest and demand help.

OH SHIT. Oh no. Oh shit.

I darted through the woods as quickly as I could. My hound wanted to go back and sniff out the man at the edge of the road, but I knew better than to allow her to run back into trouble and that man screamed trouble.

He had a presence unlike any other that I'd ever come across. Even through the storm, I'd smelled him. He carried a scent like lightning and burnt ash.

The wind had tangled his smoky gray hair, revealing glimpses of bright blue eyes. The image of him had been imprinted upon my memory like a searing brand. No matter how I tried to shut him out, I could still see him.

Now wasn't the time to worry about tall, smoking, and potentially dangerous. I had to get back to pack territory before anyone figured out how far I'd strayed alone. Shifters weren't supposed to run without the pack. That was why we had the full moon runs. Sticking together meant staying safe from hunters and nosy humans.

For me, sticking together also meant getting bitten and dominated by any shifter with a chip on their shoulder. That was why I liked to run on my own sometimes. Unfortunately, the damn storms that appeared when I shifted marked me wherever I went. It was easy to find me where there was a storm hovering above the woods.

I slowed as I reached the edge of pack territory once again. Thoughts of the dangerous man slipped back to the forefront of my mind. The hound, my beast, issued a soft whine. She turned me around and took a few steps in the direction of the road before I stopped her.

We were not going to run back into the arms of a stranger for no reason! I dug my claws into the earth as she tossed her head in annoyance. Sometimes it sucked to have two personalities inside myself. We weren't always at odds like this. The dangerous man riled up the hound.

Before I could collect myself, something hit me from the side. I tumbled, my ribs suddenly throbbing from the blow. Right as I was about to leap back onto my feet, a paw shoved me back down into the earth.

The smell of pack and Alpha greeted me like a slap to the face. I whimpered and tried to roll onto my back to show submission. Alvin didn't like that. He bit down on my throat just hard enough to make me yelp. I froze, scared of what might happen if I moved.

I'd been found out.

Alvin flipped me with his nose before biting down on the scruff of my neck. He rose on all fours and carried me like a pathetic pup. It served to remind me just how large Alvin was. His wolf was easily the size of a grizzly, meaning my paws hung about a foot off the ground.

When I realized that struggling only made him bite down harder on my scruff, I gave in and let him carry me back to his estate like a child. There, Alvin threw me to the ground and issued a low growl. I wanted to leap to my feet and run, but there was nowhere to go.

So long as I stayed in Lakesedge, I would have to answer to Alvin. There was nowhere to run because this was his territory, and he would find me anywhere I went—even if I went to the other side of Syracuse, he would be able to track me down.

If I wanted to escape Alvin altogether, I would have to leave the state. That would mean leaving Bad Moon Café and my friends there. That would mean leaving the people in the pack who weren't like Alvin. I didn't want to give up on my home or my family. Just because an asshole stood in a position of leadership didn't mean that I had to give up and run.

Alvin shifted back to his human form and put his foot on my neck. I let out an embarrassing whimper and clawed the air. In this form, I could not reach his ankle to bite it. I had no hands to push him off me. I had to lie here and listen to the bullshit he wanted to spill all over me.

"What are you doing, mutt? Are you really so stupid that you would risk exposing everyone by running around by yourself?" Alvin sneered. The white streaks in his beard trembled with his rage. "You were near the road. I saw your storm cloud, so don't try lying to me."

When would I win? No, I didn't even need to win. I needed a stalemate that would allow me a moment's peace.

A female shifter named Janessa stepped forward, her hand hovering in the air as if to stop Alvin. Janessa's brow furrowed with worry, but I watched that same expression slip into fear as Alvin pinned her with his furious gaze. His lip curled in hungry anticipation—the kind that betrayed violence and nothing else. She yanked her hand back and backpedaled.

Janessa was a good person. She deserved better than an Alpha who would scold her for doing the right thing. Catriona, the pack historian, hooked an arm around Janessa's shoulder and led the young woman away, so they wouldn't have to watch my punishment.

I wished they would stay if only so that their presence might soften whatever Alvin had in store for me. Without them around, Alvin was free to do whatever he wanted with no witnesses save for Harvey, who was likely watching from somewhere nearby. Harvey never missed an opportunity to belittle me.

Alvin grabbed a fistful of fur at my scruff and lifted my head so he could growl in my face. “Never defy me again, Vanessa. One more misstep, and I will be forced to take action.”

Take action? What the hell did he mean by that? Was he withholding a worse punishment? A chill raced down my spine. What could be worse than what I’d already endured?

Alvin released me. I thumped to the ground and didn’t move.

Above, a new storm cloud crackled. It issued warning rumbles and drew Alvin’s attention upward. He grumbled something before looking at me with open hatred again.

“Do something about that. Turn it off.”

I couldn’t tell him that I had no idea how to control the storm. If I could have, I would have done it long ago to hide my tracks. The storm followed me no matter where I went. There was no outrunning it, no dispelling it.

Alvin glared expectantly. Finally, after several heartbeats passed, he let out an incredulous laugh. “You don’t know how to control it! I knew you were stupid, but I didn’t know you were that stupid.”

He shook his head and stormed off, towards the house. Alone, I got to my feet. A growl vibrated the back of my throat. For a moment, I allowed myself to imagine leaping at him and tearing at his skin. The idea didn’t linger long. I wasn’t that kind of person. The violence just wasn’t in me.

Though my hound disagreed, I knew I wasn’t meant to be a fighter. There were others who were bigger and stronger than me. My hound form couldn’t go toe to toe with a wolf shifter like Alvin or Harvey.

Out of the corner of my eye, a new wolf stepped forward. Though we’d never spent much time together in our beast forms, I would always be able to recognize Connor anywhere. He had cinnamon stripes that ran down his back, all the way to the tip of his tail. The rest of his fur was a rich brown that blended in with the trees around him.

Connor approached me, his head tilted curiously. I pulled my lips back in a snarl.

We were friends once. I couldn't count the number of nights I'd spent at his house, playing old video games and burning our tongues on pizza rolls. Yet, the moment my beast revealed herself and Alvin set his sights on me, Connor decided I was more trouble than I was worth.

He abandoned me. Ever since then, he'd followed Harvey around like a shadow. I wanted better for my pack, but Connor had betrayed me, and I couldn't bring myself to forgive him. Not right now. Maybe not ever.

He nudged me with his nose. I snapped the air between us, my teeth making a shrill sound as they clashed. He pulled back, ears perked high.

I didn't have time for this. Instead of sticking around, I ran. Like hell would I shift in front of Connor and let him see me naked. I was tired of being vulnerable and exposed.

Behind me, Connor howled. It wasn't a call to hunt, but a call of return. The lonely sound nearly drew me to a stop. My feet tangled for a moment before I corrected myself. Only now, as I ran away, did I realize that Connor's presence had stopped Alvin's punishment from being worse. I'd gotten off with a warning because Alvin had been aware of Connor nearby.

I didn't want to think that Connor had stayed on purpose, but there was a chance that he had. If so, then I owed him my gratitude. One of these days, Alvin wouldn't stop. He would make sure that I never got the chance to ruin his control over the pack. I think Alvin's control was hanging on by a thread about to break.

For now, I would keep my head down. I would do my best to mind my own damn business and stay far away from roads while in my beast form.

The hunky stranger would likely move on. He wouldn't be a problem ever again.

Ryder

I SNATCHED the fake rock in the garden and bounded up the porch steps. With one hand, I flipped open the rock and plucked the key from it. Modern technology was a lifesaver in a pinch. Shortly after downloading an app and plugging in a zip code, I had a list of available apartments that I could book in a moment's notice.

This one had called out to me. It sat close to Lakesedge, and while that gave me pause, I knew I would have to wander into the supernatural territory if I was going to find the Barghest again. The legendary creature would give me the closure that I needed.

I wished the witch in Virginia City had been more accurate with her prediction. She'd turned over my hand and read the lines that I'd stained with the blood of my own family. If she saw what I'd done, she didn't mention it. Instead, she'd told me to keep driving. In her reading, she'd declared that I would eventually find a Barghest with the ability to change my life.

After all this running, I wanted nothing more than for this chapter of my life to come to an end. I'd grown tired of motel rooms and of sleeping in the backseat of my car when I couldn't find a motel. The fresh, clean scent of the small house greeted me with warm memories when I opened the door.

My beast stirred. My thoughts tumbled back to better days before I could reel them back in. The owner of this rental used the same cleaning products as my mother had. In the blink of an eye, I was twelve and running through our house in Thunder Pass again. I could almost hear the crash of my brother as he ran into walls and tables in his rush to catch up to me.

Morgan had been chasing me since the day he was born. He'd set his sights on me, and a challenge had gleamed in his eyes. Young and dumb, I'd allowed him to follow after me. Now, he still chased me, but for a different reason altogether.

I rocked on my heels in the doorway. The living room loomed before me. What should have been inviting made me want to run. The beast thrashed inside me, making my head throb. How long had it been since I'd stopped?

I didn't know. I'd been unable to rest and had lost track of the days. When I looked at my hands, I could still see the blood on them as if it'd been only yesterday that I'd ruined everything.

Dropping my bag in the doorway, I backed out and locked the door once again. I shoved the key in my pocket and told myself that I needed food. This wasn't running away. That's not what I was doing once again. My restless feet carried me a few streets over where I found a café with a big, gray moon hanging over the door.

Bad Moon Café.

Coffee counted as food, right? From the smell, I figured they had sandwiches and pastries as well. It wasn't what I had planned on getting, but it would do.

Inside, a moon glowed at the far end of the café. I raised a brow and wondered if the moon was lit up to match the moon's phase. It was a strange choice, but this close to Lakesedge, I wouldn't be surprised if this place was owned by a supernatural.

It seemed that it was run by them, too. The women working behind the counter carried a myriad of scents with them that marked them as supernatural. The blonde with a halo of curls barely contained by her bandana grinned wide. Her ears were tapered to a point like an elf, but she smelled like wolf and dried flowers.

"Ah, can I get a coffee and a sandwich?" I dug through my pocket for my wallet and froze when another scent slapped me in the face.

It was rich, like wolf, but it also reminded me of storms. There was a hint of charred earth and ozone in the air that made my breath hitch. My beast stirred and filled me with a new hunger. I clenched my fists, fighting the beast back, and scanned the other two women.

There was a brunette wearing a backwards baseball cap. The patch of red atop her nose told me that she spent a lot of time outside. I inched closer to her, but the smell wafting from her reminded me of ancient dust. I immediately jumped back as a chill tiptoed down my spine.

The blonde—her nametag said Cerri, with a little heart after it—flashed me another grin, this one tighter at the corners which told me that she was growing impatient. Then, her brows lifted curiously.

"I recommend the turkey club for a man like yourself. It has turkey, bacon, and avocado. As for your coffee, would you like a *charmed* coffee?"

I scowled, confused. With a shrug, I said, "Sure?"

She gave a nod, spun on her heel, and plucked a bottle out from under the back counter. I considered stopping her because I didn't know what kind of potion she was pouring into the bottom of my coffee cup, but I was too tired to care.

This was what happened when I kept running. Eventually, the exhaustion caught up to me. Consequences and retribution would be hot on its heels, too.

"Great," I mumbled as I swiped my card for the purchase.

A woman stepped down from a ladder against the back wall. She'd been changing the menu, apparently. When I realized that I hadn't even thought to check the menu, I had to acknowledge just how tired I was. When was the last time I slept? When was the last time I stopped to eat?

All thoughts of myself vanished when the woman with the ladder turned around. Her dark curls were kept tamped down by a black beanie. She had dark, winged eyeliner swiped over her eyes that made her gaze sharp and vindictive. My blood turned warm before rushing south. She hoisted the ladder and carted it away with the kind of ease and grace that came with being a shifter.

Was she the one I'd scented earlier? She had to be. What I didn't understand was my immediate reaction to her. I jammed my hand into my pocket to adjust my jeans for the growth I couldn't stop. My beast laughed at my plight before setting its gaze on the curly-haired woman.

More hunger unfurled inside of me. I needed her in my arms, so I could bury my face in her hair and breathe deep. That scent still wafted around me. It was so much like home and like Lakesedge all at once.

She returned, never once looking in my direction. My beast growled. It wanted her to look, to notice me. Still, she kept her head down.

I shook myself. It'd been too long since I'd slept with a woman. This celibacy was going to kill me. If I'd stopped and visited a bar every now and then, I wouldn't fixate on a stranger who didn't need me staring her down while she did her job.

I hadn't told my friends about what'd happened earlier today. Visions of the hunky man at the edge of the road rolled through my mind over and over. Cerri had to call my name four times to snap me out of my haze.

Addie, who was on sandwiches today, gave me a look with her head tilted to the side like that might enable her to peer past my façade. The fourth employee at Bad Moon Café kept a lot of secrets from us. She was quiet except when she wanted to tell us about her recent hikes. Today, she wore her long, dark hair in a braid that ran down her back. She'd knotted the front of her flannel shirt to crop it and allow a thin slice of skin to peek through between her shirt and the waistband of her leggings. I stuck my tongue out at Addie, snatched the paper cup from Cerri's outstretched hand, and got to work on the new order.

Cerri's potion shimmered with her arcana. Most of the time, arcana ran in the family. It was magic that manifested in the blood passed down from generation to generation. Cerri's arcana was unique to her. No one could stir magic into drinks the way she could. Though she was pack, no shifter could do what she did. I stole a glance in her direction and felt my stomach slap the floor.

Beyond her, on the other side of the counter, stood Tall, Dark, and Stormy from earlier. My breath hitched as I spun back around. The coffee I'd been pouring spilled over the cup's brim and seared my skin. I hissed and jerked back, spilling more coffee over myself.

Great, I thought. I was covered in coffee and potion.

I could feel several people watching me, their gazes burning the back of my neck. I fought the urge to rub it and focused on fitting a lid onto the coffee cup. Okay, now I had to give it to Tall, Dark, and Stormy.

I balked. My feet refused to move. How had he found me so quickly? If he wanted to talk, he did a horrible job initiating conversation. He stared at me from his position near the order counter. I knew because I could still feel his gaze hot on my skin. His attention made my heartrate skyrocket, which had more to do with how he'd caught me that morning than to do with how hot he was.

Yeah, that was it. It had nothing to do with his broad shoulders barely contained by his threadbare t-shirt. It wasn't his pale eyes, bright even though they were trapped behind shadows that seemed to plague him with guilt.

My hound wanted to nudge him and see if she could draw a smile out of him. I told my hound that I would throw myself off a cliff before I allowed her to approach him. The hound growled in warning.

She'd never growled at me like that before. It left me stunned. What was it with this guy? Why did he leave me so thoroughly inside-out?

I swallowed and turned, my motions mechanical because I had to force myself to move. Tall, Dark, and Stormy appeared at the end counter before I could set his cup down. He reached to take it from me, and a bright spark leapt between our hands.

Now, I'm not talking *we had sparks* in a figurative sense. This spark was very real. It let out a crack as it jumped from my fingers to his. He stopped and scowled at our hands while I held my breath.

Just take it, I thought, desperate to flee from this interaction. If he figured out that I was the hound he'd seen, then I could get in big trouble. My friends at Bad Moon wouldn't rat me out to Alvin, but I couldn't trust this stranger to keep his mouth shut. For all I knew, this mystery shifter was a stickler for pack rules and would run back to Alvin the moment he put all the pieces together.

I didn't need this today. I was tired of having to prostrate myself before Alvin, tired of having to bear the weight of this damned prophecy that I never had any intention of seeing through.

Tall, Dark, and Stormy took his cup finally. No more sparks appeared between us. I breathed a sigh of relief and booked it into the back room where I could breathe again. When I peeked out, Cerri and Addie gave me

inquisitive glances. I ducked back into the back room before they could figure out what had me so shaken.

Why didn't I want to talk to my friends about Tall, Dark, and Stormy? What about him made me want to keep our interaction all to myself? I rolled my eyes at my own behavior. I wasn't acting rationally. While no one had ever called me rational, I wasn't a fool, either.

I pinched the bridge of my nose as I tried to gather myself. My thoughts were scrambled from the spark between TDS and myself. If only I had a name to call him rather than Tall, Dark, and Stormy or TDS. The first was long winded, and the second seemed impersonal. Perhaps I needed to stay impersonal so that he wouldn't draw me in and make a fool out of me.

I had no idea how this outsider would react if he knew about me or how I'd broken the rules this morning. I rubbed the back of my neck. Now that no one was staring, I could feel Alvin's teeth on my scruff again. Alvin could have done so much more damage this morning. He would have if he'd known that I'd been spotted.

I pressed my back to the wall and sighed. I rubbed my face with my hands to see if I could wipe away any of the anxiety still gripping me. When I pulled my hands away, I saw that Cerri had joined me.

She put her hands on her hips, leaned forward, and studied me. I did my best to give her a reassuring smile, but it seemed tight and forced, even to me.

"What is it about that guy that has you so shaken?" she asked. "It's more than *oh, man! He's so hot!* So, spill. What's up?"

I shook my head. "It's nothing. I had a stressful morning with the pack. That's all."

Addie poked her head into the doorway and pinned me with her dark stare. "Stop lying."

"Go back to the counter before someone walks in," I hissed, eager to escape this interrogation.

Okay, so it wasn't an interrogation, but it sure felt like it when I had a pack mate in front of me and Addie to my left. We didn't really know what Addie was, only that she was a supernatural who didn't like to use her arcana. She seemed afraid of herself, which was honestly kind of intimidating.

"It's nothing. I shifted without pack permission this morning, and that guy might have seen me. That's it. He didn't even see me shift. For all he

knows, he saw a black dog in a field.” I shrugged, trying to play this off.

Cerri’s eyes widened. She swore under her breath, which amounted to a soft *dang* because Cerri never actually swore.

Addie nodded. “You stay back here, then. I’ll let you know when the coast is clear. You don’t have to interact with him at all.”

“Ha! I knew something was up.” Cerri smiled, her expression becoming sly. “I slipped him a forgetting potion. I mean, he seemed like he had something he needed to stop thinking about, but that should help him move on from the sighting this morning, too.”

I gaped at my friend. Without thinking, I threw my arms around her shoulders and held her tight. “You’re the best.”

“Cerri will always be the best of us,” Addie said before running back to the front counter to take someone’s order.

Cerri put a hand on my shoulder after I pulled away. She leaned in and whispered, “Don’t worry. We’ll always have your back.”

Gratitude swelled inside me. They were the reason I couldn’t leave. I couldn’t bear to part with any of my friends. Not only were they all amazing people, but Cerri was pack. So long as she had to answer to Alvin, I would have to stay.

I doubted Alvin’s descent into paranoia would stop with me. If I left, he would look for traitors in everyone around him. Eventually, he would remember that Cerri was my friend, and his torment would fall upon her. I couldn’t let that happen.

While it sucked to have this weight on my shoulders, it was easier to bear when I knew what I was trying to protect. I wasn’t a wolf like my father or some of the others in my pack, but I still had that wolfish sense of family that made me fiercely protective of those I loved. And I loved my friends more than anything.

So, I slouched at the break table in the back room and picked at a sandwich that Addie brought back for me. After about forty minutes, Addie returned and gave me the *all clear*. Together, the three of us crowded behind the order counter and peered out the front window for any sign of Tall, Dark, and Stormy.

Cerri perked up and opened the register. While she dug around, she said, “He paid with a card. I should have a slip with his name on it here somewhere.”

Sure enough, Cerri held up a little piece of receipt paper with the name *Ryder Callahan*.

Ryder, huh? I leaned into the front window again and looked down the street. He'd vanished from sight. Wasn't that what I'd wanted? Yet, I couldn't help the disappointment that made me heavy as I pulled back.

"I wonder who he is," Addie said, peering at the receipt in Cerri's hand.

"Maybe someone in Lakesedge knows about a Callahan family?" Cerri offered. "I can ask around when I pick up more arcana supplies."

As badly as I wanted to know more about Tall, Dark, and Stormy, I knew that too much prodding would land the both of us in trouble. Alvin wouldn't like it if he found out we were interested in a shifter from another pack. It was one thing if that shifter went to Alvin to rat me out. There was a level of respect in that kind of behavior that Alvin would appreciate.

Considering my prophecy, if I showed interest in someone outside the pack, then that might raise suspicions. Alvin might assume that I was acting against him. While that sounded like a better idea with every passing day, I knew that acting upon it would only get me killed.

The thought turned me cold. I wrapped my arms around my middle.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Ryder is probably just passing through. So long as we don't kick the hornet's nest, then this will all blow over."

Both Addie and Cerri looked as though they wanted to say something, but neither admitted it. They each gave their own approximation of a nod and went back to work. We spent the rest of the night pretending that nothing ever happened, which I appreciated.

Whoever Ryder Callahan was, I couldn't get tangled up with him. If I rocked the boat, then Alvin would tip it altogether. He would watch me drown without a moment's remorse.

I chucked the sanitizer towel back into its bucket and scowled. What had I done to deserve this? The answer was nothing. My dad had a wolf as his beast. Upon my thirteenth birthday, I thought I'd shift into a wolf, too. Dad blamed my mother's latent fae blood for turning me into what I was. Those accusations had put a wedge between them, one that my soft mother was too timid to acknowledge.

It seemed that no matter what I did or where I went, I brought friction with me. I could do my best to behave, but that wouldn't mean anything at the end of the day. My very aura crackled like a sudden summer storm.

Would it get better if I went where no one knew about me and the prophecy around me? Or would it stay the same?

The three of us stepped out into the evening air. Addie locked the café door and stepped aside, so Cerri could retrace the protection sigils hanging in the air around the storefront. They glimmered briefly, mesmerizing me in the dim twilight.

Somehow, we'd all drawn the short end of the stick. Me, with my prophecy. Addie with the arcana that scared her. Cerri and her missing beast. Violet and the demon blood in her veins. We didn't have a whole lot in common with the rest of Lakesedge. While others had mastered their arcana or had strong beasts, we were fumbling around and trying to make the best of what we had.

Sometimes, I envied Cerri for her arcana. She'd found a way to make use of what she had while I was just a dog shrouded in storms. Those thoughts didn't do anything for either of us, so I shook them off.

As Cerri stepped away from the door, I noticed a pickup truck drifting down the street behind her. The pickup came closer, and someone leaned out the driver's window and raised their hand. They weren't waving. I braced myself as the driver chuckled something in our direction.

Ice and soda rained down over our heads. Harvey's cackle tainted the once-peaceful silence of the evening. A pair of sorrowful eyes held mine as the truck passed. Connor, sitting in the truck bed, tried to apologize with a look. I flipped him the bird as cola dripped into my eyes.

Damn, that stung.

Addie sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

"I'm so sorry," I said, quickly.

"That's not your fault. Alvin never spanked that boy. I don't advocate for child abuse, but Harvey needs someone to put him in his place." Addie took off her baseball cap and shook it out.

From the other end of the street, Harvey shouted back to us. "Your ass is mine, Mutt!"

I stiffened, waiting for them to turn around. The truck turned the corner and disappeared, though. That was almost worse. I wanted to face whatever Harvey had planned. Instead, I would be looking over my shoulder until he struck.

I backed away from my friends. My presence was only going to make things worse for them. I hated that Harvey did this, that I couldn't even

spend time with my friends outside of Bad Moon without fearing for their safety. I didn't know how to change that, though. My hands were tied.

If I did anything to rebel, then Alvin would see that as treason. Packs didn't look kindly on traitors. While there was a set of rules that all supernaturals followed for the safety of the community as a whole, packs were allowed a little extra leeway to govern themselves internally. Lakesedge wouldn't look too hard for me if I disappeared, especially if Alvin claimed treason.

I wanted to go home and curl up into a ball. First, I needed a shower. The cola had dried to a sticky, stiff mess. It cemented in my curls and stuck to my collarbone.

My hound's howl lodged itself in my throat. The sound that rang inside my skull was lonely and desperate. I wished I had a dragon's fire to keep me warm. If I had a dragon's strength, then I could defend myself against Alvin. He wouldn't dare hurt me then.

The only dragons I knew about were all in Thunder Pass, Colorado. They didn't really interact with the rest of the world. There were a few dragon shifters in Wales and Germany, but they kept to themselves, too. Dragon shifters didn't like to leave their homes, apparently.

I would never find a dragon shifter to be my white knight. There was no savior waiting to find me and fix this mess that I was stuck in. I just had to find a way to deal with this on my own.

Did that mean I would have to live up to the prophecy? I didn't like the idea, but it seemed like I didn't have a choice. Fate had bound me to this situation, and I was growing tired of showing my submission.

In the mall food court, I wiggled my fingers and thought about the spark that had jumped from me to Ryder Callahan. I knew almost nothing about arcana, and I wasn't about to head back to Bad Moon Café to ask Cerri. Though my friend might be able to tell me after a bit of research, I didn't want to ruin her day with my presence.

The soda shower was evidence that the pack was more determined than ever to harass me. Alvin and Harvey thought they were breaking me. If anything, my hound gnashed her teeth and begged for a chance to fight. I couldn't bring that kind of energy back to Bad Moon Café because I would most certainly start a fight if Harvey tracked me down there.

I figured hanging out at the mall's food court was the next best thing. At least there were enough human witnesses here, so the pack would hesitate before trying anything shady. And, if that didn't work, this mall was large enough to get lost in. There were three floors of shopping and an extended wing of new shops.

I picked at the tray of fries in front of me, sad that I couldn't get an iced hazelnut mocha here. Ahead, the famous carousel spun lazily. Once upon a time, this mall had been named after that carousel. For whatever reason, they'd changed the name to Destiny USA, which sounded cheesy as hell to me.

Lost in my thoughts and nose-blind from the fast-food stalls, I didn't notice Connor until he dropped into the metal seat across from me. I stiffened, heart racing while my hound went on full alarm.

“Don’t freak out,” he said, quickly. He pushed a strawberry lemonade in my direction.

I gave it a wary stare. Connor sighed.

“You know I don’t have a reason to trust you, right?” I sat up straighter in my seat in case I needed to bolt.

When I looked at him in his human form, I saw the pre-teen that had been my friend. Since then, Connor had grown into a man. Lanky arms had bulked out into bulging biceps barely contained by his sleeves. His cinnamon hair hung over his brow. He lifted gray-green eyes up to meet mine.

I crossed my arms over my chest and met his gaze without hesitation. Connor wasn’t Alvin. He couldn’t intimidate me.

“I just wanted to say hello and bring you a drink. If you have fries, you should have a drink.”

I cocked my head. Connor’s sudden kindness set off alarms in my head. My hound didn’t trust this either. It wasn’t that Connor had ever hurt me physically—emotionally was another matter. He hadn’t sought me out since my first shift. And, when I’d gone to him, he’d always been surrounded by his new friends.

As if my thoughts summoned them, a group of shifters with Harvey at the head broke out of the crowd. Kelsey and Haylee, a pair of female shifters that could have been my friends, stuck close behind Harvey when he came over and slung his arm around Connor’s neck. Harvey tightened his grip, making Connor wince.

My hound’s hackles rose. A growl vibrated in my throat. Even if Connor was a spineless fuck, that didn’t mean I wanted to watch Harvey abuse him and call it friendship.

“I was wondering where you’d gotten to, today.” Harvey grabbed a fry from my tray and popped it into his mouth. “I didn’t think I’d find you here. It seems that Kelsey and Haylee had the right idea to go shopping.”

Behind Harvey, Kelsey mouthed an apology. That small gesture told me that she might have suggested shopping as a way to keep Harvey away from me. She hadn’t meant for this to backfire.

She flinched when Harvey narrowed his eyes at her. Her visceral reaction made me wonder how many times Harvey had laid his hands on her in anger. Rage curdled my stomach. As much as I resented the others

for their cowardice, I didn't think about what they might have been enduring behind the scenes.

"How about you join us?" Harvey suggested.

I didn't swallow my laughter in time. It came rushing out of me so fast, I nearly spit all over Connor and Harvey in the process. They would have deserved it.

Harvey's expression changed. His cocky demeanor fell away, and his eyes turned cold. "That wasn't a suggestion."

I smiled, despite my situation. "Is that how you frame demands? Then, how about you choke on a wiener?"

I watched Harvey's jaw clench. There would be hell to pay for this when I left the safety of the general public, but I was having too much fun. Turning the tables on Harvey filled me with a high I didn't get to experience very often.

"Watch your words, Blackmaw. You're going to come with us. If you behave yourself, I won't accidentally shove you off the rope bridge in the Canyon."

There had to be at least thirty feet of empty air between the rope bridges and the tile floor in the Canyon. It was hard to tell if Harvey was joking anymore. If I accidentally died, then there would be no prophecy to worry about. Alvin might even reward his son for murder.

Would a thirty-foot fall onto a tile floor kill a shifter? I had no idea, and I was not keen on finding out.

I lurched out of my seat and snatched the strawberry lemonade that Connor had brought. I lifted it in salute to him before trying to escape. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Electricity crackled in the air around me.

"Where do you think you're going, Ness?"

The command in Harvey's voice made me stop in my tracks. The arcana in his voice grabbed ahold of my skeleton and trapped it. I could barely let out a whimper. When had he learned how to do this? Had Alvin taught him? If Harvey had learned how to do this on his own, I would be surprised.

Heavy footsteps approached me from behind. Ahead, a single figure appeared among the throngs of moving people. Dark gray hair stood out as he emerged. The air between us surged with an electrical charge.

Ryder Callahan approached me with fury lighting his eyes. He reached out. I wished I could move out of his way, but Harvey's command still

gripped me. Trapped between two strong shifters, I pressed my eyes shut and waited for my punishment.

The plan to lay low in a public setting hadn't played out as well as I'd hoped. Instead, I'd found myself trapped between two shifters. I tensed, waiting for the blow that never came.

When I finally summoned a bit of courage, I cracked open an eye and found Ryder staring past me. I followed the line of his arm over my shoulder. He held Harvey by the wrist, keeping the Alpha's son from touching me.

Harvey's command had worn off. I breathed a sigh of relief and sidled out from between the two shifters. Ryder's attention followed me.

"Are you all right?" His voice was deep and rough all at the same time, like the reverberation of thunder among the clouds.

I caught myself gaping at him and forced my jaw back into place so I could nod and not look like an absolute fool. Though I knew there would be hell to pay later, I stole a glance at Harvey and soaked in the man's expression of terror and fury.

Harvey, eyes ever so slightly too wide, glared at Ryder's grasp. Harvey clenched his fist and pulled, but he couldn't break the hold.

Ryder gave Harvey a pathetic look. "Don't use your voice to hurt others."

When Ryder released Harvey, he stumbled back. Connor and the others grouped together, off to the side. I guessed they were trying to stay out of Ryder's view. Harvey lifted his chin, like he wanted to fight back.

People had begun to stop and stare. Harvey's eyes darted all around. I watched the gears finally start to turn as he realized he was surrounded by humans. Had this happened somewhere in Lakesedge, he wouldn't have hesitated to start a fight. Here, Alvin would beat his ass raw for causing a scene.

"I won't forget you," Harvey growled as he backed away.

Ryder lifted both brows and chuckled. "Sure, buddy."

The words ignited a new fury in Harvey. I could tell because I'd done the same several times over. It was in the way Harvey's head lifted and his shoulders tensed, in the clench of his jaw and the growl behind it.

Haylee touched Harvey's arm. He jerked away from her, making her flinch. My own growl escaped me. Before I could take a step toward Haylee and Harvey, someone stopped me. Snarling, I spun on Ryder.

He sighed and tugged me along by my upper arm. When we were far away from the gaggle of humans that'd gathered in the food court, I yanked my arm out of his grip. Sparks lit the air between us and gave me pause.

"It wouldn't have done you any good to jump back into that fight," Ryder said.

With my adrenaline fading, I pressed the heels of my palms to my eyes and groaned. He was right, but I wasn't about to admit that to him. That whole interaction had been a mess. Harvey would go to his father now and tell him about the stranger who'd come to my rescue.

"You should have minded your own business," I said, letting my hands fall back down to my sides.

Ryder cocked his head. The look he gave me asked if I was crazy. "There's no shame in asking for help."

My lip curled. "This isn't any of your business. You aren't from around here. You don't know about me. I'm cursed. Getting involved with me will only make things worse for me."

He put his hands up in the air between us. "I'm not trying to get involved with you."

Though, as he said it, his gaze ran down my body and back up again. His attention lingered on my breasts and hips.

My cheeks warmed. I leaned forward and hissed, "That's not what I meant!"

He stopped, peered around, and pulled me into the hall that led into the Canyon wing of the mall. We emerged from the dark hallway and into a bright walkway with the open canyon far ahead. The smell of coffee in the distance beckoned me. I broke away from Ryder and chucked Connor's stupid peace offering into the trash.

I still didn't understand why he'd bothered talking to me. If he'd just kept on walking by, none of this would have ever happened. Connor was too dumb for his own good.

"Where the hell are you going?" Ryder didn't have to jog to catch up. His long legs carried him toward me with ease.

I grumbled under my breath. There would be no losing this guy. He would always be one step ahead of me with those powerful legs.

"If you would just slow down for a moment and tell me what's going on, then maybe I can help."

I heard the unspoken part of that sentence in the way his words hung unfinished. He had more that he wanted to say, but he'd trailed off before he added the other part of this deal. I stole a glance in his direction and noticed the scars peeking out from under the collar of his shirt. They reached up the muscles around his neck.

Ryder wanted something from me. He'd denied sexual interest, which was fine by me. It totally was. I didn't want to see how far those scars reached under his shirt or what his thighs looked like without jeans.

Nope. Not at all.

I marched towards the nearby café. It wasn't Bad Moon, but it would do for now. The smell of coffee intensified and settled the wild part of me in constant need of comfort. Coffee filled the void that nothing else could.

Ryder didn't stray far. He hung around, likely trying to find a way to ask me for the favor he wanted. This guy didn't know me, so I wasn't sure what kind of favor he would want from me. I kept studying him, glancing away whenever he caught me staring. I couldn't read him, though. When he wasn't saving me from my own pack, he kept his expression guarded.

At the counter, I ordered an iced caramel macchiato with an extra shot of hazelnut syrup since they were out of chocolate syrup. Ryder added his order to mine and paid for it, which irked me. I looked back to see if any of Harvey's lackeys had followed us. If they saw Ryder paying for my drink like this was a date, they would start to think that the two of us were a thing.

I thanked Ryder for the coffee, snatched it the moment the barista set it down, and darted for the exit.

Ryder

THE WOMAN ESCAPED ONCE AGAIN. I swore and shook my head. My drink hadn't hit the counter yet. Either I waited for the coffee and let her disappear into the crowds, or I chased after her. I could track her scent, but the myriad of aromas in the mall made that difficult. Between food stalls and perfume shops, I couldn't smell anything.

She was the Barghest. I was sure of it.

I didn't understand why her pack hated her. The male shifter's malice had been damn near palpable. It'd left a sour taste on my tongue when I dealt with him. The others had stood behind him but hadn't involved themselves. That didn't absolve them of their guilt, though.

Together, a pack could stand up for those weaker than themselves. That was the point of packs and clans. For whatever reason, they did not want to side with the Barghest woman.

I told myself that I didn't need to know why. That didn't matter so long as she could use her power to help me. I'd come to the mall to buy a burner phone I could use while I stayed in town. I couldn't bring myself to destroy my old phone with all of my contacts and photos, so as long as I stayed in Syracuse, I would keep it turned off.

I never expected to run into the Barghest woman here. She wasn't anything like I'd expected. The image of a black hound had made me think of an older, bearded man. She obviously didn't have a beard. She looked about the same age as me, too.

I couldn't lose my chance to get her help. I ran after her just as the barista called out my name. There went four dollars down the drain. It wasn't much, but I didn't have access to my family funds anymore. The only money in my account was what I'd picked up on odd jobs as I moved across the country.

It would be worth it so long as I could get the Barghest to help me.

I should have gunned it out of the parking lot. Instead, I sat behind the steering wheel and steadied my breathing. I flexed my fingers, which were stiff from being clenched tight into fists.

If I could have my way, I'd live out a simple life. It wouldn't matter to me if my Alpha noticed me or not. Unlike some shifters who preened when their Alpha recognized them, I would have been happy to fall under the Alpha's radar. Maybe then, I could have become someone else.

I wondered who I might have become if Alvin hadn't set his sights on me. Connor and I would still be friends. In time, we could have formed a mate bond and settled down to have pups of our own. I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted, but the vision was so idyllic that I allowed myself to sink into it for a while.

There was a chance, if my life had been normal, that I never would have met my friends. Applying to work at Bad Moon had been a last-ditch effort to escape Alvin's anger. I'd wanted a job away from Lakesedge where I wouldn't have to hide what I was.

I couldn't give up my friends any more than I could change my situation. So, I forced myself to open my eyes and reach for the key in the ignition. To my disappointment, Ryder had found me.

He tapped on the window to my right. I groaned. I could start the car and drive away. What was he going to do? Grab my bumper and keep me from driving away? He couldn't do that here, in the human side of Syracuse. If he did, he would likely end up with nothing but the bumper as I drove off.

A lapse of judgement made me roll my window down. It was a bad idea, but I did it anyway. Maybe it was his sexy jawline or his cold eyes that I so badly wanted to warm that made me stay. Either way, I would ask myself why I made such poor decisions later.

“I have my pack up my ass twenty-four-seven. There isn’t any room for you to get up there, too.”

Ryder was taken aback. Brow furrowed in disgust and confusion, he shook his head. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

I laughed, glad that I unsettled him. “I don’t know. I like to think that my trauma has made me funnier. Don’t you agree?”

He groaned and hung his head. “Listen. I need your help.”

I blinked, stunned. “Excuse me? You, big bad and probably more dangerous than I could ever imagine, need *my* help?”

His jaw tightened as he stared me down. I was used to the pressure of those stronger than me, so I didn’t back down even though my heart leapt and jammed itself into my throat. My hound had a slightly different reaction to Ryder.

The beast brushed up against the inside of my skin. I could feel her shaggy fur as if she were right here beside me. She let out a low whine and rolled over for him. I wasn’t used to her submitting like this. She wanted Ryder’s attention so bad that she was willing to risk it all for him.

“Stupid dog,” I muttered to myself.

“What?” Ryder cocked his head.

Was I really going to give in to my hound and hear this guy out? The beast wanted to help him, but I had no idea how I could be of any help to someone like him. He was clearly stronger than me. He’d made Harvey back down with almost no effort. Anyone like that had the power to handle anything that came their way.

“Look, I’m not into the fake-dating thing. If you’re running from your arranged marriage or from a crazy ex, then that’s your problem. You should probably go back and talk it out. I’m not going to be your mysterious new girlfriend for the purposes of skirting your responsibilities, okay?”

Ryder stood and promptly dropped his head onto the roof of my car. I stifled my laugh. Why was I poking a hornet’s nest? If Ryder was as strong as I thought, then I shouldn’t be having this much fun infuriating him. I couldn’t stop, though. His reactions were so soft. Not once did he direct his anger toward me in a physical manner.

As awful as it was to say, I wasn't used to that kind of control.

I licked my lips, afraid of what I was about to say. Ryder was strong. Maybe even strong enough to take on Alvin. If I heard Ryder out, then I could weigh his request against my own counteroffer. I didn't want Ryder to ask more than I could give, but maybe I could get him to put an end to Alvin's reign.

My breath hitched.

Fucking prophecy.

I didn't want to live up to it, but Alvin had given me no other option. He'd stripped me of my choices the moment he set his sights on me. If he'd tried another approach, then the prophecy would have been dead in the water.

Ahead, Harvey and his gaggle exited the mall. They were busy laughing at something and hadn't noticed us yet. I didn't want Harvey to see me with Ryder again. It was bad enough that Ryder had given them the wrong impression earlier.

"Do you have somewhere private we can go to talk?" I asked quickly.

Ryder's eyes narrowed with suspicion before he followed my gaze to the mall doors. Upon seeing the other shifters, he quickly rattled off an address. I plugged it into my GPS and told him that I'd meet him there.

I hit the gas and sped out of the parking lot. Why did it always feel like I was running? I ran from Alvin, from Harvey, from the prophecy. I couldn't help but wonder if it was time to stop running. Someday, I would have to face what hid in my shadow.

Thinking about that terrified me, though. I didn't know if I, alone, had the strength to face this prophecy. I wasn't about to ask my friends to help me, either. This fight had nothing to do with them. They were better off staying out of this, especially Cerri. She had the most to lose by associating with me.

The address Ryder gave me led to a small craftsman house outside of Lakesedge. I couldn't see Onondaga Lake from here, but the air held a hint of it. I drifted past the house and parked at the end of the street, so no one would see my car next to his. I would have some plausible deniability that way, not that Alvin would really listen to me if someone ratted me out. Still, I felt better walking up to the house.

Ryder's car sat in the driveway, telling me that he'd arrived first. It was a sleek muscle car from the seventies that had been refurbished. I paused to

admire it before turning back to the house.

Had Ryder been here this whole time? It was a nice house with a small garden out front. The flowers required maintenance, but I couldn't envision Ryder on his knees in front of them. He seemed more like a wood-chopping kind of guy rather than a gardener. Did that mean he had a girlfriend after all?

Something about the idea of Ryder with another woman bothered me. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and glanced back at the front door. Ryder didn't mean anything to me. As hot as he was, I didn't know him. We weren't even friends.

My reaction to him was strange, but it meant nothing at the end of the day.

I jumped up the steps and knocked on the door. Waiting under the porch roof, I was hit with a wave of regret. Once more, I checked over my shoulder to see if anyone had followed me. Somewhere, in the distance, an ambulance siren wailed like Syracuse's theme song. It left me uneasy.

The door creaked open before me. Ryder filled the doorway, his relief blatant.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said.

I wanted to make a dirty joke but bit my tongue. Flirting with Ryder would get me in trouble. I couldn't let this man become a part of my life. Not like that.

He stepped aside, so I could enter. I stared past him, at the living room, and hesitated. If I passed this threshold, that meant I was playing into the hands of the prophecy. Did I want to do that? I wanted Alvin to stop hurting this pack. I couldn't do that alone. I wasn't strong enough.

"Should I close the door?" Ryder asked, voice laced with impatience.

I sneered sarcastically and pushed past him. My heart thumped nervously. My curls lifted from the static in the air. I was surprised that the lights didn't flicker when Ryder closed the door and stepped closer. Was that thunder I heard, or just my own heart?

He rocked on his heels and glanced about. His gaze hopped over everything. I sensed that he was avoiding looking directly at me, which really made me wonder what he wanted to ask of me. He didn't blush or anything obvious like that. If anything, Ryder seemed hesitant.

Well, this was awkward.

I lifted my coffee to my lips and slurped loudly. Ryder finally looked at me. His shoulders fell in disappointment as he gazed longingly at my coffee.

“I abandoned mine when you took off.”

I shrugged. “That’s not my problem. You made that decision.”

He raked his hand through his hair and growled. “The witch didn’t bother telling me that you would be this prickly. What is your problem?”

I stiffened. *The witch?* I’d had my fill of witches. It took everything in me to make myself stay. Every part of me wanted to lurch out the door and run back to my car. I could put an end to this right here and now.

Yet I stayed. I stayed because I knew that things couldn’t go on as they were. Someone had to put a stop to Alvin’s behavior. He wasn’t the Alpha this pack needed anymore. He’d become someone else, and we couldn’t afford to let him stay in power. I hated that I was the only one willing to acknowledge it. Everyone else wrote off his behavior as stress from the prophecy. I knew that this wouldn’t end if I was out of the picture.

Alvin would keep hurting people for the sake of keeping a grip on his power. He would make sure that no one in his pack could fight against him.

That meant that I had to stay. I had to hear Ryder out.

It was the right thing, even if it felt wrong.

Hand fisted in his hair, Ryder fixed his bright gaze upon me. I swear, lightning flashed in those pale eyes of his. He licked his lips before speaking. Something low in my core tightened. I had to sit down and cross my legs.

“The witch said that the Barghest would be able to help me.”

I waited for more. When Ryder remained silent, I asked, “Well, did your witch tell you how I was supposed to help? I can’t really do much without more information.”

His jaw tightened. This man was going to grind his teeth to dust if he wasn’t careful. I wanted to get up and touch his chin to see if that might loosen some of the tension holding him. Instead, I set my coffee down and shoved my hands under my thighs. So long as I sat on them, I would know where they were at all times.

Being alone with Ryder made me uncomfortable. Not because he seemed untrustworthy or like he might hurt me. I’d gotten really good at telling when someone wanted to hurt me. Ryder seemed cold and distant,

but not because he didn't care. I got the sense that he hid something behind that cold exterior.

If what he kept hidden had to do with the help he needed from me, I was going to box his ears. I couldn't do anything unless he explained what was going on.

Well, I wasn't even sure I could help to begin with. This guy seemed to be under the impression that I had access to some kind of arcana. If I had magic that I could control, then it was a mystery to me.

He'd called me a Barghest. I made a mental note to visit Catriona and see if she had anything more on Barghests in her history books. Maybe that would give me some more insight into what I was capable of. Maybe then, I could actually help Ryder.

Was I actually considering helping him? I mean, if I wanted him to help me, then I would have to fulfil his request first.

I didn't like how tangled my mind had become. I felt like a dog chasing its own tail. Swallowing, I shoved all the thoughts back down.

"Look," Ryder said. "The witch didn't give me details. She read my palm and told me to look for you. So, are you going to help me or not?"

I jumped out of my seat and stepped onto the coffee table before I could stop myself. On the table, I stood a little taller than Ryder. I looked down at him and felt our frustration pump more static into the air.

His chest heaved. His nose wrinkled with the ghost of a snarl that he likely fought back. I desperately wanted to slap him upside the head. He wasn't giving me anything. He kept demanding help without telling me what would actually help. He reminded me of a dog who wanted to play without letting go of their favorite toy, but much more volatile. Where did he get off making demands?

A figurative bulb went off over my head. The idea flared bright and pulled my spine straight so I could peer down at Ryder with a smug smile. If he wanted my assistance, then I could use this leverage to my advantage.

"Fine," I said. "I'll help you, but you have to tell me what my aid is worth to you. What are you willing to do for me?"

One eye twitched as he glared up at me. His lips parted. I expected him to push back, but that wasn't what happened. Instead, his shoulders fell. He let out a ragged sigh.

When he turned his pale gaze upward, my breath stilled.

"I'd do anything."

I had Ryder right where I wanted him, but this seemed wrong. His pain wasn't something for me to exploit. I shouldn't have asked this. If I used his desperation against him, then I was the villain.

But I needed help. No one here wanted to come to my aid. Connor had shown some interest in extending kindness my way, but that wasn't enough to save me from what I had to endure. Connor's gifts wouldn't save me or the pack.

Ryder had the strength to do what needed to be done.

I had to give him what he needed, then. One way or another, I would figure out how to help him. I would get to the bottom of what I was and find my arcana, so I could pay him back for what I was about to ask. That was the only way I could rationalize what I needed from him.

If I didn't, then I was no better than Alvin. I didn't want to be cruel and uncaring. That wasn't the person I was meant to be. Nothing Alvin had done to me was enough to warp me into a villain. Nothing.

"I need you to kill my Alpha."

Ryder

"EXCUSE ME?" I roared.

Her curls fluttered as she cringed away from me. She didn't back down, though. The Barghest woman stayed standing on the coffee table where she could look down at me.

I clenched my fists at my sides, not out of anger, but to hide blood that was no longer on my hands. I'd washed them clean. No one could see the evidence of my past transgressions. The scars over my shoulders were the only reminders of what I'd done, and no one would look at them and know exactly what had happened.

Her lips parted, her jaw trembling all the while. She wouldn't look directly at me. Instead, she fixed her gaze on my chest while she shook.

We stood there, at an impasse. Though she had asked something terrible of me, I could see the reason why in her reaction. I remembered the shifters at the mall and the way they'd hounded her. Her misery had been written all over her face, but beyond that I'd caught a glimpse of her fear.

That was what had drawn me to her. She'd given me nothing but grief since then, but if I was in that position again, I'd do it all the same. I loathed the look of terror on her. She wore her attitude like a shield and pushed all others away with it.

I did not want to get past her shield, but I did want to help her. If I could give her a better life in exchange for her assistance, then who was I to deny her? It's not like I hadn't soiled my hands before. My soul would never recover from my sins.

"If you don't want my help, then..." Her voice trailed off.

"Hold on," I growled. I snatched her wrist before she could leap off the table and make a break for it.

I knew I'd made a mistake when she flinched. Cursing to myself, I quickly released her and folded my arms over my chest.

She scooted back, off the table. Her lips twisted into a sneer that wasn't aimed at me. I wondered if she hated herself for her reaction. Why couldn't I do anything right? This was my fault. Not hers.

I bounced on my heels as I thought. While the room remained quiet, my dragon reared its head and made a cacophony inside my head. It growled and scratched at me so it could get closer to the Barghest woman.

The dragon inhaled deeply and memorized her scent. I really needed to quench those urges more often. Maybe then I wouldn't react like a primal beast whenever I ran into a hot woman. The Barghest woman had perfect round hips and thick thighs barely contained by her ripped jeans. I wanted to stick my fingers into the holes of her jeans and feel the skin beneath.

Why was I having such weird thoughts? I shook myself.

"Look, that's a lot to ask of anyone," I said to keep my mind off her body. "I'm not going to do anything without good reason."

She lifted her head. A firm resolution swept over her. It chased away the tremble that had her shaking after my roar. "Either you do what I ask, or I'm not helping you."

I groaned. "How about this? I'll think on it."

I didn't have the time to think on it. Morgan would find me. I knew him. He would have started his hunt the moment he'd discovered what happened. I'd left without word, without leaving any kind of explanation behind. Morgan wasn't going to leave it at that.

But the Barghest woman let out a soft sigh of relief, and I melted.

Fucking women. Why did she have such sway over me? I knew I needed her help, but this seemed like more than just desperation.

"Tell me," I began, "how you plan on helping me. What can you do for me?"

She lifted a brow. "Well, I need to know what your problem is. I don't know what I'm supposed to do until you tell me."

The smell of blood and ozone filled the air. I tried to shut it out, but the scent wouldn't go away. It hung around me like a ghost I couldn't exorcise. I held my breath and waited for it to leave me alone.

When I opened my mouth, the taste of metal covered my tongue. I snapped my mouth closed and tried to breathe through my nose. The Barghest woman, whose name I still didn't know, stared at me. I breathed deep and shoved the memories down.

"What should I call you?" Those were the only words I could manage. I couldn't bring myself to explain what I needed. The memories were still too fresh, despite how long I'd been running. Guilt and remorse hit me like a tsunami and left me reeling. I couldn't even think long enough to figure out what I needed from her. "I need your name and why your pack hates you."

She let herself fall back onto the couch. Her curls fluttered around her face and made her seem younger than I'd first thought. Her smoldering gaze slid to the side as her lips twisted into a disgruntled scowl. I thought I saw a hint of incoming tears.

What the hell was I supposed to do if she cried?

But she didn't. She pressed her eyes shut for a heartbeat. When she opened them again, she met my gaze without fear.

"Vanessa. Call me Ness, though. I was named after my father's mother, but I never really liked her all that much." She sucked her teeth. "As for why my pack hates me, they don't. Well, not everyone, at least. It's just my alpha and his family. Alvin is an absolute son of a bitch. You met his son earlier."

I studied her face for lies. She remained unreadable, though. The tension in the room sent static dancing along my skin. She clearly had an affinity for storms, same as me. I found it strange that the Barghest I'd been searching for would have the same elemental powers. What were the chances?

Though I wanted to sit beside her and feel the electricity between us grow sharp, I backed up until the back of my legs hit a chair. Sitting across

from Ness, with a coffee table between us, I weighed my options once again. She could help me. I knew she could.

“Fine. Give me time to figure out why your Alpha is being a bastard.” I hated the words that came out of my mouth.

Was I really going to do this? Was I going to kill a man to get this woman’s help? It seemed so. I didn’t have any other choice. I’d taken a life before, and nothing had been the same ever since. Would another life change much? Would I see this man’s face at night when I tried to sleep? Or would his death feel justified?

Before I could say anything else, Ness jumped to her feet. She wiped her boot-prints off the coffee table, grabbed her drink, and marched towards the exit. She gave me a wave over her shoulder.

“I’ll see you when you make up your mind, big boy.”

I fumbled out of my seat to chase after this skittish shifter. Damn, she had a habit of running.

I'd done it. I'd taken the first step in making that damned prophecy come true. It'd placed an obligation on my head that I'd wanted to ignore for as long as I could shift. I told myself that Alvin was forcing my hand, but that didn't make this any easier. I didn't want this kind of duty. I didn't want to be the one to make this happen.

I wished I could be like Janessa. I wanted to be just another female shifter in the pack, not the future traitor. Though my actions could lead to a better, safer pack, that didn't make this any easier. I wanted to scream my frustration, but I swallowed the sound and let it fester in my stomach.

As I trudged down the sidewalk back toward my parked car, I heard the familiar rumble of a pickup truck engine. I stiffened and glanced back. How did they always know how to find me? Did Alvin have a GPS tracker on my phone? Had one of his minions put a tracker on my car while he'd been yelling at me?

I wrinkled my nose and fought the urge to flip them off. This time, they had Connor behind the wheel. As the truck came closer, Harvey leapt out of the truck bed and jogged alongside it.

Ryder stood on his porch. Even from here, I could see his scowl. He tensed, like he might jump in to help me, but I gave a soft shake of my head. He needed to stay out of this, or else I would have a harder time. He had to stay a secret until the time was right.

"What are you doing outside of Lakesedge?" Harvey asked. He caught up to me and slung his arm around my shoulder. "We've been looking everywhere for you! It's time to run with your pack."

My blood turned to ice. Voice hushed, I said, “No, it’s not. The full moon is still a few days away.”

“I think you’re mistaken.” Harvey grinned, showing sharp teeth.

My stomach churned. I wanted to look back to Ryder and beg for help. I couldn’t. He wasn’t my savior. He couldn’t whisk me out of this mess without repercussions that would ripple through the pack.

Besides, I had to figure out how I could help him, too. It felt wrong to ask him to kill a person when I didn’t even know what I could do for him. Hell, I knew it was wrong to ask that of him at all.

When I veered towards my car, Harvey yanked me off course. He pulled me back to the truck. I tried to dig in my heels, but he wouldn’t relent.

“Your pack is waiting for you. We better get a move on,” he said with a snarl. He grabbed ahold of my upper arm and dragged me.

On one side, Connor watched with his sad-puppy eyes. On the other side, I could feel Ryder’s anger mounting. The clouds above rumbled.

Harvey hesitated. His attention rose, eyes rolling towards the sky. When he lowered his gaze and narrowed his eyes at me, I cringed apologetically and shrugged.

“Whoops?” I offered.

The feral curl of his lips scared me almost as much as the gleam in his eyes. “You’re going to be the guest of honor tonight,” he said. “Everyone is waiting for you.”

He shoved me toward the truck. I staggered, my mind tumbling. I threw my hands out to brace myself against the truck before my face smashed into the rusting exterior. My coffee splattered across the ground.

Guest of honor? I clenched my jaw to keep my teeth from clattering as fear took ahold of me. I had to use all of my self-control to keep from looking back to Ryder for help. Harvey must have told his father about Ryder. They didn’t want me fraternizing with outsiders.

When the hunt sounded tonight, I would be the prey. My hound gnashed her teeth and snarled. She was ready to take on everyone, but I wasn’t so sure we could. My hands shook when I pulled them away from the truck. If they got me onto the truck bed, I was done for.

The hound thrashed and told me to run. We weren’t in Lakesedge, though. I couldn’t shift on the street. There were too many potential human witnesses here. Those same witnesses I had been counting on keeping me safe were now a hindrance.

Harvey gripped the back of my neck and pushed me down. I hunched, against my will, while he dug his nails into the back of my neck. I whimpered pathetically.

Harvey leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Everyone in the pack is going to get a taste of your blood tonight. Maybe then you’ll think twice about relying on others to fight your battles for you.”

My relief that I wasn’t going to die tonight was short lived. Harvey released my neck before lifting me and throwing me onto the truck bed. Ryder shouted, but that didn’t stop Harvey from sitting on my back to keep me face down.

My heart pounded, pumping ice through my veins. I wanted to cry, but there wasn’t a chance in hell that I would do it in front of Harvey. Someone reached out and grasped my hand to give it a gentle squeeze.

I peeked to my right to see Kelsey with her lips drawn into a grim line. She tore her gaze away from me and wrapped her arms around herself. A tear slipped out of the corner of my eye.

At the end of the day, we were all pack. They cared, but they were powerless. I wasn’t going to let Alvin and Harvey keep abusing their power. I would survive tonight.

Even if I didn’t, Ryder would know. He would avenge me, and then the pack would be safe again. I wanted to believe that Ryder would do the right thing even if I wasn’t there to keep up my end of our bargain.

Fuck, I barely knew this guy. I didn’t know anything about him, let alone how far he was willing to go for me. He’d balked at my request—which was fair considering what I’d asked of him. I had no promises that he would stay and do the right thing.

That meant I had to survive tonight. No one was going to get a taste of my blood if I had anything to say about it. My hound agreed. She poured strength into me. I let it settle into my muscles and give me hope.

No matter what, tonight was going to suck, but at least I would survive.



THE SHIFTERS who had shown their support earlier now stood as far from me as they could manage. Janessa hid behind Catriona, who gave me a small nod in greeting but didn’t bother speaking to me. Haylee and Kelsey

were together, at the other side of the crowd. As people moved about, I noticed that the two of them were holding hands. Their skin looked deathly pale.

They were terrified, which made me want to laugh.

I was the one in the center of this shit show, not them. They weren't the ones about to get their tail ripped off. I'd be lucky if I made it through tonight with only a few scratches. By morning, I knew I would have a few fresh bite wounds.

Harvey stayed close by. I could feel his attention on me. He'd ripped my beanie off and tossed it on the wood pile behind the house. Now, my hair danced in the breeze. I shoved it out of my face several times before giving up.

Everyone else, including my father, seemed confused. Dad wore a look of perpetual annoyance. He glanced from face to face, but couldn't bring himself to look in my direction. I wondered if he had an idea of what would happen, even if no one had outright told him.

Would my father come to my rescue? Would he stand up for me?

My eyes burned with tears because I knew the answer to that question. I just couldn't bring myself to acknowledge it.

Alvin stepped forward. He threw his arms wide as he turned to address his pack. Everyone bowed their heads. I stood, stiff as a board, until Harvey palmed the back of my head and forced me to bow. My lip curled in defiance that I couldn't afford.

"Good," Alvin said. He raised his voice to speak to the rest of the pack. "We gather here tonight, days ahead of the full moon, because one of our packmates needs to be taught a lesson. Vanessa Blackmaw has been seen with outsiders who do not know our ways."

Voices rose, the pack all speaking at once. They came to my defense, but no one's voice broke above a scared whisper. I clenched my jaw tight and wished that someone had the balls to speak louder for me.

"Ness didn't ask that outsider for help," Kelsey said.

Everyone stopped. Silence slipped over the pack. Alvin's footsteps retreated. Kelsey's whimpers soon followed. The sound grated at me. I couldn't deny the sheer panic in her voice. If Alvin so much as touched her, she might piss herself.

I'd spent so much time as the object of Alvin's anger that his attention didn't scare me as much as it should. Kelsey had spoken up for me, proving

that she had bigger balls than some of the men present. I owed her this.

“Yes, I did.” Oh, I hated having to do this.

Silence made my ears ring. I could feel Alvin’s attention land back on me. I almost breathed a sigh of relief. Kelsey didn’t deserve Alvin’s wrath. I could handle it. Let me handle it from here.

I heard Alvin’s footsteps approach. Harvey’s hand fell away right before Alvin gripped my chin. I hated being trapped between the two of them.

Alvin’s breath washed over my skin when he leaned in and asked, “Who did you pledge your allegiance to, Vanessa?”

Bite your tongue. Bite your tongue. Bite your—

“This pack,” I said.

Alvin’s eye twitched. I’d answered his question, but not the way he wanted. Though he’d dedicated the past nine years to breaking me, I’d refused to bend. Despair had crept into my mind, but I wasn’t ready to let it win.

“And who runs this pack?” His spittle sprayed my cheek.

I flinched. My hound wanted to bite him, but I couldn’t let her take over right now. Harvey would knock me on my ass before I could get away.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek. Nine years ago, a new shifter, I’d been shoved onto my knees in front of Alvin. I could still remember the derision on his face when he realized what I was. They’d forced me to pledge to him that day. There was a scar on my left cheek from a piece of gravel that’d been pressed into my skin from how hard they’d held me down.

I’d had no say in the matter. Later that day, my father had told me that I’d done the right thing. The pledge would make sure that Alvin protected me despite what I’d become. I hadn’t understood the prophecy yet. All I’d known was that Alvin had become enemy number one.

“Who runs this pack?” Alvin shouted into my face.

His breath smelled like rotten ass.

I wondered what Ryder was doing. I imagined he was watching a sitcom in his perfect living room. Did I cross his mind? Was he worried about me? It didn’t matter. I had to rely on myself.

If he came to my rescue, Alvin would want me dead for sure. Harvey made it sound like they wanted to hurt me. Even Alvin had said that tonight was to teach a lesson. I didn’t want to shift and run with them, but at least I would see another day. This wasn’t the end.

“You do,” I said finally.

Alvin rocked back on his heels. He didn’t seem pleased in the least. He’d likely wanted me to submit right away. I’d held out for a while just to piss him off. Fuck me, they were going to make sure that I lost at least half of my tail tonight. I would have to run fast.

Alvin patronizingly patted the side of my face, hard enough to sting the skin. “You’ll learn your place tonight.” He stepped back and acknowledged everyone at once. When he spoke, arcana imbued his voice with power. “Shift!”

People bent all around me. Their grunts and groans filled the air while I held out. Alvin’s magic gripped my spine and tried to bend me. My hound growled and gave me her strength. While everyone around me changed forms, I stood tall and stared Alvin down.

He paused, caution finally reaching his eyes as he watched me. My lips twisted into a snarl.

“Run,” Alvin said. “Run and hope that I don’t put you out of my misery tonight.”

I spared no time in shifting. The moment I let go of my hound, she leapt free. Thunder cracked and made the pack whine. I landed on all fours and set off, running. My paws slapped the earth and turned the forest into a blur around me.

The smell of new, summer growth filled my nostrils. The scent of ozone soon followed. The storm that always followed me brewed overhead. I wished that I could command it and strike down my foes with lightning from above. Instead, it stayed out of reach. Whatever arcana commanded it refused to answer to me.

I had to rely on my hound tonight. The stormy winds cleared the air of the forest’s scents. I caught Harvey not far behind me. His father would be behind him, waiting to pounce the moment that Harvey had me cornered. I searched the myriad of pack smells for signs of my father, but he seemed far away.

He wasn’t going to help me. The thought made my hound howl with sorrow. The sound echoed between the trees. While I’d marked my location with the howl, it wasn’t like they couldn’t find me with the storm overhead.

A flash of cinnamon fur appeared to my side. I tensed, and my feet tangled with one another, sending me tumbling. I rolled and bounced back

on my feet, but the fall left my front shoulder throbbing. Each footfall sent a jolt of pain up my leg. It flared hot over my shoulder and onto my back.

Connor closed in on me. I didn't know what to expect from him. His intentions seemed unclear. I couldn't trust his kindness to keep me safe. Connor would bow to Alvin's will no matter what.

I veered away from him and jumped over a fallen log. My leg gave out and made me eat dirt. The thunder rolled once more. It almost sounded like a warning, but to who? I wanted to howl my fury to the clouds above.

Before I could make another sound, Alvin's barks broke the silence behind me. He was closer than I'd thought. I had to pick myself up and hope that I could keep running.

Connor nudged me. I snapped at him and caught a chunk of his fur between my teeth. I spit the fur out when he backed away. He gave me a wary look. I didn't need his help. He couldn't do anything for me.

But when I stood, my legs buckled. The fall I'd taken had pulled something. If I waited and poured some power into the shoulder, I could heal. I didn't have time to wait, though. Alvin and Harvey were closing in. They would rip me to shreds if they caught up.

I didn't want to go through the meat grinder tonight. I wanted to wake up from this nightmare and pile into my car for my shift at Bad Moon. I wanted to see my friends' smiles and hear their laughter.

I wanted to see Ryder one last time and maybe figure out what his peach-colored lips tasted like.

Connor dragged a bundle of broken branches over to me. He was going to cover me with them, but I knew that the branches wouldn't be enough to hide my scent. I wanted to scream at him to stop being a damned fool. He wasn't helping.

I forced myself to my feet. My front leg refused to work, but I could run on the other three. Maybe I wouldn't be as fast, but at least I could keep moving. Connor yipped when I limped away from him. Like hell would I look back.

In the time that I'd been on the ground, Alvin had circled around. I didn't even stop to sniff the wind before taking off. In no time flat, I ran right into him. He leapt out from behind a tree and threw me off balance. I landed hard on my busted shoulder and yelped.

Growls filled the air around me. They were all half-hearted. The pack didn't care as much about this hunt as Alvin did. The others were here

because they had no choice.

I couldn't hate them, even as my beast snarled and snapped at those who closed in around me. I saw no break in their ranks. No one left even a gap for me to run through. It wasn't like I could get very far on three legs anyway.

Above, the storm darkened. Winds whipped between the trees and tossed foliage into the air. Twigs slapped wolf hides before tumbling away into the distance. The sky flashed bright with lightning that was still trapped in the clouds. Darkness settled back in, thicker than before.

My heart lodged itself in my throat. My hound had a fighting spirit, but we couldn't take on Alvin and Harvey together. Had I been smarter, I would have separated them somehow. Instead, my feet had betrayed me and made me too slow to do anything so cunning.

Ryder

THE STORM PULLED at my wings. It'd been too long since I'd been able to lose myself in the clouds of a tempest. I couldn't let the winds take me tonight, either. I had another task at hand. The Barghest woman needed help. Ness hadn't asked for help outright, but she had been dealt a shitty hand of cards, and I had the power to help her.

My vision pierced the thick clouds around me. Far below, a pack of wolves surrounded the black hound who kept one wounded paw close to her chest. My dragon roared. The sound shook the clouds. Venomous anger flooded my body.

I snapped my wings tight to my body and plummeted toward the ground. If the wolves didn't scatter, I would hit a few. They deserved punishment for what they were doing to Ness. The Barghest woman had a sharp tongue and an attitude to match, but she didn't deserve this.

A soft whisper echoed in my mind, reminding me of what she'd asked in return for her assistance. She wanted me to kill her Alpha. Yet, as I looked down at the scene below, I understood why.

Could I really blame her when her pack had her cornered like a rabbit?

Her Alpha leapt. His teeth pierced her skin before I could hit the ground. My impact drowned out her yelps. I spun and grabbed the Alpha wolf. His teeth ripped through Ness's skin. I should have thought that through, but my anger eclipsed my ability to think. The world glimmered beyond a veil of red.

I threw the Alpha wolf into a crowd of his followers. They crumpled into a yipping pile while I turned my attention back to Ness. She fumbled back onto her feet. Her vision seemed unfocused as she swayed. Blood poured over her other shoulder, forcing her to put her weight onto the leg she'd been favoring.

I'd made a mess of things once again. Had my intervention helped at all? I couldn't stick around to find out. I gathered the little hound into my claws and opened my wings.

A wolf, one that smelled like the asshole from the mall, leapt at me with his fangs bared. I braced to whip my tail in his direction, but before I could strike, a wolf broke free from the pack and slammed into his side. The wolf had dark fur, almost as dark as Ness's. The wolf bared its teeth at the asshole before glancing at the hound in my hands.

Indecision flickered across the older wolf's features. If my intervention bothered him, he didn't stick around to tell me. He spun and took off into the woods. More wolves followed suit. The pack dispersed, leaving only those dedicated to the Alpha behind.

The Alpha eyed me warily. He looked me up and down, perhaps weighing whether or not he could take me with the assistance of his pack. If he could rally the entire pack and trap me on the ground, then there was a chance that he could.

Lightning flickered overhead. It hit the ground between the Alpha and me. The smell of singed earth coiled in the air as the Alpha turned tail and ran. A growl rumbled in my throat when I opened my wings and rose into the air.

I knew what it looked like when madness took a shifter. Though Ness's Alpha was an asshole, he was not insane. Though I knew that Ness needed help, I wasn't sure that I could follow through with her request. Had her Alpha shown signs of madness, then this would have been easier.

Her Alpha was cruel and vindictive, which required logic and reasoning. I carried Ness away from her pack's hunting grounds. We

reached the same field I first saw her in. My car waited for me on the side of the road since I couldn't fly back to the rental in this form.

Air roared in my ears. My form shrank, scales pulling back into human skin. I crashed into the ground and dropped into a crouch to soften the impact. Clutched to my chest, the hound made a small sound. I buried my fingers in her fur and whispered that she was safe. The last thing I needed was for her to panic and try to escape.

Ness was too wounded to run right now. Blood congealed across my forearm from holding her. I had to be careful adjusting my hold on her when I opened the passenger door. I didn't want to tear open any wounds that were in the process of healing. Ness had already been through hell tonight.

I woke with drool on my chin and a thin blanket over my body. The tight interior of the car sent me into a panic. My hound scratched at me from the inside. She howled to break free, but my body protested. Every inch of my skin screamed in pain while my heart raced. My back arched as I hissed.

The best I could do was wait for the wave of pain to pass by. It hurt so bad I thought my skin would burn away. Any moment now, I would crumble to ash and vanish from this world. That wouldn't be so bad. Would it?

I'd finally escape the trouble always on my heels. I would be able to rest once and for all. The promise of peace tugged at me, but I pushed back. I wasn't ready to give up. That resolve sent me rocketing back to the present. The world came into sharp focus as I gasped.

"Fucking hell," Ryder groaned.

He stared at me with his brows arched in the middle.

I forced myself back into the seat even though every inch of my body screamed in protest. The wave of pain subsided, leaving behind the dull throb of wounds that were struggling to heal. Adrenaline from my sudden panic faded, too. As it washed away, exhaustion set in and turned my limbs heavy.

I stared past the windshield at the front door ahead and wished I could stumble inside. I wanted nothing more than a soft pillow under my cheek. Instead, I said:

"This isn't my house."

Ryder made a sound of acknowledgement. "I didn't think you'd be safe if I took you back to Lakesedge."

Lakesedge. My home. The place that I should have been safe.

I couldn't go back there yet. Ryder had interrupted Alvin's hunt. Alvin would be pissed that he didn't get the ending he wanted. Someone would have to pay for this. If I went home, Alvin would hunt me down and take this out on me. Ryder was the one who'd crash-landed in the middle of the chase, but I would be the one to take the blame.

Now there was no way I could deny my involvement with Ryder. Word would get around that I had an outsider working for me. They would inevitably call me his whore. They would call me a traitor.

I was neck deep in shit. I'd already betrayed Alvin, though. I'd asked Ryder to kill the Alpha before any of this happened. Maybe I deserved the names they would call me. This is what happened when one fought against fate for too long. Fate would always win out. It would bite back with a vengeance, too.

"Come on," Ryder said. "Let's get you inside. Wrap that blanket around yourself, so nothing slips out."

I laughed. "You don't want to get a peek at my nipples? You've earned it."

"You're delirious, Ness. Shut the fuck up and help me get you inside."

Ryder didn't make any kind of advances as he helped me out of the passenger seat. He made sure that his hands were always outside the blanket at all times. At first, he tried to get me onto my own feet, but my joints refused to support my weight. Healing had taken too much out of me and left me limp as a noodle. Having Ryder scoop me off my feet and carry me inside like a helpless, stolen bride didn't make me feel any better.

He carried me to the back of the rental house. The bedroom had a row of windows facing the backyard. No light pierced the sheer curtains from this side. Ryder placed me on the bed where I sank into the plush mattress. The darkness surrounded me and beckoned me back to sleep.

"I'll keep watch tonight," Ryder whispered. "Get some rest."

I shouldn't have imposed on his home, but I couldn't fight the pull of sleep any longer. This outsider vowed to protect me. I knew that he needed something from me, so keeping me alive was a priority for that reason alone, but I allowed myself to savor the feeling of being safe and wanted for once.

I didn't know if I would ever experience this again. The fact that I had to find this feeling in the presence of a stranger wasn't lost on me, either. I drifted back to sleep while my hound savored Ryder's faint scent lingering in the air.

Ryder

NESS PASSED out almost as soon as I set her down. Watching her wake so violently in the car had scared the hell out of me. I still needed her to set things right for me, so I could go back to my old life. I couldn't have this Barghest woman tapping out now.

Yeah, that's why her pain scared me. It had nothing to do with the way her curls spilled over the pillows cradling her head. It wasn't the soft sigh she made as she fell back to sleep while I watched.

She seemed so small and fragile in the dark. I could hardly believe that this woman had the power to change my life. How she possessed the arcana I needed, I would never understand. She hid her fear behind her swagger, but I could see it, nonetheless. If she had the kind of power that the witch hinted at, then shouldn't Ness have been able to stop her Alpha?

I gripped the doorjamb, my fingers pressing indents into the wood. I had to stop myself and shake my hand to release the tension slowly overtaking me.

Ness would do what I needed her to do. Doubt wouldn't help me now. I was too close to my goal to run away now.

Turning, I trudged back to the living room. Was Morgan watching storm patterns? Would he see the storm that Ness had conjured and think of me? It seemed like storms followed Ness everywhere she went. A sudden thunderstorm wouldn't be abnormal for the area. If I was lucky, her arcana would hide me for the time being.

Morgan wouldn't think to look here, where storms appeared at random. At least, not for a while. He would put the pieces together, though. He would follow my trail. I'd done my best to hide it, but Morgan was a determined man. I couldn't hide from him forever.

I collapsed onto the couch and threw my feet onto the table in front of me. I needed a beer or something harder, but I couldn't afford to dull my senses tonight. The pack might show up on my doorstep, and I needed to be ready to defend myself.

Without alcohol to numb my thoughts, I drifted into my memories. My father's laugh always found me first. It echoed in my ears and made me believe he was still here with us. I tumbled back to the cookouts we used to hold for the clan. Dad liked to wear silly aprons while managing the massive grill he'd built himself.

In those days, his laugh had drawn everyone in. People fought for a chance to be the center of his attention. And he'd made sure to give them all a little bit of his time. That was what had made him such a good leader. He'd made everyone feel safe and wanted.

The clan didn't have that anymore. I wondered how they were doing without him. Was Morgan a good leader in his stead? I couldn't reach out and ask. Morgan likely hated me.

My dragon roused and reminded me that I'd done the right thing.

Had I? It didn't feel like it some days. There were times when the road stretched out forever in front of me. It seemed like the running would never stop, like I'd made a rash decision without thinking things through, like I'd thrown away everything good in this world because I'd been too stupid to try something else.

The guilt of what I'd done sat heavy in my chest. My dragon growled as the weight shoved the beast back down. I half hoped that the local Alpha would pull up tonight and try something because I wanted to fight.

My hands curled into tight fists. My knuckles popped, one by one. The soft sound echoed in the living room. But no one rose to the challenge. No one showed up on the doorstep. I strained to listen for signs of the pickup-truck, but I heard sirens in the distance and nothing else.

NESS

COCOONED in a fluffy bathrobe I'd found in the closet, I stumbled into the kitchen and yanked the fridge open. My stomach grumbled greedily until it

slapped the floor.

I straightened and called out to the man sleeping on the couch. “Why isn’t there any food in your fridge? Are you a monk or something?”

The incomprehensible grumble that came from the living room made me shake my head. Ryder wasn’t going to be any help. I reached for the cupboard only to find the same thing. The cupboards were just as empty as the fridge.

How could this man live with no food in his house? Not only was he a shifter, but he was a dragon shifter. You would think that a beast of that size required a pantry the size of a master bedroom. He needed to eat at some point. So, why wasn’t there any food in this house?

Ryder staggered into the kitchen while rubbing his eyes. His dark gray hair stood up in messy tufts. He yawned and revealed his sharp incisors. Immediately, my hound forgot all about her hunger. My core tightened as a warmth spilled through me. I spun around and stared down at the counter.

Ryder reached past me, plucked a cup from a nearby cupboard, and filled it with tap water. When he set it down on the counter in front of me, he said, “That’s the best I can offer.”

I scowled. “My hero.”

“Damn right,” he grumbled. “Don’t forget who saved your ass last night. You owe me now.”

I spun. “No, that was not the agreement. Butting into a situation that didn’t involve you is not enough. I still need you—”

He groaned, the sound turning into a dull roar. “I know! You need me to kill your Alpha. Give me some damn time to think about it.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Well, you’re not getting anything out of me until you follow through.”

Nothing but a panting hound, it seemed. Despite his anger at me, my hound desperately wanted his affection. She wanted to roll over and bare her stomach like a fool. I swallowed and warned her that there would be consequences if she embarrassed me. I didn’t know what those consequences would be, but I wouldn’t stand for this behavior.

“Looks like I have to get breakfast at work,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

My hound whimpered and filled my thoughts with other things that I could eat, but I would have to get on my knees for that.

“Fuck,” I whispered as I shook my head.

I needed to get out of here. Before Ryder could even ask what was wrong, I spun and bolted for the door. At least my car would still be parked down the road.

“Where the hell are you going without clothes?” Ryder let out an exasperated sigh. “I know I’m a bad host, but you don’t have to run like I’m trying to kill you.”

He paused. I heard him groan behind me. There was a soft slap of flesh on flesh, and when I turned, I found him with his palm over his face.

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

I laughed, because what else could I do when my Alpha wanted me dead? “You’re one of the few who can say that honestly.”

Ryder’s hand fell away from his face, revealing the grim set of his jaw. “There was another wolf who tried to protect you last night. You have allies in your pack. You know that, right?”

I stilled, my breath caught on the tip of my tongue.

“Big fucking wolf with dark fur. He had some small white markings. An older wolf, maybe?”

“My father?” Dad helped me last night? I couldn’t believe it. After all the shit my father gave me for what I’d become, he’d stuck his neck out for me? That couldn’t be right. If Ryder was telling the truth, then my dad would be in trouble.

I glanced at the clock in the kitchen behind Ryder. My shift at Bad Moon was quickly approaching. I couldn’t afford to lose my safe haven, but my dad would be vulnerable if I didn’t pull Alvin’s attention away from him.

Ryder seemed to sense my hesitation. He bowed his head. “Go get ready for work. I’ll pay your father a visit.”

I tensed. “Are you sure? Going into Lakesedge is dangerous for you. The pack knows who you are.”

“I don’t particularly care. Besides, the pack isn’t the only organization that runs Lakesedge. Just because shifters govern themselves doesn’t mean they get to control everything. I’m sure your neighborhood has others who would side with me if anything happened.”

Yet, as he said this, I watched his face turn pale. Ryder was sticking his neck out for me. He didn’t want to be seen, but he was willing to risk it to check in on my dad.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

I clutched the blanket wrapped around my body and wrinkled my nose. Had I left my phone in the car? If I had, then I could call Vi and see if she could bring me a change of clothes. Was Vi already working today? Who was off?

The schedule was a blur. So much had happened in the past few days that I couldn't remember who was on shift today. As badly as I wanted to crawl back into Ryder's bed and go back to sleep, I couldn't let the world keep spinning without me. There was too much to do, too much that needed my attention—which was exhausting in its own way.

I couldn't do this on my own. I stole a glance at Ryder. While he was on my side for now, his assistance was conditional. If I didn't uphold my side of our deal, then he would move on, and I would be without allies again.

Running a hand through my hair, I tried to exhale and release the tension tightening my core. It didn't work. I was just as tightly wound as I had been before.

Considering that I had a shift at Bad Moon and a lot of research to do, I had to get my ass moving. I turned toward the door only to have Ryder catch me by my arm.

"Where do you think you're going dressed like that? You're going to shock the neighbors. We want to lie low and not draw attention."

I grinned. The thing about my hound was that she'd always been good at drawing attention. From the prophecy to the storms, all eyes had always been on me.

With a half shrug, I said, "Good. I'll give them a show. If they think I'm doing a walk of shame, then they won't think about the half-dead dog you dragged in last night. Besides, you don't plan on living here. Do you?"

Ryder blinked, stunned. A soft blush reached his cheeks even though he tried to keep his features stony and expressionless. I bit my lower lip to stifle my laughter. When his gaze dipped, dragging down my throat and over my exposed chest, my laughter faded. Desire unfurled inside me once more.

I had to yank myself out of Ryder's grip and get a move on before I dropped the blanket and threw myself at him. Sleeping with this guy was a bad idea. It would bite me in the ass, especially if I couldn't figure out how to follow through on this deal.

Outside, I stepped down the porch steps and put a swagger in my hips. It was all for show, though. I didn't feel half as confident as I looked.

Without food, my body screamed at me. Aches from my healed wounds started throbbing. If I didn't get something to eat soon, my wounds might reopen. My body needed energy, or I might come undone.

Shifter healing required a lot of arcana. On the surface, our healing might seem really fast, but the process took a lot longer than one might think. Our wounds closed quickly to keep us from bleeding out. Magic held us together while our bodies settled back into place. Should that magic get interrupted before the body was ready, then the wounds might come back.

The feeling of being watched made the hairs on my arms stand on end. When I reached my car, I glanced around. The street seemed empty. Whoever had eyes on me was carefully hidden. I chalked it up to one of Ryder's neighbors being nosy.

In my car, I reached under the dashboard and felt around for the emergency key I'd taped to the dash. Being a shifter also meant getting stranded without one's keys from time to time. While I knew that I shouldn't keep a spare key in my unlocked car, especially in a city like Syracuse, I also didn't like being without an escape option. My situation had taught me that my life was worth more than this shitty car.

The spare key didn't have a fob attached, so the alarm went off when I started the engine. I rolled my eyes and disabled the alarm. Once I locked the doors, I fished around the center console for my phone, which had sunk into the sea of crumpled receipts that I needed to clean out.

I didn't have many messages. Connor had sent me a text, warning me about the hunt, the day before. I must have missed it while I was inside with Ryder. Every now and then, the pack surprised me. I didn't know whose side they were on. The obvious answer was that they were all looking out for their own asses, but every once in a while, they would help me. It always caught me by surprise.

The pack would never earn my complete trust ever again. The days where I could put my life in their hands was over. I wasn't a naïve child anymore.

My friends, however, would always have my back. I called Vi, but she didn't answer. That likely meant that she was already at work, so I tried calling Addie. She picked up and offered to bring me a change of clothes and one of her camp-shower packs. Though the idea of using a bunch of wet wipes to shower made me cringe, I didn't really have the time to go home and shower.

I parked behind Bad Moon and waited for Addie to meet me. She dropped off a backpack full of supplies, including food, and apologized because she had to get going. The pale color of her face was in direct contrast with the dark circles under her eyes. I wanted to ask what was wrong, but I was confident that I looked pretty similar.

She didn't ask why I needed clothes, so I didn't ask why she needed to go. Still, I couldn't help but wonder what had Addie so shaken. Unfortunately, those thoughts didn't linger long as I began to wipe old blood off my body.

This life sucked. I envied the people who got to roll out of bed and have boring days. I wished I could really do the walk of shame, but I had to spend my days running from danger instead. I realized, as I tugged on Addie's leggings, that I never really got to experience my teenage years, either.

I didn't get to have a rebellious phase because of Alvin's watchful eye. Even my Dad's irritation with my hound made me want to be the perfect daughter, just so I could get a little bit of approval. Nothing had worked, though.

I was tired of trying. I was tired of constantly trying to run from the people who should have had my back. Dad's act of defiance during the hunt wasn't enough to make up for all the years he'd called me a disappointment.

Shaking myself out of my dark thoughts, I shoved my feet into the boots that Addie had brought for me and reached for the box of toaster pastries in the bottom of the backpack. She'd made sure to pack my favorite s'mores flavor. I owed her big time for dropping whatever was going on in her life and coming all this way to help me out.

Inside, Bad Moon Café was on fire.

Literally.

Vi cringed at me from behind the counter while the sandwich press burned behind her. The flames danced in the air and ignited the nearby bucket of paper-wrapped straws. I yelped and leapt into the fray. Customers grumbled under their breaths while Vi frantically spilled their drinks. The bell over the door chimed when a few customers left.

I swatted the bucket of straws with one hand while using the other to throw a damp towel over the sandwich press. The fire sputtered and hissed angrily.

Behind me, Vi cursed and apologized on an endless loop. She kept throwing glances back at me. Her lips seemed drawn into a permanent cringe at this point. I tried to assure her that this was fine. With her, it was normal.

Any time Vi was left alone, something caught fire. Audra, the café's owner, tried to always schedule Vi with someone else. I didn't have time to check the schedule, but I was sure that Cerri should have been here. Cerri was the only one I could think of since Addie had the day off, and I worked the late shift.

Worry for Cerri nearly overwhelmed me. Bad Moon Café had brought the misfits of Lakesedge together. Why did our misfortunes have to align all at once? Addie seemed distraught, Vi was setting fires, Cerri was missing, and I had my Alpha breathing down my neck.

I wished I could keep my shit together long enough to help my friends, but it seemed as though I'd dug my own grave. Maybe I shouldn't have asked Ryder to help me. If I hadn't followed him home and worked out an arrangement yesterday, then I wouldn't have been the subject of Alvin's hunt. I could have denounced Ryder and avoided all of that.

Though the idea that I could have avoided this all clung to me, I knew better. I could put out the fires here and there, but I would have to do something to keep them from starting. That meant dealing with the one starting them.

Alvin.

Not Vi.

I put out the fire and threw away the charred sandwich. It hit the bin like a brick. I scowled at it and shook my head. Vi finished helping the customers who'd stuck around to watch the shit show. Her shoulders drawn up to her ears, Vi turned to me and apologized once more.

"I'm so sorry. Addie told me that you had a shitty night, so I put a sandwich on the press for you. I swear I didn't forget about it. I put the press on a timer and everything!" A hint of red flashed in her eyes when the sun broke free of the clouds and pierced the dim shop with light.

"It's all right. I appreciate the thought. Addie brought me some toaster pastries, anyway."

Vi didn't seem convinced. Her short blond hair stuck up at every angle. I patted her hair to make it look a little more purposeful. She gave me a

sheepish smile. For a half-demon, Vi was incredibly sweet. I wished I had half the softness that she had.

She spun around, grabbed the tip jar, and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill that someone had left us. "Here. For putting out my fire this time."

I rolled my eyes. "You worked this shift by yourself. Keep it. You deserve it." I grabbed the sanitation rag and began wiping down counters. "Where is Cerri? Did she call in?"

Vi shrugged. My stomach sank.

The whole pack knew that Cerri and I were friends. Because Cerri didn't have a beast, no one really thought much of her. After last night, I wouldn't put it past Alvin to target her just to get back at me. My blood turned to ice until the bell over the door let out a panicked chime.

Cerri breezed through the door as if my thoughts had summoned her. She wore a grimace as she rushed me. Before I could even think to move, Cerri threw her arms around me.

"Uh, I was the one who survived the morning shift all by myself," Vi grumbled. "But all right."

Cerri didn't release me as she reached out to pull Vi into her arms. "I'm so glad you're okay."

I clutched my friends and tried to fight back the tears that had been waiting for me to let down my guard. The past couple of days had been a lot. I'd been pushing forward, ignoring the frustration building inside me.

If I let it come to the surface now, I would crumple. I had to tamp it back down so that I could keep moving forward. Tearing myself out of Cerri's arms, I wiped at my cheeks with the back of my hand. Now wasn't the time to break down.

Cerri watched me warily. She touched Vi's hand and told her to clock out. Vi hesitated. I could feel her gaze on me.

"Are you sure?" Vi asked. She wrung one of the sanitation rags between her hands until a thin drizzle of water trickled onto the floor by her feet. "You could take the day off, Ness. I don't mind pulling a double."

My laughter sounded fake to me when it came out. "The café would burn down for sure if you had to stay all day."

Her frown deepened. I hadn't meant to poke at her insecurities. Shit.

Cerri leaned back. "You know, we should really find a way to get rid of that bastard once and for all. That, or we get you a new identity. I can talk to

some of the witches in town and see if they have anything that might help you disappear from Alvin's radar."

The thought filled me with such weightless hope that I nearly floated off the ground like a child's balloon set free. However, becoming someone new would mean losing my pack. If I went back to the pack as someone new, I would still have to deal with Alvin.

I'd witnessed the way Harvey treated his female friends, too. To escape Alvin and his son, I would have to run far, far away. I didn't like the idea of losing my home or leaving the others to Alvin's cruelty.

"If Alvin is distracted by his hatred of me and that damn prophecy, then he's not hurting the others," I said, finally.

Cerri and Vi shared a look. The air around Vi flashed hot as her lip curled.

"I wouldn't mind burning his house down for you," Vi offered. "If we're lucky, he might get trapped inside. And, by lucky, I mean I could bar the doors and windows."

Cerri gave Vi a look of reproach. "We aren't burning people alive like this is a witch hunt."

"Hrmph, suit yourself. If Alvin can call a hunt on Ness, then I think it's absolutely fair that we can hunt him."

"I think our best option might be to help Ness find a way to fulfil the prophecy. I mean, it's there for a reason. If we can figure out how to trigger the prophecy, then Alvin will be forced down from his position of power." Cerri looked between the two of us.

Vi shrugged. "Killing him would do the trick, but if you want to play nice, you're totally welcome to suffer."

"Vi," I said, a note of warning in my voice. "No murder, please. This isn't your problem. You don't have to get involved."

"When someone attacks my friend, then it becomes my problem! How dare you assume that we can't help you?"

I started to apologize, but my words were drowned out by the chime of the bell over the door. I turned to the customers and froze. A growl vibrated in my chest as Alvin stared me down.

Lakesedge wasn't the nicest part of town. The potholes in the road that made my car bounce down the road had me thinking that the city often forgot that the neighborhood existed. The spells over the area protected the supernatural community here but left the infrastructure to decay.

The homes were nice, though. Shifters often opened roofing and construction businesses because it allowed them to use their strength to help their communities. I remembered summers spent on rooftops back home, helping strip old roofs.

I didn't have to go all the way to the lake to find Ness's home. The address she gave me was tucked between several Victorian homes that had been recently updated. The neighbors' new features made the old porch and chipped paint of her home look unloved, which I doubted was the issue. The lawn had been mowed recently and someone had taken the time to plant a garden out front.

Ness's misfortune had affected her family. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel and wondered what the hell Ness could have done to earn her Alpha's hate. I doubted that she'd turned him down. He was old enough to be her father, and it seemed like his son had a twisted obsession with her.

The front door opened and pulled me from my thoughts. A tall man with broad shoulders and a slight beer-gut stepped out. He fixed his gaze on my car and scowled. If he couldn't smell me already, he was probably smart enough to put the clues together and come up with *outsider*.

I cursed how guarded shifter communities were. There were so few who allowed new shifters to enter their ranks, as if fresh blood might challenge old traditions. Perhaps we would be better off that way. I heard there was a man in Oregon doing just that, and his pack seemed to be doing just fine.

I stepped out of my car and gave the man a nod. I didn't step onto his lawn. Wolf shifters were almost as territorial as dragons. Instead, I waited for him to approach me. While he took his damn time, I glanced up and down the road for any signs of the Alpha and his followers.

If they were here, they were well hidden. I had a sneaking suspicion that Ness would receive the brunt of the harassment today. I'd made her a promise, though. I had to trust that she could protect herself. If not, then her friends could do it.

I don't know what that blonde slipped me, but it put me in a fugue state that night. If I'd known that her "charmed" coffee would do that, I wouldn't have agreed to it. I'd gotten the best sleep I'd had in over a year, but if Morgan had found me, I would have been screwed.

Not worth it, in my opinion.

Ness's father finally closed the distance between us. I gave him a nod in acknowledgement. His nose wrinkled as he scented the air.

"That's what I thought," he growled.

What could I say? I didn't know how to respond to his disgust. The man who'd bravely defended his daughter had been replaced by this asshole. The way he looked at me made me want to deck him.

"Don't let Ness pull you into her games," he said, turning to walk away.

"Hold up," I called out before he could leave. "What the fuck do you mean by games? You were there last night. You saw how your pack is treating her."

He paused. "I won't let them kill her, but I'm not going to allow my daughter to be a traitor, either. Whatever she's asking you to do, forget about it. This pack doesn't need anyone else shaking the boat."

"You make it sound like the boat is already rickety."

His shoulders slumped. He gave a languished shake of his head.

I wished I could say that his inability to bring himself to do better for his pack surprised me, but I'd seen it before. Shifters had a hard time disobeying their Alphas, even when that Alpha became corrupt. The arcana that bound us into a family could also keep us trapped in dangerous situations.

“If you all hate him so much, you can band together and do something about it,” I spat.

I didn’t want to be cruel, but if I could convince this pack to rise up against their Alpha, then I wouldn’t have to get my hands dirty. My hands had already taken a life once. If I could avoid doing it again, I would.

This Alpha didn’t deserve the air he breathed, but I would do anything in my power to not be the one to kill him.

Ness’s father didn’t look convinced, though. If anything, he seemed more defeated than ever. I wasn’t an Alpha, myself. I didn’t know how to rally the shifters. If I had the right words, then they would see the truth.

Instead, they bowed their heads and looked away while Ness took the brunt of this Alpha’s hatred.

I exhaled through my nose. “What’s his name? No one has told me yet.”

Ness’s father hesitated. Then he said, “Alvin. Alvin Combs. His son is Harvey. That boy is trouble.”

I gave the man a nod.

Before I could get far, he called out, “If you’re going to stick around, you should get some allies.”

I stiffened. I’d hoped that the pack would become my allies. That was the plan, really.

“Visit Golden Apple by the lake. The restaurant’s owner can help you.”

Taken aback, I shook my head. I didn’t understand how a restaurant owner could help me, but I wasn’t going to stand here and make the man answer all my questions. Instead, I threw myself back into my car and drove around the block to clear my head.

At lap five, I came to the conclusion that Alvin’s attack dogs weren’t going to strike any time soon. My presence wasn’t keeping them away, either. They were somewhere else. The scents in the air here in Lakesedge wouldn’t lead me anywhere.

Ness’s father warned that I would need protection. I figured there was no harm in following his advice. The GPS led me toward the lake, just like the man had said. A brick warehouse converted into a restaurant sat near the bank. Behind the building, several docks jutted out over the water.

The sign hanging over the door had a gold apple with a bite taken out of it. Thorny black vines wrapped around the edge of the sign and left me with a sinking feeling that I was walking into the domain of someone powerful.

I should have brought an offering.

I found parking and stopped to study the building once more. I didn't have an ability to see through magical illusions, but I felt the need for one right about now. Rolling my shoulders back, I prepared myself for whatever I was about to walk into.

The inside of the restaurant was dimly lit. The shadows in the corners rippled as if they were alive. Nervous electricity leapt up my spine. I inhaled and took control of myself before stepping down into the dining area.

A thin man with hunched shoulders and tired eyes looked me up and down. The corner of his nearly non-existent lips curled into a wicked smile. Once more, electricity surged through me. My beast sniffed the air, but the scent around me was unlike anything I'd ever smelled before.

I chalked the heady scent of wine up to the fact that this seemed like an upscale restaurant that I was under-dressed for. I couldn't place the smell of earth and flowers, though.

"Our Lady was wondering when you would pay her a visit," the man said, his voice more like stones grinding together than a human voice.

I had been so distracted by the restaurant's smell that I hadn't given the host any thought. He crooked a finger too long to be human at me and led me away from the front door.

I assumed he would lead me to a table by the windows overlooking the lake, but he made a sharp right turn and pushed through a door that I hadn't noticed before. A dark stairwell led down. I thought I would end up in a basement where Alvin's shifters were waiting to ambush me.

Instead, I stepped out into a wide cavern. Light streamed in through a window that peered directly into the lake's waters. As I stepped deeper into the cavern and made my way between dining tables, I realized that was not a window at the other end. No glass separated the cavern from the lake. The water stood upright as if it were afraid to spill over the woman lounging before it.

She wore a wine-red dress that dipped low between her small breasts. The light filtering in through the lake water made her skin shimmer as if it were made of finely ground gemstones. In her black hair, several moths trembled, their wings fluttering ever so slightly.

She lifted her red eyes in my direction and grinned. I would have thought her to be a vampire were she not sitting in the sunlight.

The host stepped between us and bowed low to the woman. “Queen Beryl of the New York Unseelie Court, I introduce the storm dragon of Thunder Pass.”

I nodded my head in her direction. While I’d never met a fae queen before, I doubted lowering myself before her was a smart idea. Fae were deceitful beings who liked to trick mortals into their service. I already had enough trouble with one woman. I didn’t need another trying to use me.

“I was told that you were waiting for me,” I said, holding my position.

She smiled softly and patted the seat beside her.

I gave a shake of my head. “I don’t mind standing, ma’am.”

Queen Beryl did not pout. She did not frown. She stared me down, that smile fixed in place as if everything were going according to her plan.

“Word spreads quickly in Lakesedge,” I said. “I haven’t kept you waiting long, I hope.”

She gave a slight shake of her head and leaned forward to set her wineglass down. She, too, had inhuman fingers. Everything about her was elegant and beautiful and a little more than human. I wondered if she hid a monstrous form and couldn’t help but show hints of her true nature even through this guise.

“Not at all,” she said. Her eyes narrowed and a hungry grin spread over her face. “After all, I’m not the one who needs something from you.”

My jaw tightened.

She leaned forward. “You are a shifter, alone and without the protection of an Alpha. Now that you’ve thrown your allegiance behind the Black Hound, you’ll find no safety with Alvin of the Lakesedge pack. In order to ensure that no one else in Lakesedge hunts you down, you need someone to claim you. Someone so strong that even Alvin himself will think twice about hurting you.”

I laughed. “Have you forgotten that I’m a dragon shifter?”

The fae queen gestured to me. “Your dragon might be safe, but what of this form? What will you do when they drape you with silver and trap you with your humanity? Mortal bodies are frail without the beast to protect them. If you think Alvin would never resort to such trickery, then you need to reevaluate your enemy, darling.”

A heartbeat passed.

“And you need to remember that my court extends far and wide. Without my protection, Alvin could ask any number of my subjects to

handle the silver for him. Only my word will protect you.”

The shadows moved. Creatures of all shapes and sizes stepped into view. There were golems, hulking creatures made of stone. There were fae that lifted themselves into the air with the help of shimmering batwings. A few crawled out of the lake and dripped fresh water onto the floor.

“So, you’re resorting to blackmail?” I asked, more than a little annoyed.

Alvin looked me up and down. He gave an appreciative nod before saying, “You healed well last night.”

I shot a panicked glance at the human patrons still inside the café. A human grabbed his girlfriend’s hand and tugged her towards the exit. Thankfully, Alvin and his cronies didn’t stop them. A human teenager still lingered in the far corner. Her earbuds kept her from noticing what was going on.

“You can’t expose us,” I hissed.

Alvin shrugged. “If we get exposed here, it won’t be my fault. You’re the one who betrayed your pack. You brought the outsider in. Anything that happens from here on out is *your* fault.”

I stiffened. The girl in the corner bobbed her head in time to her music. Her gaze never rose from the book in her lap. I hoped that she would realize what was happening and run for the door. I tried to will it. My hound howled inside me, but the sound couldn’t find its way into reality.

“Don’t do it,” I whispered pathetically.

Behind me, Cerri tried to step forward. I held out my hand to stop her. She didn’t need to get involved in this fight, too.

“What do you want?” I asked.

Alvin gave me an unimpressed look that flashed darkly. My hound rose in challenge. Though I couldn’t bring myself to look him in the eye, I got as close as I possibly could. I glared at him while my hound fought to break free, so she could tear into Alvin.

Not here, I told her.

Bad Moon Café was my last sanctuary. It was the last bastion of peace that I had in a world where I found nothing but suffering. Though I wanted to teach Alvin a lesson for invading my sanctuary, I wasn't going to violate this place with violence, either. I wasn't going to make a mess or break anything.

Not unless Alvin made the first move. I tensed, waiting for him to strike.

The human teenager still sat in the corner. Her attention had lifted. I watched her face turn pale as she read the room. Somehow, Cerri had slipped away from the counter. She appeared at the teenager's elbow and motioned for her to follow. I breathed a sigh of relief as Cerri led the teenager out the back entrance.

Unfortunately, that left me alone with Alvin and his cronies. Today, Alvin had brought Jackson and Marcus Wills. When they were younger, the brothers had been kicked out of every high school in the area for violent bullying. Time hadn't done them any favors. In the years since their high school careers, they'd only gotten meaner.

I wanted better for my pack, for people like Janessa and Kelsey and even Connor, with his misplaced sense of duty. Jackson and Marcus could rot in hell, for all I cared. They watched me with hungry gazes. Their wolves lingered too close to their skin and filled their eyes with inhuman light.

I licked my lips nervously. "Your dogs don't know how to contain themselves. I have more restraint than those two put together."

Alvin spun and cracked Jackson upside the head. He staggered and crashed into his brother. The two fell into a display of tea boxes. The tea clattered to the floor and drew a growl out of me.

Alvin turned to me. "You think you have restraint? They're just boxes, Vanessa. Why are you so upset?"

As if Alvin had delivered a cue, Marcus laughed and stomped on a box of Earl Grey tea. Jackson looked me in the eye as he crushed two boxes back-to-back. Those would come out of my paycheck, for sure.

Where was Ryder? I hoped he was still with my father, like I'd asked. Knowing that my father was safe would give me the strength to keep my chin high. I could afford to pay for a few boxes of tea.

I just had to keep them from destroying anything else.

A wave of misplaced courage overcame me. I stepped out from behind the counter and up to Alvin. His grin widened. I straightened my spine and lifted my gaze as high as I could. My fury empowered me. I could almost look him in the eye.

His snarl rippled through the room. I rocked back, my heart lurching. Alvin caught me by the front of my shirt before I could escape. He yanked me forward. I heard the sound of tearing fabric, remembered that this shirt wasn't mine, and stopped fighting.

Would Addie care if I ripped her shirt while trying to escape Alvin? Probably not, but I didn't want to make anything worse. I'd feel like shit if I had to hand a ruined shirt to Addie, so I let Alvin hold me hostage.

He leaned in close, his lips twisting into a sneer while his rotten breath rolled over me. I tried to turn away, but he slapped me across the face. The room spun before suddenly jerking back into place.

While I struggled to catch my breath, my hound waited for the right moment to strike. I had to hold her back and remind her that retaliating would only make things worse. My friends didn't need to clean me off the floor when Alvin was done with me. If I bowed my head and let Alvin get his rage out, then this would end soon.

I hated this. My fingers curled into fists at my sides. Rage made me tremble as every muscle tightened with the need to fight back. My hound howled. The smell of coffee disappeared. The air changed, carrying the scent of ozone and an electric charge.

Several emotions passed over Alvin's face all at once. They happened so quickly that I couldn't read any of them before they were covered by his angry bravado all over again.

"Don't be stupid." Alvin slammed me into the coffee counter.

I cried out when the gashes in my thigh reopened. Apparently, the toaster pastries hadn't been enough to help me fully heal. Warmth spread over my thigh as I struggled to catch my breath. Alvin didn't give me time to collect myself. He palmed the side of my head and shoved it into the wood wall of the counter.

Splinters pierced my skin. My eyes burned as fury and terror mingled inside me.

Alvin couldn't win, but I couldn't fight him here, either. This wasn't the right place to make a stand. If I wanted to fight back, I would have to lead him out of Bad Moon. I refused to let him leave his mark on this place.

At least Cerri had gotten out. Alvin wouldn't accuse her of defending me. I hoped that she was safe, and that Alvin hadn't posted someone outside the back exit. Cerri could handle herself. She probably had a pocketful of potions to protect herself.

"I'm only going to get dumber if you keep hitting me in the head," I said.

His growl turned into a roar as he pulled his hand back to strike. I flinched.

The blow never came.

Wary, I cracked open one eye. Ryder stood behind Alvin. He had ahold of Alvin's wrist. Both Jackson and Marcus shared a confused look, as if he'd snuck right past them. They moved to grab Ryder, but Alvin inhaled sharply and raised his free hand to stop them.

I lifted my head and noticed that Ryder had tightened his grip on Alvin. The skin of Alvin's wrist had turned a mottled purple color. Alvin's clenched jaw was all that betrayed his pain.

Alvin twisted and turned his glare toward Ryder. I watched as Alvin's gaze dropped to something hanging from Ryder's neck. A medallion on a thin leather cord sat atop Ryder's chest. The fight bled out of Alvin in an instant, making me give the medallion a second look.

At first glance, the medallion had seemed normal. I'd thought it was made out of metal and covered with a red enamel, but now I could see that it was a dark red crystal that had been shaped and polished into a flat circle. In the center, a blood-red blossom caught the light.

Alvin yanked his wrist away from Ryder. "I see that you're a weak worm of a man. You crawled to that whore's feet to beg for help, and now you're her tool. And here I thought you were a threat."

Even as he spat vile words at Ryder, Alvin flexed the hand that Ryder had crushed. The bruise flared over Alvin's skin before slowly receding. Alvin healed faster than any other shifter I'd ever seen. His wrist returned to normal in the blink of an eye. If Ryder had broken any bones, they were whole before I could even take another breath.

Thinking about wounds made my thigh throb. The gashes were still open. They refused to heal until I ate again. I didn't dare move while Ryder stared Alvin down. If either of them started a fight in here, I would be pissed.

Not in Bad Moon.

Alvin knew what he was doing when he walked in here. He'd known that I wouldn't fight back here. If I asked Ryder not to fight, too, then Alvin would have the upper hand.

I hated Alvin for pushing everyone into a corner. He seemed to know how to move so that his foes were trapped. I had to be smarter than Alvin if I was going to live through this. I began to doubt my decision to ask for Ryder's help. If Alvin was going to control Ryder the same way, then this battle was already lost.

I stole another glance at the medallion around Ryder's neck. The symbol seemed familiar, but I couldn't place it. Alvin had called Ryder a whore's tool. What had he meant by that?

Ryder's expression twitched, as if he were fighting back a snarl. Jackson and Marcus stepped up behind him. I dragged myself to my feet and put myself between them. I had to lean on Ryder's back to stay standing, but I wasn't going to let them hurt him.

Why? I wasn't sure. I was using Ryder. He was nothing more than a means to an end. He could easily take on all three men at once, but the urge to keep him safe overrode my own desire to live.

The warmth that spilled out of him suffused me with a little bit of energy. I raised my chin and looked Marcus in the eye. That was when Jackson decided to strike.

Ignoring the pain in my thigh, I ducked and punched him in the stomach. While he recovered from the blow, I spun on Marcus. He reached out to grab me, but Ryder yanked me out of the way. He slid an arm around my waist and smoothly switched places with me. He had ahold of Marcus's outstretched arm in an instant. He twisted it behind Marcus's back until the grown man hissed in pain.

All the while, Alvin watched. His upper lip curled as he sucked his teeth. I braced myself for his attack, but it never came. Instead, he raised a hand again, and the brothers froze. Alvin's sigh filled the quiet room.

Alvin turned his attention on me. Though he remained calm, I could see the fury boiling just beneath his skin. "If you keep consorting with the outsider, you will lose your rights to the pack and the safety we provide. This man isn't capable of making good decisions. He's already signed his life away."

I shared a glance with Ryder, expecting him to give me a confused shrug. Shame shadowed his eyes. He'd done something while he'd been

gone, and it had to do with that medallion.

Ryder should have been protecting my father. I highly doubted that he'd gotten the token while hanging out with my dad. I clenched my fists at my sides. Pain radiated from my thigh and up my torso, making me take the weight off my wounded leg. Off balance and ready to collapse, my anger didn't look as threatening.

"What did you do?" I whispered.

Ryder gave a nearly imperceptible shake of his head. He wasn't going to tell me today. I had a feeling that even when Alvin left, Ryder would keep his secret.

I turned to Alvin. "Are you kicking me out of the pack?"

He laughed. His wolf filled his eyes as he stared me down. "No one gets kicked out of my pack. The only way to leave is to die. Keep that in mind."

Alvin shoved past me. When the door finally closed behind Alvin and the other two, I nearly fell over. Ryder caught me by my armpits. The smell of blood became too strong to ignore.

"What happened?" Ryder asked, too quickly. "Why are you bleeding?"

Cerri breezed back into the room. She motioned for Ryder to set me down in a nearby chair before she knelt behind the coffee counter. A moment later, she came back up with a clear cup of potion that glittered in the light.

She slapped a twenty-dollar bill into Ryder's hand. "Go down to the end of the street and order a tri-tip sandwich. We don't have anything here that will get Ness back onto her feet."

Ryder drew himself up to his full height and glowered down at Cerri. "Where the hell were you when this happened?"

I kicked Ryder in the knee with my good foot. He turned his glare upon me. I didn't care. Exhausted and angry as I was, he didn't scare me. He could shift into a dragon and eat me whole for all I cared. I would give him the worst case of indigestion possible.

Ryder didn't say anything, though. He crumpled the money in his clenched fist and stormed out the door. When he was gone, Cerri pushed the potion into my hand. I trusted my friend and her arcana, but I didn't know what she could do to help me.

"No questions." She narrowed her eyes at me. "Just drink."

I sniffed the cup's contents and almost gagged. The pungent smell of herbs and fermented ingredients overwhelmed my senses. "You couldn't

have bothered to hide this in a coffee? I'd kill for a mocha right about now."

Cerri groaned and rolled her eyes. I was acting up because of what happened. Cerri didn't deserve my attitude right now, so I pinched my nose and downed the potion in one gulp. It traveled down my throat in a lump before landing in the pit of my stomach.

I shoved the cup back at her and cursed when the aftertaste spread across my tongue. "Why does that taste like a barn?"

She laughed, but the sound was hollow. "You don't know what a barn tastes like."

I wanted to argue that I'd smelled more than one barn in my lifetime, but Cerri kept looking over her shoulder. The way she watched the door made me wary. I didn't think she was nervous that Ryder would return.

I touched the back of her hand, pulling her attention back to me. "You know something. Tell me before he comes back."

She sighed. "How well do you know that guy? Do you think it's a good idea to be around him?"

"I don't know him, really." I hesitated, weighing the truth. Cerri was my friend, but I didn't want her to think less of me when I told her what I'd asked Ryder to do for me. I swallowed the truth. "He thinks that I can do something for him. Apparently, another witch thinks she knows what I can and can't do."

Cerri gave a hollow chuckle. Once again, she looked over her shoulder. "That medallion belongs to Queen Beryl."

My jaw dropped. "The Unseelie Queen Beryl? The one who took the court under the lake in a very bloody assault? That one? Why would he have gone to her?"

"I don't know, but that medallion means that he has her protection. She doesn't give that out to just anyone. Her price is very high."

My foot nervously tapped against the floor. Ryder had struck a deal with the fae queen while he should have been keeping watch over my father. The information stung. I knew that I shouldn't have put my trust in Ryder because he was an outsider, but I'd hoped that he would have my back.

I squeezed Cerri's hand. I could trust her, but I couldn't ask her for help—not without putting her in harm's way. I didn't want to do that to any of my friends. They had my back, but I wanted them to stay safe.

The potion warmed my stomach. That warm sensation spread from my gut to my torso and on to my limbs. My thigh tingled at first. Then the

feeling turned hot. I clenched my teeth as the gashes burned.

“What did you give me?” I bit out.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t have enough energy to heal. If it hurts, then you need to eat something soon.” She paused and bit her lip. Once more, she looked back at the door. “I learned more about your new friend.”

My heart stopped, as if even it wanted to be quiet so that I could hear what Cerri had to say.

“Ryder was part of the Thunder Pass clan, though I’m unsure of his rank.”

Oh, I did not like the use of the past tense in her statement. “Was?”

She pressed her lips together and gave a firm nod. “Apparently, Ryder fled from his clan in Colorado after the clan leader was murdered. There isn’t a whole lot of information that I could gather because the dragons are pretty secretive. My guess is that someone framed Ryder for the murder.”

I let that sink in. I had no idea what to make of this situation without further information. The rumor mill could only grant me so much before it twisted the truth and gave me false ideas. I would have to get the truth out of Ryder himself.

The thought of working with a killer didn’t fill me with the confidence that it should have. Even though I had asked Ryder to kill a man, I’d appealed to his sense of justice. I hadn’t given any thought to the possibility of darkness inside the man.

Fool that I was, going around trusting people. That would get me hurt. I just knew it.

The bell over the door chimed, and I flinched. Shame hit me like a ton of bricks as Ryder stepped around Cerri and offered me a thick sandwich wrapped in brown paper. I eyed the medallion around his neck once again.

Ryder noticed and lifted it to hide it beneath his shirt. If he thought he was going to keep his deal a secret, then he was mistaken. I didn’t have the will to deal with it right now, though. I snatched the sandwich from him and tore into it. Hearty steak melted on my tongue. I groaned.

Ryder lifted a brow.

“Don’t watch me eat, you pervert.”

He rolled his eyes. While an uncomfortable silence settled between us, Cerri set about cleaning the mess that Alvin had made. She wiped blood from the outside of the coffee counter. I touched my cheek and flinched. A sliver of wood stuck out of my skin.

Ryder leaned in and reached for it. I stilled, my heart racing. He hovered close. If he was breathing, I couldn't hear it. Gentle fingertips grazed my cheek without hitting the bruise. His lips twisted to the side as he focused.

This man could have been stunning. His eyes softened, losing that hardness that kept everyone around him at bay. The tip of his tongue poked out from between his lips and made me smile. My hound panted heavily in his presence.

I wished I could kick her. We couldn't trust Ryder. He might be beautiful, but we didn't know a damn thing about him. The fact that he wouldn't tell me why he wanted help sat in the back of my mind like a flashing warning sign.

He plucked the splinter from my cheek and straightened. In the blink of an eye, his cold demeanor returned. He refused to even look in my direction. Whatever we'd had in that moment was gone, and I had no idea how to get it back.

Not that I wanted it back.

"So, what's with the medallion?" I asked around a mouthful of sandwich, as if I could be repulsive and keep him from wanting me.

Yeah, that really helped me temper my own desire. I could have rolled my eyes at myself, but I didn't want to be obvious.

Ryder ignored me. He paced, pausing at the front window long enough to look up and down the street. I wished he would stop and tell me what was going on. His silence said more, though.

The sandwich did the trick. I shoved the last bite into my mouth. The burning sensation in my thigh faded. Though the leggings were sticky with blood, the skin underneath had stitched back together again. I just had to eat a little more and take it easy for the rest of the day.

With Cerri's healing potion and a sandwich in me, I gathered the courage to tell Ryder to leave.

He gave me an incredulous glare.

I shrugged. "I appreciate your help, but everything is fine now. You can go."

"That asshole is going to come back the moment I leave. Are you sure you want to kick me out now?"

"I'm not kicking you out. I'm releasing you from your duties. You don't have to stick around here. You can go on and do whatever it is that you

came here to do.” I wished I could act like I didn’t have a stake in his presence here.

If I could make it seem like I didn’t care whether or not he stayed, then maybe I could have the advantage for once. The way he studied me made me feel like my desperation was obvious. I kept my face carefully blank.

His hand lifted to his chest before falling back down to his side. Good. He knew that the damned medallion had something to do with this.

Why did it feel like we were having our first fight as a couple? Ryder didn’t mean anything to me. My hound wanted to ride his bones, but that was it! This wasn’t anything more than a poorly formed deal that wasn’t going to go anywhere.

I had to figure this out on my own because I was the only one that I could count on.

I limped back behind the counter and bit the tip of my thumb while I studied Cerri’s potions. Maybe I could slip Alvin a potion that would make him sleep for the rest of eternity? Was that possible?

Ryder towered over the counter. “I know you’re upset, but your father told me to do this.”

My head snapped up. “Excuse me? What did you just say?”

“Your dad told me that I would need allies here. I went where he told me to go. I’m not happy about what I had to do to get this damned thing. If I could take it back, I would. I can’t, so I might as well stick this out.” He pressed his knuckles into the countertop until they turned white.

I could hear his teeth grinding together as he pinned me with his furious gaze. I pressed a finger to his chest.

“I didn’t ask you to come here and get yourself caught up in someone else’s web. I asked you to do a simple task. After that, you could have gone your own way.” I flicked the medallion. “You did this to yourself.”

Why did my father tell Ryder to visit Beryl? What the hell had he been thinking? I lifted my gaze and looked Ryder in the eye. Wasn’t this man smart enough to not get tangled in a fae’s traps? One look at her and anyone could tell that she was dangerous.

Hot? Yes.

Dangerous? Also, yes.

Someone’s attractiveness doesn’t negate their ability to hurt you. Why couldn’t men think with anything other than their dick?

My hound snarled at the idea of Ryder atop Queen Beryl. My stomach tightened with rage as it burned its way up my throat. I let out a shuddering breath. The jealousy wasn't like me. I couldn't let my hound have her way. Ryder wasn't my mate.

He was hot and strong and a complete idiot.

He stared at me with his jaw slightly slack. My cheeks heated when I realized he was processing my reaction. Before he could put the pieces together, I spun around and began making my favorite drink.

The muscle memory comforted my upset hound. She wanted me to turn back to Ryder and protect him like I'd done earlier. I couldn't keep him safe against Beryl. I could barely protect myself. Standing up to Jackson and Marcus would bite me in the ass later.

Alvin had made it clear that I would sign my own death sentence if I helped Ryder. What other choice did I have? I knew that Alvin had my death sentence in his back pocket at all times. He would find a way to kill me without causing too much of a stir in the pack eventually.

"What are you doing after work?" Ryder asked.

I threw back an espresso shot and set the cup back in place to prepare another for my mocha before facing him. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

I didn't expect the smolder that overcame him. He leaned in, his breath warm against my cheek. I inhaled sharply. My lower lip trembled in heady anticipation.

Voice low and rumbling, he whispered. "I'm not going to date the biggest pain in my ass I've ever met."

I reeled back, laughter spilling out of me. Before I could stop myself, I flipped him the bird. I couldn't explain the rage simmering under my skin. I was used to despair, but the way his words hit my hound and left her filled with sorrow made me angry.

Spinning away from Ryder, I found Cerri staring at us with a queer look on her face. She asked me if I was all right, but I shook her off.

Ryder

I WATCHED NESS STOMP AWAY. She disappeared into the back room and left me alone with her coworker, the one who had slipped a potion into my coffee. The blonde offered me a wide, forced smile, but she kept looking between me and the doorway that had swallowed Ness a moment ago.

When the blonde finally focused on me, I could almost feel the wave of protectiveness coming from her. It slammed into me with crushing force.

Ness had some interesting friends outside of the pack.

No. This woman smelled of pack, but I couldn't find any hint of animal in her. The scent coming from her had another wild tone to it that reminded me of Beryl's underground court.

"What are you?" The words left me before I could stop them. I shook myself. "Apologies, ma'am. I'm not normally this rude. I'm on edge, and your scent is confusing."

She stepped behind the counter and put a clear plastic cup down. When she pulled a bottle of glittering liquid out from under the counter, I grimaced.

"Are you going to poison me again?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "I didn't poison you. I asked you if you wanted a charmed coffee and you said *yes*. I could have been more forward about what I meant, but I'm still figuring out how to explain that in a way that hides what I'm doing from the humans."

Alvin's show had emptied the café. His presence must have left behind a dark cloud that everyone could feel when they came close. I watched a few humans step up to the door, pause, and turn away. The sign in the window said open, but no one wanted to come inside.

That gave us the opportunity to talk about what was going on here.

I stepped closer to the counter and watched the blonde work. She filled the bottom of the cup with her potion and poured lemonade over it. The cup's contents shimmered until she added a red syrup that smelled strongly of strawberries. When she topped it off with ice, I half expected her to pass it to me. Instead, she shoved a straw into it and lifted it to her lips.

After a long drag on her straw, the blonde said, "I know she's using you for something. I have my suspicions, but if I get pulled into this, then Ness will never forgive herself. The thing is, I know that you wouldn't still be here if you weren't trying to use her, too."

I opened my mouth to argue and quickly closed it again. The blonde wasn't wrong, and I didn't have it in me to lie right now. So, I kept quiet

and heard her out.

She set her cup down and leaned back against the counter behind her. “Don’t get her killed. I swear, if you get Ness killed, I will do everything in my power to make you regret it. Maybe you don’t care about her, but I have a feeling that you do and that it won’t be hard to make you feel remorse.”

A growl vibrated in my throat. Summoned by her threat, my dragon reared its head and snarled. She didn’t back down. If she saw the beast in me, it didn’t affect her. I had to give her points for her lack of fear, but I didn’t appreciate her insinuation.

Then she shrugged. “But when you become Alpha, I’ll be the first in line to bow my head to you.”

I took a step back and shook my head. These women were conniving. I didn’t waste my time telling her that I wouldn’t become her new Alpha. There was no way in hell that they were going to twist my arm and force me into a position meant for someone else.

I had given up my claim to any kind of leadership back in Colorado. Never again would I have that kind of power. I didn’t deserve it.

As I stepped outside, the medallion hummed against my chest. I wanted to tear it off, but the damned thing was stuck to my neck. I couldn’t get the leather cord over my head without it shrinking.

I’d tried.

The thing had damn near strangled me, despite my best efforts.

This medallion and the deal behind it trapped me here. I had been passing through only a couple of days ago. Now, I was bound to two women I couldn’t trust. On one hand, Ness needed help. If I left her to her fate here, I would never forgive myself. But, in my efforts to help Ness, I’d bound myself to someone even more dangerous.

I’d thought that I could cast off the physical evidence of my deal with Queen Beryl, but an enchantment kept it around my neck no matter how I tried to snap it.

My beast thrashed inside me. Its discontent manifested in tension that gripped me from head to toe. I clenched my fists at my sides until my knuckles ached. Though there was no sign of Morgan in the skies, it would only be a matter of time until his judgement caught up to me.

I deserved whatever Morgan had in store for me, yet I couldn’t stop myself from running.

If I'd been a better man, I would have stayed and faced the consequences for my actions. I would have looked my brother in the eye and told him that I would have done it all over again if it meant saving everyone.

I wish I could have been that kind of man. I hated myself for running.

What had running brought me? Now that I had rushed headlong into the mess here in Lakesedge, I had my regrets.

I ran my hand along the short beard growing over my chin. The smell of coffee and hound filled my senses and stirred something deep inside me. Desire hit me suddenly. I clenched my teeth and shoved it back.

I would find another way to help Ness, and then I'd be on my way. I didn't need her to help me.

The smell of asshole Alpha hovered on the air. I followed it back to Lakesedge. The beast under my skin begged to be let loose when I found where Alvin lived. A well-placed lightning strike would burn his house to the ground, but that wasn't what I needed to do.

So long as I could push him out of his role as Alpha, then I could rest easy without knowing that I'd taken another life. I wasn't sure how I would go about relieving Alvin of his position, but I would figure it out. While I did that, Ness would help me.

She had to.

If she wasn't the one the witch had told me about, then I'd dug my own grave here in Lakesedge.

I hoisted my bag higher onto my shoulder before climbing the steps up to Catriona's front door. I would have liked to have come earlier, but the only time Catriona had been able to meet me had been in the late afternoon. Most of my day had been spent nervously awaiting whatever I might find here.

The elder pack member doubled as the pack historian. This old house on the edge of Onondaga Lake housed records going all the way back to the pack's formation. I'd called her the night before to arrange a meeting under the guise that I wanted to read my prophecy. If I would find any information on what I was and what I could do, it would be here.

At least, that's what I told myself as I knocked.

Catriona called out from deep inside the house. I eased the door open and stuck my head inside to listen because I hadn't heard her clearly the first time.

"Get your ass in here and shut the damn door before you let the pollen in! I'm tired of sneezing." Catriona stepped into the hallway ahead, motioned for me to close the door, then disappeared into another room.

I stepped in and did as she asked. The inside of her home was cozy, with plush furniture, pillows, and blankets everywhere. In the corner of the living room sat a piano. I remembered taking music lessons from Catriona. She never minced her words, especially when she told me that I would never have a future in music.

Catriona waited for me in the stairwell to the second-floor library. She shook the keys in her hands. "Are you ready?"

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

She studied me for a long while. “There’s no guarantee you’re going to find what you’re looking for up here.”

“I just want to see the prophecy records. I need to see it with my own eyes.”

Without saying anything more, she nodded and turned to unlock the door at the top of the stairs. The gleaming lacquered door swung open and revealed shelves crowding one another in a dark room.

Catriona stomped across the room and cracked open the blinds to let in a little bit of light. “Not much. The sunlight isn’t good for the records, but I don’t feel like paying more to the electric company, either.”

I gave her a nod, as if I cared. My heart raced. The hound whimpered pathetically inside me. I quieted her and braced myself. For what? I wasn’t sure. Anxiety crackled like electricity along my skin. It snatched my breath and left me shaking.

Catriona gave me a light shove, making me stagger forward. I gave her a glare, but she didn’t flinch. Catriona wasn’t one for pack theatrics, despite being a shifter. Her wolf seemed content with its power.

She reminded me of Audra, in some ways. Audra owned Bad Moon Café. My boss had an air about her that was hard to figure out. At the café, we’d taken bets on what Audra actually was because none of us knew for sure. I surmised that she was some kind of old shifter and that Alvin was afraid of her, because he didn’t mess with her. Addie and Vi thought that she was a demon more interested in living a human life than with compelling damning contracts out of unsuspecting victims.

Catriona and Audra carried themselves in a way that told the rest of the world to fuck-off. I wished I could figure out how they did it. I wanted some of that attitude for myself, but I couldn’t stop my hound from growling or yipping when push came to shove.

“Are you going to hover over my shoulder the whole time?” I asked meekly.

Catriona sighed, clearly annoyed with me. “Hear me out, child. It’s not you. It’s that cloud of destruction that follows you around like a sad puppy. I can’t have it wreaking havoc on my library.”

I’d hoped to take a peek at other sections. Because of my position within the pack, I wasn’t sure if Catriona would approve my request to dig deeper into the records. If Alvin told her to keep me from any information

other than the prophecy, she would have to obey him. Not even her devil-may-care attitude would keep her from obeying the pack Alpha.

I sucked in a breath. I had no idea if Alvin had told her to do anything. My fear was that he had, and that Catriona would hover over me if she caught even a hint of my true intention.

At some point, I would have to trust the people in my pack, especially if I wanted to reclaim it from Alvin. He was the real problem. Once he was out of the picture, I would be alone with my pack for the first time. All the bridges I'd burnt would have to be rebuilt if I was going to be a part of the pack.

Catriona sighed again. "Damn it, child. You're breaking my heart, standing there and looking as pathetic as you are."

My lips parted as her words sank in. I gaped at her. She breezed past me, plucked a book from a shelf to her left, crouched, scanned the lower shelf to the right, and grabbed another book. She slammed them onto the table under the window and faced me.

"You'll find your answers there." She tapped the books once before heading to the door where she paused. "Try not to burn the place down."

"I'm not a firestarter!" I called back to her.

For a heartbeat, I waited and listened to her retreating steps. Then, once I was sure that I was alone, I approached the books. They didn't have fancy covers. There weren't even titles on them, just a set of dates on the spines relating to the time captured on the pages inside. The first book Catriona had pulled was from the year that the witch had passed through.

The other book was older. The dates on the spine went back a hundred years, which made me raise my brows. I wasn't sure what this book had to do with me, so I set it aside and opened the one with the prophecy.

My fingertips tingled. These pages held the reason for my position in the pack. I wished I could have burned it years ago, before I'd even shifted for the first time. I held onto the desire to turn back time because it made me feel like I had a little bit of control for once. I couldn't change what was, though. Even if I'd burned the book, the memory of the prophecy would have remained.

I had to find a way around it. Asking Ryder to kill Alvin had been an act of desperation, one that I wasn't proud of. If I'd given my request more thought, then maybe I could have undermined the prophecy. There was still

time. Ryder hadn't challenged Alvin yet. I could find the dragon shifter and tell him I'd changed my mind.

I could call this all off.

Ryder needed help, though. He wasn't going to go anywhere until he got what he wanted. I couldn't do that until I figured out what that was. That left us in a standstill. I'd hoped that this visit would give me a bit of clarity, but I wasn't sure anymore.

I bit back my hesitation and opened the book. As if waiting for me, it fell open to the page of the prophecy. The handwriting didn't match Catriona's penmanship on the previous pages. The witch herself had written this so that there was no way someone would write it down wrong.

The Black Dog will bring with it an ill omen. Beware the strike of lightning because it will burn the cruel and unholy. The Alpha will be at the center of that strike should he let his shadow grow taller than himself.

I growled in frustration. This didn't say anything about my hand in the Alpha's demise. I wanted to throw the book across the room. No matter how I claimed that I wanted nothing to do with this, I couldn't convince anyone to separate it from me. They couldn't see past these words that an outsider had given them to see their suffering packmate.

An *outsider* had given this prophecy to the pack.

I ran my fingers down the page. *Burn the cruel and unholy* stuck with me. Alvin had been a kind man before he'd found out that the prophecy had been about me. Or, at least, that's what I'd always thought. It seemed as though this had revealed a side of Alvin that few got to see. He'd kept his true nature hidden.

That gave me an idea. The pack blamed Alvin's behavior on me and the prophecy, but if I could expose the things he'd done before my first shift, then I might be able to convince the pack to turn against him. It was a shot in the dark because I didn't even know where to begin.

I bit the tip of my thumb. If Alvin had always been cruel, then he hid it well. I didn't know what kind of truths I could dredge up to show the pack. I would have to get close to Alvin and his family, which I didn't want to do.

I wanted to escape this prophecy, though. I wanted to get out from under its umbrella so badly that I figured this might be worth the risk. All I had to do was find evidence.

For a moment, I allowed myself to yearn for a friend to talk me out of this plan. Cerri and Addie were at the café, and Vi was banned from

Catriona's house because of her tendency to set things on fire. I couldn't invite Ryder here without putting Catriona in trouble, either. I gripped the edge of the table and tried to talk myself down.

Did I want to dive into the closet that Alvin kept his skeletons in? Hell no. Did I have any other choice? It didn't feel like it.

I put the book with the prophecy record down and turned to the other book Catriona had pulled out for me. I ran my fingers down the aged spine. The handwriting inside belonged to someone who had been a part of the pack long before I'd entered this world. I wondered what this old book had to do with me.

Flipping through the first few pages didn't tell me much of anything. As historian, Catriona had likely read a fair number of the old records. If she thought this one would tell me something, that meant she'd read it. I wished she'd stuck around to tell me which page held what I was looking for.

Nervous, I chewed on the tip of my thumb.

Then, as I quickly flipped through the pages, I noticed a lightning bolt. It appeared and disappeared in the blink of an eye when the pages settled. I quickly grabbed the edge of the pages and flipped through them again. This time, I stopped when a sketchy lightning bolt appeared again.

The record on the page spoke of a black dog that had invaded the local church during a sermon. Lightning struck the church and a few of the people inside. A witness reported seeing a dog before the lightning, and once the light faded, a woman where the dog had been.

I gasped. Finally, a scrap of information!

I flipped the page, eager to read the rest, only to find that someone had ripped it out. My stomach hit the floor. A torn edge ran along the inseam of the book. I brushed it with the pad of my thumb, as if my willpower alone could bring the page back into being.

Nothing happened. I shouldn't have been surprised, but my disappointment was palpable. I let out a soft curse and wondered who this mystery Barghest could have been. If she made that kind of show in a church, she must have been filled with fury.

I turned the page back. The way the scene had been recorded made me wonder if I could control the storm. The viewer made it seem as though the woman had brought that lightning strike down. She'd done it while in her hound form.

My lips twisted to the side. I wasn't sure if I could get away with practicing. Alvin would send a hunt out for me if he saw signs of a storm. Alvin wouldn't want me to gain control of my arcana. My storms weren't exactly easy to hide.

Why couldn't I have had a cool arcana like Cerri? I wanted to brew potions in the privacy of my own room. Then I could have learned more about myself without the fear of someone breathing down my neck.

I turned my phone over and glanced at the time. I would have to meet with Alvin later. He'd made it very clear that if I was late with my check-ins, then I would be in even more trouble. Did I even care at this point?

The urge to run as far and fast as I could hit me and left me with a yearning for freedom that I'd never felt so strongly before. My whole chest ached when I thought about my feet hitting the ground for joy and not survival. There would come a day when I didn't have to keep watch over my shoulder.

That day would be here, in Lakesedge, because I couldn't abandon my home or my pack. I knew they were doing everything they could to help me. Okay, so that wasn't much, but I understood how it felt when Alvin turned his anger toward me. I couldn't blame them for shrinking away.

Maybe I was too forgiving, but I didn't want anyone else to take my place. I wanted to get rid of Alvin's ruthless control once and for all.

Where was Catriona? I needed to find her so she could tell me about the missing page. I crouched and returned the book to the shelf because she would know what I was talking about when I asked her. I scowled at the prophecy and gave it an angry shake as if I could chastise the witch who'd left it. The gesture was futile. I didn't feel any better in the end, so I shoved the book back where it belonged and went downstairs.

I followed the smell of freshly brewed tea to the kitchen where I found Catriona pouring it from a clear glass teapot. She only had one cup set out, which meant that she didn't want company. I licked my lips and hovered in the doorway.

My heart hammered nervously. I knew what I had to ask but balked at the idea of finally finding out about myself. What was I afraid of? The truth could have been right in front of me, yet I'd lost my voice.

Catriona turned round and casually leaned against the counter. She cradled her teacup between both hands. The look she gave me was full of impatience and irritation.

I swallowed. It seemed as though no one had the time for me. I didn't think of myself as a burden, but that was often what it felt like. I knew that my presence could bring Alvin's wrath down upon someone's head if they spent too much time around me. Catriona wouldn't be in much trouble because her position in the pack was above nearly everyone else.

Still, so long as I was an outcast, I would only be a harbinger of trouble for others. No wonder I felt so alone.

I straightened and tried to keep my voice from wavering when I asked, "Where's the ripped page from the old book?"

Catriona narrowed her eyes. "Missing, you say?" She tilted her head to the side as her eyes grew distant. Her brow furrowed and her lip curled.

"If you know who—"

Catriona shushed me. A low growl hummed in her voice. "I don't know who would have done such a thing. And before you ask, I don't know what the passage said. Don't pester me with questions. I have to change the locks on my doors."

"Is there anything at all you can tell me about that passage?"

Catriona shot me a sharp look. "Listen here, I was trying to help. I just keep the records; I don't read them."

"Nothing? Not why she was here? You can't even tell me why she was at the church to begin with?" I threw my hands in the air.

Frustration had roused my hound. She paced, a low growl rumbling out of her.

Catriona set down her teacup and brought herself to her full height. Eyes narrowed, she pointed a finger at me. "Don't give me attitude for trying to help you. I know that your ass is backed into a corner. We're all doing what we can to help."

I laughed. I couldn't help the bitter sound as pain knifed through my chest. "Help? You call this helping? Alvin nearly killed me the other night. He went to my workplace and nearly exposed us to a bunch of humans. No one is helping me. You're all cowering. I'm left to deal with this on my own."

I shut my mouth as Catriona's gaze darkened. Her jaw tightened. Rage washed over her features before disappearing again.

I backed away, afraid that if I stayed, then I would lose control of my mouth again. No matter how many times I told myself that I forgave my pack, the truth would tumble out. Their inability to protect me hurt more

than I wanted to admit. I wanted to be strong and independent because that's what I needed to survive. The truth was, I didn't have either of those qualities.

I was just a lost dog.

And that truth hurt.

"I heard that boyfriend of yours made a deal with Queen Beryl."

I froze.

Catriona continued. "He's a pretty boy. If you make sure that woman doesn't get her claws too deep into him, you might have what it takes."

I cocked my head and half turned to peer back at Catriona. "Those words, in that order, don't make any sense to me."

Her smile held secrets that I could not yet understand. "Shoo. Take your cloud of destruction elsewhere before an angry mob sets their sights upon me for helping you."

I gritted my teeth. I could have told her that if the pack would help me, then I wouldn't have to turn to outsiders and fae queens for help. Instead, I kept my mouth shut and ducked out the door.

The sun shined brightly, as if my world wasn't coming down around my head. I fought the urge to flip it off and turned toward my car. There were only a few hours of daylight left anyway. Meeting Catriona this late in the day had really messed up my schedule.

Of course, Ryder waited for me. He leaned against the passenger side of the car with his hands casually tucked into his pockets.

When he saw me, he straightened. "How are you feeling today?"

My thigh throbbed in response. Though the wounds from the hunt had finally healed, a phantom pain still lingered. My body refused to let me forget what my pack leader had done to me.

"I didn't ask you to be my bodyguard," I said as I looked around.

We were in Lakesedge. Alvin would have eyes everywhere, all trained towards me. I didn't like the idea of being caught with Ryder again, but I guessed there was no turning back. Alvin already knew which way my allegiance would lean. He'd done his best to push me away, after all.

"I have a counteroffer that I wanted to discuss." Ryder planted his feet apart.

I got the sense that this was less of a counteroffer and more of a change of terms. Whatever Ryder wanted to add to the deal would be non-

negotiable. I swallowed and braced myself. We couldn't discuss it here. If Alvin had eyes on me, then he would have ears listening, too.

I wasn't ready to leave Lakesedge, though. Hiding among humanity on the other side of Syracuse left me feeling alone. I couldn't change the fact that my hound needed pack. The further away that I went from other shifters, the more my hound whined. My only solace was Bad Moon Café and my friends who worked there.

Here, in Lakesedge, I could watch the small fae with their gossamer wings tend to wildflowers and perennials. If I got up early enough, I could listen to the selkie song by the shore. Lakesedge had magic around every corner. I didn't feel so alone surrounded by community, even if I didn't interact with them.

But Ryder had made a deal with the Unseelie queen here. The same fae that I found comforting were small spies listening in on our conversations. We would have to head into the center of the city where there was more iron to escape them.

What a mess, I thought.

I wanted to escape Alvin's oppression and had managed to get myself and Ryder caught in a sticky web of trouble instead. I rubbed my face with my hands. That damned prophecy hadn't even said that I would be an instrument in Alvin's demise, only that I would be an omen. I could have kept my hands clean and let fate take care of him. Instead, I'd tried to control fate.

"All right," I said meekly.

Ryder's brow furrowed. "Are you okay? Have you healed yet?"

I lifted my chin and pulled a false façade of cheer over my features. "Don't worry about me. I'm back to normal again."

Ryder didn't look convinced, but he moved aside and motioned for me to get in my car. I wondered, briefly, where he'd parked his muscle car. I wouldn't have minded a ride in that. My own car was embarrassing by comparison. The empty fast-food bags in the back seat didn't make it any better.

I pulled my keys from my pocket. "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere but here." He opened the passenger door when I unlocked the car.

Watching Ryder fold his broad frame and long legs into my small sedan would have been comical had my anxiety not taken ahold of me. A shiver

ran down my spine. I looked over my shoulder, but the street was empty. That didn't bode well. Lakesedge was never empty. There was always someone, shifter kids chasing squirrels or small fae playing games in the street.

Above, the clouds darkened as if I'd shifted. I couldn't summon storms in my human form, which meant this had to be a summer storm rolling in. I swallowed and got into my seat.

Inside the car, Ryder reached for me, then hesitated. His hand hovered in the air. Warmth spilled off him in waves, but he never touched me. He pulled back and shook his head as he turned his attention outside the window beside him.

I stared at him for a moment too long. What the hell had that been? The air in here thickened. Desire pinched my stomach. The urge to reach across the gap and pull him to me nearly overwhelmed me. I gripped the steering wheel instead.

As hot as Ryder was, I figured we would be awful together. Wherever we went, lightning and destruction would follow. I didn't know what he was running from, but his desperation to escape mirrored my own. Sleeping with him would only complicate things further.

Besides, I doubted he wanted to sleep with me. He'd witnessed my weakness firsthand the night of the hunt when he'd had to air lift me out. Shifters like him, big and powerful, wanted to mate with strong and beautiful women.

I was just a mangy mutt in comparison to him.

I shook myself. My frustration and fear were getting to me. Running a hand over my hair, I reminded myself that I had just as much value as anyone else. Alvin had worked hard to plant doubt in my mind. Fighting it back had exhausted me, but I wasn't going to give up.

"Food," Ryder said, out of nowhere.

I peered at him out of the corner of my eye. His jaw firm, he stared directly ahead. His stiffness made me wonder what was going on in his head.

Ryder

FUCKING HELL.

I hadn't accounted for how good she would smell inside this ridiculously small car. I clenched my fists as my dragon rioted inside me. Just one whiff of her scent had woken it and sent it into a furious fit. I stiffened and fought to keep my hands to myself.

I'd nearly touched Ness earlier, when it'd seemed like the world had rested its weight on her shoulders. She had looked miserable when she stepped out of that house by the lake. The dark cloud surrounding her had made me want to hunt Alvin down and finish him off.

Seeing Ness in trouble unraveled my control. It'd happened the night of the hunt with her pack and the day after when Alvin had paid her a visit at the café. I wanted to rip apart anyone who dared lay a hand on her.

The lessons my father had taught me at a young age would never leave me. Even though I couldn't follow in my father's footsteps and assume leadership of my clan, I would always carry his teachings with me. That meant I had to protect the weak at all costs.

That was why I did what I did. I'd stained my own soul to uphold his teachings.

The dragon gnawed at me from the inside. It chewed on my innards and sent hunger rolling through me. It wasn't just food that I wanted, though. I wanted Ness. I wanted her in my lap, where my arms could keep her safe and my lips could finally give me a taste of her.

"For fuck's sake," I growled.

"No need to get grumpy," Ness muttered as she turned onto a side street and merged with traffic.

We left Lakesedge, and the number of cars around us tripled. I marveled at the magical barriers that kept humans from wandering too far into Lakesedge. In the rearview mirror, I saw rows and rows of warehouses instead of the homes that I knew were there.

Back home, no such magic protected us from humanity. My small hometown in the mountains was protected by the landscape. Dragons made up most of the community, but there were others with arcana who lived among us. We kept each other safe in the privacy of our own bubble.

Here, the two worlds butted up against one another, yet humanity had no idea what lurked near their lake. Memories of the fae court under the lake made me shiver. Ness stole another wary glance at me.

I cleared my face so that there was nothing to read there. She narrowed her eyes at me and turned back to the road ahead.

“I’m getting food from a drive thru, then we can head back to your place. We shouldn’t spend too much time together. Alvin has been looking for an excuse to kill me for years. You’ve finally given him one.” She flicked the blinker and turned into a drive-thru coffee shop.

“When I said food, I meant something more substantial.”

She gestured to the sub shop connected to the café. “You’re welcome to get out and order food while I get my coffee.”

“How are you not vibrating into a parallel universe? You drink way too much caffeine.” I kicked my door open and left without waiting for her to respond.

Ness rolled down her window and leaned out. “Get me an Italian meat combo while you’re in there!”

Though I gave her the middle finger over my shoulder, I knew I’d do as she asked. I wanted her to have the energy to run should Alvin come for her. If I left her living on nothing but coffee, I would feel awful if she died.

The thought of Ness, dead in a ditch, filled my throat with white hot lightning. It crackled across my tongue and between my teeth. Rage simmered in my stomach and made my blood boil. I systematically cracked my knuckles one by one, but that did little to bleed away the rage making my dragon go wild.

I could do as Ness asked and kill Alvin. Then she would be safe, and I would be able to move on. I wouldn’t have to worry about the little hound shifter anymore.

But I wasn’t going to bloody my hands again. I couldn’t do it. Once was enough. No matter how many times I told myself that I could do it again, I wasn’t sure if I had enough soul left to give up. Too much of me had been sheared away by guilt. Duty wasn’t enough of an excuse for me to do this anymore.

That was why I’d tracked Ness down. Well, that and the fact that I needed to tell her about what I wanted. She’d barely given me anything to work with. I wasn’t sure what kind of arcana she had at her disposal, so I didn’t know what to ask of her.

Today, we would settle this so that both of us could move on.

Ness pulled around the front of the coffee and sub shop combo. She peered out the window while sipping from a ridiculously loaded coffee. Her

eyes flashed when she saw the bag of food in my hand.

I rolled my eyes. Damn dog.

Back at the rental apartment, I tossed the bag of food onto the coffee table and dropped into a chair. Ness lingered in the doorway. The way she looked back over her shoulder enraged me. I knew she was looking for danger.

No shifter should have to live their life like that. The fact that Alvin hated Ness this much made me want to break something, preferably his neck.

“Why does he hate you so much?”

Her shoulders slumped. She stepped inside and kicked the door closed behind her. Though she lifted the coffee to her lips, she didn’t drink. It hovered in front of her like a lifeline. I guessed it was the one comfort she could afford in a world that left her little softness.

I faced forward so I could turn away from the urge to fold her into my arms. Eventually, she threw herself onto the couch across from me. She yanked a sub from the bag and gave it a sniff. Scowling, she shoved it toward me and grabbed the other sub.

“Are you going to answer me?” I leaned forward, elbows on my knees and stared her down.

Ness ignored me. She unwrapped half of her sub and took the largest bite she could manage. I watched the shifter woman tear into the bread and meat as if filling her mouth would keep her from having to explain herself. Eventually, she would run out of food. That, or she would choke on her idiocy.

At least here, I knew she was safe. My beast calmed a bit. The dragon in me wanted to know if she would run out of food or choke first. If the second happened, I was here to help. I wasn’t too concerned.

“Well?” I asked.

She swallowed hard. Her gaze went distant.

What the hell had she done to deserve Alvin’s hate? I tensed, fearing the worst. Had she killed someone? If that was the case, then she should have had the power to deal with Alvin on her own. I doubted Ness had committed the same sin as me. She didn’t carry the same ghosts. If anything, she looked beat down.

“Witches hate me,” she said, finally.

I sat back and waited for her to continue. A few moments passed. Silence stretched until she cleared her throat and dragged herself back to the present. I knew she was here when she looked me in the eye.

“A witch came through town a few years before I was born. She gave our historian a prophecy. A black hound would foretell the fall of the pack’s alpha. No one thought anything of it until my first shift. Then, Alvin decided to make me pay for the witch’s words. He’s been trying to keep me under his control ever since.”

“Wouldn’t they have known what you would become during your first shift? Someone in your family would have had to have been a hound for you to be one, too.”

Ness gave a half-hearted shrug. I watched her closely, but she was well practiced at putting up walls. I couldn’t read anything beyond anger at this point.

I leaned back as my own thoughts turned. I’d approached her with a request because of another witch. That explained why she thought witches hated her. Half of her life had been dictated by the words of witches.

Desperation pinched my gut, but I kept it from showing. Thoughts of my brother rolled to the forefront of my mind. If she could help me, then I needed her to do so soon. I wouldn’t allow pity for her to get in my way. This wasn’t a friendship.

It was a transaction.

I needed to guard my emotions better. In my time away from my clan, my own barriers had deteriorated. There was no need to guard oneself if you never stayed too long. This was as close as I’d gotten to anyone in the past year.

My beast craved company, but Ness had to stay at an arm’s length.

“Look,” I said. “We can’t mess around anymore. There’s too much at risk.”

Ness lifted a brow. Rage flickered in her eyes. My beast chastised me for my words. I needed to bring a wall down between us to protect myself, even if my beast hated me for hurting her in the process.

“No shit,” she growled. “My life. That’s what is at risk. Don’t you think I know that?”

I exhaled through my nose. I knew that. It should have been more important to me, but with the wall between myself and my emotions, I felt nothing. A chill crept over me. I sank into it and allowed it to swallow me.

“I won’t kill your Alpha. You can’t ask that of anyone.”

If my declaration did anything to her, she kept it well hidden. I waited and watched her expression, but it remained a burning mask of anger. I expected her to fly off the handle or show some sort of desperation. When neither happened, I continued.

“I will, however, help you dethrone the man. He shouldn’t be allowed to lead anyone. If you have any ideas that don’t involve murder, I will be more than happy to help.”

Her anger vanished in the blink of an eye. She threw her feet to the floor and leaned forward. A vicious smile curled across her lips. I watched the light of her hatred flicker in her eyes once more.

My heart did backflips until I took ahold of it. I would not allow myself to fall for this angry little vixen. We were here to use one another.

But the beast reminded me of other ways to use each other. It pushed visions of her face twisted with pleasure to the forefront of my mind. If only I could make those bright eyes roll back in her head as I touched her. Maybe then I would be free of this desire punishing me every time she came too close.

When my blood started to rush south, I banished the thoughts from my mind. My beast sulked, growling at me the whole time. I couldn’t afford to humor the beast or else I would lose what little time I had left. If I wasted it indulging in pleasure, then my brother would catch up to me.

Our fight would devastate this small city. Ness already had enough to worry about. I couldn’t allow my actions to make anything worse for Ness. She was a pain, but she didn’t deserve that.

CHAPTER 11

I sensed a distance between Ryder and myself that hadn't been there. The night of the hunt had brought us closer. Perhaps seeing my vulnerability had made him feel something for me. That closeness shattered and left a canyon in its wake. Ryder, who had been so concerned for my safety, had pulled away from me.

That was fine by me. Tall, Dark, and Mysterious could do whatever he wanted so long as he did what needed to be done. His counteroffer was reasonable. I'd felt bad for asking him to kill.

We didn't need to go that far. My fear had gotten the best of me. It'd become warped. I never wanted to kill Alvin. I simply wanted him gone. That could take many forms.

"I need help finding evidence that Alvin was a bastard long before he began focusing on me."

Ryder narrowed his eyes.

I explained the prophecy and how it'd hinted that Alvin had been a cruel Alpha long before my hound had shown itself. I had nothing to prove that theory, but I hoped that Ryder could help somehow.

How? I hadn't figured that out yet.

But he nodded. "Before I do that, I need you to help me first."

I fought back a grimace. Whoops.

I'd completely forgotten that I was supposed to do something for him. If he would tell me what, then maybe I could practice. Until then, I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

His eyes became distant. A cloud shadowed his face as he tumbled back into his own thoughts. I wondered if a memory had taken ahold of him. If so, then it wasn't a good one. Sorrow and fury mingled on his features.

I got up and snapped my fingers in front of his face. He came back to the present with a horrid snarl. Blazing eyes flashed at me. I was too tired to be afraid of Ryder. He could have ripped me in half, but I doubted he would go through the trouble of hunting me down only to kill me.

His snarl faded with a sigh. He ran his hand over his face and turned his gaze away from me. I waited for his attention to drift back in time again. When it didn't, I sat silently so he could tell me his horror story.

I had a feeling I wasn't going to like this. His shadows were too dark. Something lurked in the back of his eyes that I wanted to shine a light on.

"I left my clan for a reason." His brow fell flat, like he was weighing his words before he said more.

Impatience grabbed ahold of me. I wanted to shake the truth out of him. Instead, I sat on my hands. My thundering heart couldn't help me make good decisions while it pumped adrenaline into my system.

"I heard that you might have been framed for your clan leader's murder," I said, even though I'd done my best to keep my mouth shut.

His sigh turned into a growl. He fixed his angry glare on me. "I wasn't framed. I killed him."

My stomach plummeted. Without thinking, I sprang up from my seat and ran for the door. My fight or flight instinct took over. With my hound close to the surface, my mind emptied, throwing logic away so that I could escape.

Ryder caught me around the middle before I could get out the door. He pulled me tight to his chest and whispered softly. My hound thrashed. I kicked and bucked, but Ryder's hold was firm.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Ryder whispered, over and over again.

I could hear the edge in his voice, how he was close to breaking. I couldn't stop, though. My hound had enough. She wanted freedom. She wanted to feel safe for once in her life. If she couldn't find that here, then nowhere was safe.

I wanted to scream, but I swallowed the sound before it could escape me.

"Ness, you're all right. I'm not going to hurt you. I would never hurt you."

“You can’t promise me that,” I growled. “You barely know me! Why would you promise that?”

Panic turned the room sideways. My hound scratched at me. My skin would break soon, and the hound would leap out of me. Where would she go? I had no idea. I had to keep her locked away so she couldn’t run too far.

My back hit the couch. Air whooshed from my lungs. Surprised, I stared up at the ceiling. He placed his broad hand over my chest to hold me down. The weight of his touch grounded me.

So, the room had tilted because Ryder had picked me up? I’d been out of control. In my panic, I hadn’t even noticed that he’d lifted me off the ground.

His face, hair falling in a veil around us, filled my vision. “Are you going to behave?”

“Eat shit,” I whispered, exhausted.

I covered my face with my hands and waited for my heartrate to settle once again. My hound still paced wildly. She wanted to know where Ryder was and make sure that he wasn’t going to hurt me, but I kept my vision obscured by my own hands.

When Ryder spoke again, his voice was still just as close. “I meant what I said. I won’t hurt you, Ness.”

I’d just lost my mind and told him to eat shit, but still he kept his cool. He gave me his word that he wouldn’t harm me. I wasn’t used to men who had my best interests in mind. We’d spent half this discussion trying to pull away from one another.

That canyon that had opened between us suddenly didn’t seem so large. I pulled my hands away from my face and peered up at him. Sincerity arched the middle of his brows. His lips parted as our gazes locked.

I clenched my fists to keep from reaching for him. The desperate need to know what he tasted like nearly won out. I kept it back, but only barely. My fingertips grazed the front of his shirt before I realized what I’d done.

Ryder took ahold of my wrist without breaking eye contact. My heart pattered again, but not in fear. This time something else overcame me. My damned hound rolled over and exposed her belly to him again. I wanted him, too, but she could play it cool for five minutes.

Before I could decide whether or not to act on my thoughts, Ryder pulled away. His fingers slipped away from my wrist and left me bereft. My hand crashed down to my chest, where it lay useless.

Ryder turned his back to me as he gripped his hair and tugged. “Do you know what Treasure Sickness is?”

So, we weren’t going to talk about what just happened there? I was okay with ignoring my little freak-out, but I wanted to address the chemistry in the room. Instead, I swallowed my stupid feelings back down and shook my head.

It took me longer than I wanted to admit to remember that Ryder couldn’t see me with his back turned. After that, I choked out a pathetic, “No.”

He stalked into the kitchen. I heard the fridge open and the clank of glass bottles knocking against one another. The soft hiss of a bottle being opened slithered into the living room. Growing impatient, I waited for him to return.

When he stepped back into the room, he took a long drag from the bottle before speaking. “Dragons are a little different from other shifters. We collect things. For some, that manifests in knickknacks. For others, it’s coins or stamps. Our leaders collect their clan. That’s what motivates them to keep the clan safe.”

I cocked my head. There were few to no similarities between stamps and people, but I didn’t point that out.

“Sometimes, Treasure Sickness can manifest in dragons. It takes the form of paranoia and anger. I watched my clan leader become paranoid that his people would leave him. He started lashing out against them. It got to the point where I was taking the brunt of his anger just to hide it from the others, so they wouldn’t have to know.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Shifters don’t always know how to act when their leader turns against them.”

The look Ryder gave me held more sadness than I knew what to do with. I clamped my lips shut and reminded myself that I didn’t know his clanmates.

Ryder didn’t go on. I bit my lip to keep from saying anything stupid.

What did any of this have to do with me? If only witches could be more direct with their ominous statements. I wouldn’t be in this predicament so much. I would know how to help Ryder, so he wouldn’t have to stay too much longer.

My gaze dropped to the medallion that had fallen out from behind his shirt when he’d grabbed me. He’d made a promise to Queen Beryl in order

to protect himself against Alvin. I shouldn't have felt so guilty about a decision that Ryder had made by himself, but I couldn't help it. Knowing that my father had suggested it made it even worse.

I wrapped my arms around myself and whispered, "I just want to be safe."

Ryder sighed, a sound filled with pity. I had the urge to punch him in the groin but stayed where I was. Making him hurt because I couldn't withstand his pity wouldn't change anything. I wasn't going to be like Alvin. My anger and fear would not get the best of me.

I would be a better person than Alvin or Harvey. This pack deserved better, and I was willing to do the work to make that happen. At least, I was willing to do it for now. My motivation waned. Fear slowly ate at me from the inside out.

Though Ryder had promised to keep me safe, he wouldn't stay forever. I couldn't count on the dragon shifter to always have my back.

Not for the first time, the idea of leaving tiptoed into my mind. There was a sanctuary in Tennessee and a rehabilitation pack in Oregon. They would be able to protect me. I wouldn't have to worry about giving my schedule to the Alpha. The feeling of being watched wouldn't haunt me so much.

No. I couldn't leave. I'd just promised to help my pack. What kind of person would I be if I left to save myself?

Alive.

"What did you do? Why did you have to leave your clan?" I asked.

Ryder remained silent. When I looked at him, I found him staring out a window at the skyline. The way his eyes flicked over the horizon warned me that he was waiting for someone. A shiver rippled down my spine.

We didn't have time to sink into our sins and past regrets. I sat upright and planted my feet on the floor. Thinking about my earlier panic response made my cheeks burn, but I did my best to ignore it and focus on what we had to get done.

"We need to make a plan," I said, drawing Ryder back to the present.

He nodded, finished his beer, and chucked the bottle into the bin behind him. When he sat down across from me, he mirrored my pose. I inhaled to steady myself and began listing my ideas.



Ryder's counteroffer hadn't been as bad as I'd anticipated. I left his rental with a spring in my step. I had hope, for once. We could pull this off. We could actually change something and make the Lakesedge pack *better*.

I was so distracted by my thoughts that I didn't hear Harvey sneak up behind me. His scent hit me just as he grabbed a fistful of my hair. I jerked backwards and stumbled. He used my lack of balance to yank me into him.

He used his other hand to cover my mouth. A grin spread over his face.

"Let's put some distance between us and your friend's house. Shall we?" Harvey dragged me along.

My hound fought to break free, but I couldn't shift outside of Lakesedge. The privacy Ryder got from staying on the human side of the city hindered me every time I left. If we'd been in Lakesedge, I would have changed and booked it out of here. Instead, Harvey had me trapped.

Two blocks away from Ryder's rental apartment, Harvey stopped. He pulled me tight to his body.

"I heard that Dad finally gave you the ultimatum. If you don't stop consorting with the outsider, he'll put you down." Harvey ran his knuckle over my cheek.

With his hand off my mouth, I pulled my lips back in a snarl and growled. He wasted no time in slapping me. My cheek stung, but I wasn't bothered. It was the least of what he could have done. I'd survived this before. I would survive it again.

This was what my life had come down to. I endured abuse so much that something like a slap seemed like child's play. Every time Alvin escalated, the previous torture was no longer as frightening as it had been before.

"Eat shit, Harvey. I don't want whatever you're selling."

He gave me a shake. His growl echoed in the dark. "Watch your mouth, mutt. I came here to give you options. I don't want my dad to kill my favorite plaything. If you're a good little mutt, I'll convince him to let me have you. I want to fuck you in front of that pathetic friend of yours. I'll laugh while Connor cries himself to sleep."

Stomach churning, I ripped myself out of Harvey's grasp. My scalp stung from the hair he pulled out, but it would grow back.

"Do I have to repeat myself?" I asked. I forced as much bravado as I could muster into my voice to keep it from shaking. "Eat shit, Harvey."

So, Connor had feelings for me? I didn't know how to process that while staring Harvey down. I couldn't let my guard down or Harvey would

grab me again. Ryder was too far away to hear this unless I screamed, which I didn't want to do unless it was the only option I had left.

I didn't need Ryder to rescue me all the time.

"I'm not going to be your plaything." My stomach turned at the thought.

Here, on the human side of the city, Harvey couldn't hurt me. I took a step back to put more space between us. The air around him made me sick to my stomach. He watched me with a frightening intensity as he closed the distance between us.

Harvey lifted his hand. I flinched.

Revulsion at my own reaction unfurled within me. I gritted my teeth and held my ground, even when Harvey gripped my chin.

"Be careful," I whispered. "Or a human will see you and call the cops."

I hoped that the threat of human intervention would be enough to make Harvey pull back. He glanced about before gesturing broadly.

"What humans? It's just you and me out here, mutt."

I clenched my jaw and prepared myself to run. How far would I get before he caught up to me? If I ran back to Ryder's, would that cause more trouble?

Ryder wouldn't be here forever. I had to handle things on my own.

"You're never going to get in these pants." I threw myself backwards.

Harvey reached for me, but I spun and sprinted across the nearest lawn. I ran between houses and prayed that no one happened to glance out their window. My heart lodged itself in my throat. There, it thundered violently. I almost couldn't hear Harvey's footsteps as he chased after me.

There was no way I would shake Harvey in this form. My legs were shorter than his. I had struggled in PE, even as a shifter. I would have to shift to get an extra speed boost. After that, I would have to shake him. If Harvey shifted, too, then I would be shit out of luck.

My hound form was small and agile. With my dark pelt, I'd blend into the dimming night and disappear easily. But where could I shift and not expose myself?

I scanned my surroundings for somewhere I could hide. The nearby underpass called my name. It would give me cover for a moment, which was all I would need. The underpass also told me that we were getting closer to Lakesedge.

Hope flared brightly before Harvey's howl pierced the night. I looked back. When had he shifted? While I was distracted, my feet tangled beneath

me. I lurched forward and caught myself. My palms grated against the sidewalk.

With an angry wolf closing in behind me, I forced myself upright and ignored the stinging in my palms and the angry throb of my knee. If I survived this, I would rat Harvey out for being a dumb bastard. I wanted to see Alvin beat his son's ass.

I jumped into the shadows under the raised highway. The roar of cars overhead drowned out my fear for a moment. My hound leapt to the surface as I scanned the road behind me for Harvey. He hadn't caught up yet, which didn't make any sense.

I couldn't have lost him that easily. Last I'd known, he'd been right behind me.

My hands shook as they hit the concrete again. My fingers curled into paws. Small claws emerged from my knuckles. Between inhale and exhale, my hound stepped out and shook herself. She scented the air, but she couldn't sense anything past the exhaust overhead and the smell of trash drifting on the wind.

Run, I told her.

I spun and crashed into a solid form. The smell of enemy wolf set off alarms in my head. I reeled back, struggling to get my feet under me again. Harvey let out a sound that was almost a laugh. He prowled closer, but I wasn't about to give him time to pounce on me.

I jumped over him. He tossed his head in an effort to grab me, but I used his head as a jumping point. He snarled, but I didn't stick around to hear it.

My claws scrabbled against the ground when I landed. Above, a storm gathered. I held my breath in the hopes that it would disperse and leave me alone for once. I had no such luck. The stars refused to align and reveal any kind of arcana to me.

Thankfully, Lakesedge wasn't far away. I took a sharp turn down a familiar road. The spells over Lakesedge rippled along my pelt when I dashed through them. Though the sense of returning home overcame me, I couldn't let my guard down. I wasn't safe yet.

I chanced another glance back. Harvey had vanished again. Adrenaline hit my bloodstream like a bucket of cold water. I paused and searched for him. My scan was fruitless. Wherever Harvey had gone, I couldn't find him in the dark.

Swallowing, I turned back. My home wasn't far away. I had another two blocks before I could scramble through the doggy door in the backyard.

I'd almost confessed everything. The words had been hard to dredge up, but once they'd reached my tongue, I'd had to hold back the worst of it.

Thankfully, Ness had changed the subject and given me the opportunity to shut my mouth. The plan we'd come up with had been agreeable.

Night had fallen while we'd discussed our options. I'd offered to let her stay. At least I would know she was safe if she stayed. Instead, she declined. My beast snarled when she left. The creature told me to follow her because she would inevitably find herself in the middle of another fight again.

I declined, much to my beast's frustration. I couldn't babysit her at all times. Eventually, Morgan would catch up to me. I didn't want to be in the middle of an altercation with Ness's enemies when my brother arrived. That wouldn't be fair to Ness.

Glancing at my burner phone, I wondered if Morgan had noticed that my other phone had stopped moving. I'd turned it off days ago, but Morgan had always been better with technology than me.

For reasons beyond my understanding, I hadn't been able to get rid of my phone. I'd clung to the photos and old voice recordings. It was all I had left of a life I would never get back.

Dad, telling me he was proud of me.

My brother, wishing me a happy birthday.

Mom, complaining that I'd forgotten to take the trash out again.

I missed them all more than I wanted to admit. They meant everything to me. I'd done it all for them.

I had to remind myself of that. Though there was blood on my hands, I'd done it to protect those I loved—both the living and the memories of the now-dead.

“Fuck,” I whispered into the dark room.

I pressed my hand to my eyes and tried to blot out the memories rising there. I could almost see Dad's face right before...

Thunder cracked overhead.

“Oh, for fuck's sake.” Could that dog not stay out of trouble for more than an hour?

I rolled off the couch. The moment my boots hit the floor, the burner phone lit up. I grabbed it, thinking that Ness had called for help. Of course, had I been thinking, I would have remembered that the storms only appeared while she was in her hound form.

I would have stopped and looked at the number on the screen, instead of answering the call and holding it to my ear.

The voice that said my name made my stomach hit the floor.

Morgan snarled. “I don't know where you are right this minute, brother, but I'm going to find you soon. You're going to pay for what you did, traitor.”

I could have explained myself, but my tongue twisted. The words were caught behind the knot in my mouth. Nothing came out. Silence crackled over the line, occasionally broken by Morgan's growl.

I almost wished Ness had stayed the night. Then I could have handed the phone over to her and had her lie for me. That would have raised a million questions, but it would have given me a little more time. Now, I would have to destroy this phone and hope that Morgan hadn't tracked it to Syracuse.

Unable to speak, I hung up on Morgan. I stared at the cell phone in my hand for a long while before crushing it in my grasp. Small pieces of plastic crumpled and clattered on the floor. Glass from the screen pierced the mound of my thumb. I blew out a breath to steady myself and slowly pulled it out.

The wound closed while I tossed the blood-covered glass onto the coffee table. If it stained, I would find a way to pay the rental owner for the damages. Right now, I was more concerned with my brother.

How had he found me so quickly? I knew technology had made hiding difficult, but I never thought he would work that fast. I should have known

better. After what I did? Of course, Morgan would use everything at his disposal to find me.

I cursed and stood so I could throw away the remnants of the phone. Though I wanted to fling it into the lake, I wasn't about to pollute Beryl's waters. I already had enough trouble on my plate.

Ness

I **SPRINTED THROUGH LAKESEDGE**. The top of my house appeared ahead, sending hope fluttering through me. I just had to make it to the back door. If I could get inside, then I would be safe. Harvey wouldn't bother my parents.

Just as the rush of hope appeared, Harvey leapt out in front of me. His claws made a horrendous scraping sound as he landed and spun toward me. He went in for a bite. I dodged out of the way of his snapping jaws at the last second.

Small and agile, I dropped and flung myself under his body. I slid past him and jumped back to my feet. Harvey wasted no time in spinning. He pounced on me and shoved me into the ground.

My teeth rattled as the world stuttered. Harvey's claws sunk into my back and pierced the skin.

The sky above trembled with rage. I could feel the building energy. Thunder rumbled across the city. Harvey's hot breath washed over my ear as he leaned in close. I tensed, waiting for the strike—either Harvey's attack or lightning from the storm.

Neither came.

Harvey's weight tumbled off me. Breath held, I had to force myself to move. I didn't look back to see who had attacked Harvey. I ran like my life depended on it.

Who had saved me, though? It hadn't been Ryder. I would have recognized his massive dragon form. Had one of the fae helped me out on Ryder's behalf? I shuddered to think of how much I would owe for aid from the fae. They would give the help, then demand something in return even though I hadn't asked for anything.

I scrambled under the fence in the back yard. Dragging my belly through mud to get to safety wasn't the lowest point of my life, but I knew that I would continue to get lower and lower from here. The mud was the least of my problems.

The windows ahead gave off a gentle glow that cast shadows across the lawn. I tensed, waiting for something to leap out at me, be it Harvey or a fae. When nothing struck, I took a cautious step forward.

The backdoor doggy hatch was within sight. If I made a dash for it, I could throw myself inside where no one would be able to bother me.

At least, not until I had to leave again for work in the morning.

I wanted to ask why my life had come to this, belly down in the mud and too afraid to run to safety, but I already knew the answer to that question. This sequence of events had been brought on by a witch with a big mouth.

I wanted to rip fate to shreds. The threads that bound this world together meant little to me if they trapped me like this.

Summoning a little bit of courage, I rose on shaky legs and lurched for the door at the other end of the lawn. I expected someone to take me by surprise again. Lightning crashed near the road. It illuminated everything to show that the path was clear.

"What the hell is your daughter doing?" Dad shouted just as I crashed through the doggy door.

Mom's distant sigh was haggard.

I slumped on the floor and caught my breath before shifting back to human form. There was a blanket nearby for moments like this. Heedless of the mud on my fur, I snatched it and pulled it over myself.

I shuddered when my form changed. Paws turned into palms pressed flat against the laundry room floor. My chest heaved. Running for my life in the chill night air had seared my lungs. Even changing forms couldn't quite chase away the burn in my chest. So much for being a shifter. My healing capabilities sucked.

Mom appeared in the doorway. Her eyes went wide. Though her lips formed an O of surprise, she didn't say anything. I often wondered if she was too afraid to face the truth. It hurt to think that my mother lied to herself about my predicament. Then again, I understood the urge to avoid reality.

She ducked her head in a quick nod and went back to the kitchen. For a moment, I thought she'd abandoned me. Then I heard the soft clank of pans and knew that she was making something for me to eat. I let out a tired sigh and pressed my face to the floor.

"You know they wouldn't harass you so much if you didn't put up a fight," Dad said.

My hound whimpered inside me. How could he go from protecting me to berating me? I didn't understand it. The sudden switch in his demeanor broke me. I couldn't summon even an ounce of my normal attitude to defend myself. In front of my father, I fell apart.

Tears burned my cheeks. I turned my face downward so that he couldn't see how much this hurt. I should have asked him about Ryder and Queen Beryl, but my voice failed me. Inside, my hound crouched low to make herself small.

Dad was the only one with the power to make me feel like this. Alvin could smack me around. Harvey could grab ahold of me. I rose to their challenges and let my tongue bear my venom. Yet, whenever my dad shook his head and voiced his disappointment, I fell apart.

"Just give them what they want, and they'll start to believe that you're harmless. I know you won't live up to that damned prophecy. You need to show them that."

No, I thought. My life is my own, and I will not let anyone control me.

He grumbled. "If your mother's damned fae blood hadn't interfered, you wouldn't have to deal with this."

There he went, trying to place blame. The only person to blame for what was happening to me was Alvin. Had Alvin been a good man, he wouldn't have balked in the face of a prophecy that called for the fall of a cruel man. Alvin wouldn't have batted an eyelash.

The man had done well to cover his tracks, but I would find whatever he was hiding. I had to. If I didn't, then I would never get my pack's help.

"Mom can't control what her blood does," I said, my voice barely more than a mumble.

Dad wrinkled his nose and shook his head before wandering away. I sat up and pulled the blanket around myself. I needed a shower, but the mystery of whoever had helped me still remained.

On my hands and knees, I pushed the doggy door open so I could peer out into the night once again. My heart thumped, even though I promised

myself I would not go back out there. I wasn't going to put myself in harm's way again tonight.

Not for anyone.

Behind me, Mom threw a set of sweats and a pack of wet wipes into the room. I startled and leapt back from the doggy door. My heartrate skyrocketed. I pressed my palm to my chest to keep my heart where it belonged—inside my body.

A soft whine outside pulled my attention back to the door. The pain I heard in that one sound made me leap to my feet. I ignored the wet wipes and threw on the clothes so I could burst outside once more. A part of me wanted to go back where it was safe, but I lurched down the back steps anyway.

The sound of someone in need made me run across the lawn. Mud climbed up my ankles and splattered my sweatpants. At the fence, I paused and waited for the sound again. Breath held, I pressed my hand to the fence and strained to listen.

This could have been a trick. Harvey wasn't above deceit. They knew that I wasn't as heartless as they were. I wouldn't leave someone who needed my help.

Pack meant more to me than it did to them.

No matter how long I waited, I didn't hear the sound again. Wherever it'd come from, it was no longer around. I could have sworn that I'd heard a wolf whine. That's what it had sounded like. If Harvey had baited me, then he wouldn't have given up so easily.

That could only mean the sound had been real. Someone had been calling out for help.

I clenched my fists and looked around. In the glow of the windows behind me, I noticed a ladder leaning up against the house. Hurrying, I grabbed it and dragged it over to the fence so I could peer into the world beyond.

I had to remember that just because I was in my own yard, that didn't mean that I was safe. Harvey could easily grab me and pull me over the fence before anyone could stop him. That didn't deter me, though. I climbed the ladder and searched the darkness behind the house for signs of where that sound had come from.

"Where are you?" I whispered.

A wolf had saved me. I just knew it. Deep down, I knew that a wolf had hit Harvey to give me time to run. Helping me would not go without punishment. I'd gotten away because of someone else's sacrifice.

Ice filled my veins. I could see no one no matter how I craned my neck. Disappointed and concerned, I stepped down from the ladder.

The back door flew open, making me jump. Dad's silhouette filled the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing outside? Get your ass back in here where we know you're safe."

As much as I wanted to argue and tell him that he didn't care if I was safe, I remembered what Ryder had told me. My father had stuck his neck out for me. Dad had sent Ryder to Queen Beryl, too. Though I wasn't sure if that was the best piece of advice he'd given, I figured he might have had good intentions at heart.

I wished someone would give me their all. If one person could have my back in every way, maybe I would be able to go out and live my own life. Dad would only help if I was near death. Ryder needed something from me and the moment I gave it to him, he would vanish. Connor and the others were too afraid to risk their necks.

I had the ladies at Bad Moon Café, but I didn't want to risk their safety, too. They weren't shifters. No one at the café had shifter healing.

Maybe I was just making up excuses to not ask for help. It didn't feel right to involve them in this fight when they weren't really a part of it. Even Cerri, who had been born to shifter parents, had managed to escape the worst of Alvin's cruelty. I wasn't about to pull her into his warpath.

Sad and concerned for whoever had helped me, I wrapped my arms around myself and carried my exhausted bones back inside. Mom had left a sandwich on the counter for me. There was even a pickle on the plate. I spared a moment to wash my hands before carrying the sandwich upstairs, so I could scarf it down while the shower water heated up.

The hot water seared the healing scratches on my palms, but I savored the pain that reminded me I was still alive. It was a small thing, one that I wished I didn't have to rely upon. Did Janessa or Kelsey feel the same way? Alvin and Harvey threatened them into submission. The women in this pack were too afraid to take my place.

Someone entered the bathroom. The scent of Mom's perfume danced in the moist air as I heard the creak of the toilet lid. Mom sighed from her seat.

I stilled, unsure of where this conversation might go.

Mom wasn't pack. She had a little fae blood in her, but that was about it. She didn't have quick healing or super strength. She didn't even have any arcana, as far as I knew. For the most part, Mom was a human who knew too much about Lakesedge.

"Do you need anything else?" she asked. "If you need more to eat, I can defrost some lasagna."

I hesitated. A knot in my chest blocked any words that I might have said. I knew an apology would come next. Mom's guilt over my situation weighed heavily on her. While Dad blamed her, I knew that she never could have anticipated what would happen. Any anger I might have felt towards her fae blood faded when I watched her cry.

"Have..." Mom paused. "Have you thought about leaving? If you went to college in another state and found a good job, you wouldn't have to worry about anything here. It could all go back to normal."

Her words cut me down. My lungs tightened.

Back to normal.

After what Alvin had done, could the pack go back to normal? Could they just ignore everything that Alvin was capable of? I didn't want to think so, but it seemed like they were all desperate to pretend that nothing had ever happened.

Hot tears mingled with the shower spray as I said, "I don't want to waste money on college tuition when I don't know what I would do."

Mom made a sound of acknowledgement in her throat. That sound trailed off. "I just want you to be safe. You could find another pack, one that would protect you. There's a good one in Tennessee."

I dropped into a crouch and wrapped my arms around myself. Why did I have to give up everything I knew just for existing? Lakesedge was my home. This pack was still my family, even if they didn't have backbones.

"Can we just watch some TV tonight?" I asked. "Maybe make some popcorn?"

"Do you want me to add the buffalo seasoning?"

"Sure." I stood and rinsed my hair.

There wasn't enough water to wash away the events of the night.

I didn't expect to see Ryder posted outside my house when I left for work the next day. Though the desire to ask him where he'd been last night pinched my stomach, I kept the words locked behind my clenched teeth.

Ryder gave me a two-fingered salute in greeting as I approached his car. We didn't have time to say anything before Harvey's truck screeched to a halt in the middle of the road. I stiffened when Harvey poured out of his truck. He staggered toward me with a big smile on his face.

Several things happened at once. Harvey reached for me. I jerked back, out of his reach at the same time that Ryder grabbed Harvey by the back of his neck. He yanked Harvey away from me and growled in the wolf shifter's face.

Harvey's look of glee didn't fade, though. Fear made my breath shudder out of me. I recalled the sound I'd heard the night before. I hadn't been able to find the source of the pained whimper.

"What did you do?" I whispered.

Ryder stole a glance in my direction. His brows arched when he saw me. I must have been pale. The low growl that rumbled from Ryder confused me. Was he angry that Harvey was upsetting me? Did he actually care about me?

I didn't have time to think about that right now.

"Come with me and you'll find out," Harvey said, smugly.

I grimaced. "I have to go to work soon..."

Harvey laughed. "Dad already called out for you. They'll find a replacement on their own."

The way he said it made it sound like I would never go back to work. My stomach churned. The bacon sandwich I'd devoured earlier would come back up if I didn't get control of myself soon.

"Tell your attack dog to let go of me," Harvey said. "Or you might lose another friend."

The world fell out from under my feet. Weightless, I struggled to find balance as I asked, "What do you mean?"

Full of himself, Harvey gestured to Ryder. "Call him off."

Ryder shook Harvey and growled, "I'm a dragon, not a dog like yourself."

Though I caught a glimpse of fear in Harvey's eyes when Ryder snarled in his face, that smug confidence never fully fell away. Harvey knew my weakness. I hated how well the bastard understood me. I'd stood up for my pack one too many times. Harvey and Alvin had been paying attention the whole time.

"Let him go, Ryder."

Ryder gaped at me. "You can't be serious! He's just trying to manipulate you. You understand that, right?"

I knew that. They'd been doing it for years now. What could I do when someone else was in trouble, though?

I locked eyes with Ryder. "You weren't there last night. Someone helped me and now they're paying the price. I can't...I can't let that happen." My voice cracked. I couldn't help it when my heart had shattered.

My nails pressed into my palms from how tightly I'd balled my fists. Ryder let Harvey go. The wolf shifter staggered away from Ryder before straightening his spine. If Harvey had a tail in this form, it would have been tucked between his legs in Ryder's presence. I knew that Ryder could have thrown Harvey on his ass, but I would not risk the life of another just to watch Harvey get what he deserved.

"In the truck," Harvey commanded. He turned his attention to Ryder. "You're welcome to come and enjoy the show, too. Just remember that your pet won't like the consequences if you decide to act out."

"Ness isn't my pet," Ryder said.

I placed a hand on Ryder's chest as I passed by him on my way to Harvey's truck. The sooner we got this over, the better. We didn't have time for their pissing contest. I hoped the touch conveyed that.

Ryder gave me a look of reproach, as if to ask if I was really going to bend to Harvey's will. Did I have any other choice? I had a debt to repay to whoever was suffering on my behalf.

Ryder didn't get back into his car like I expected. When I slid into the passenger seat of Harvey's truck, Ryder came around and pulled me out. He lifted me high and set me down in the truck bed before taking the passenger seat next to Harvey. Out here, I could breathe a little easier, and I think Ryder knew that.

It was also amusing as hell to watch Harvey balk. It took the man a solid minute to get into the driver's seat while Ryder waited in the truck cab.

But Harvey put the truck into gear and sped forward. As I pulled my hat down over my hair, I wondered who had been suffering while we'd argued amongst ourselves. I couldn't think of anyone who would stick their neck out for me.

Maybe, in another life, Connor would have had my back. The number of times that Connor had stood to the side while Alvin and Harvey hurt me made me doubt that Connor would have done anything for me. If it wasn't him, then who could have knocked Harvey off me last night?

Dad had been inside. Ryder hadn't been present. No one else had the strength to push Harvey around.

Alvin's house appeared ahead. It sat on the edge of the city where nature could sprawl behind it. Our running grounds stretched along the edge of the lake and far beyond. Those grounds should have filled me with joy, but when I saw the house and the land around it, I felt nothing but dread pulling me down.

The sense that I was about to walk into my own grave haunted me. One misstep and I would plummet six feet under.

Harvey slammed on the brakes. I crashed into the back of the truck cab. Pain jolted down my spine. Almost immediately, the smell of ozone blossomed on the air. I hadn't shifted, though.

"Pull another stunt like that and I will break your nose," Ryder snarled.

Before the two could start fighting, I hopped out of the truck bed and stormed towards the house. Ryder hastily followed, like I'd hoped. I didn't want to do this alone. The urge to reach for his hand filled me, but I managed to keep to myself.

The touch would be a mark against me. I couldn't afford to let Alvin make assumptions about my relationship with Ryder, no matter what I wanted from Ryder.

The smell of pack wafted on the breeze. There were others here. How many had Alvin called to witness this? I wrapped my arms around myself once more. Alvin had to be stopped. He was an infection in the Lakesedge pack. No one would know peace until he was gone.

A small part of me hoped that Ryder would see what was happening and step forward to challenge Alvin today. I knew that would not happen, but I wished it, nonetheless.

The scream that pierced the air nearly bowled me over. Ryder put a hand on my back to steady me. I used him to propel myself forward. Breaking into a run, I sprinted around the house. Ryder followed hot on my heels.

The crowd in front of me didn't move right away. I pushed the first few people out of my way. A familiar voice grunted on the other side of the crowd. My stomach dropped. The crowd parted to reveal Connor, on his knees.

I almost didn't recognize him at first. His face was swollen and mottled with bruises. I bit my lip. He must have taken a beating recently if he hadn't healed yet. That, or they'd starved Connor overnight. If they'd hit him several times and kept him from eating, then his body would slow down.

Connor. You damned fool.

"You should have let Harvey have his way," I muttered under my breath.

Connor looked up. He would have met my gaze had his eyes not been swollen shut on both sides. Someone had taken the time to tie his hands behind his back. My heart ached. Pain filled my chest even though no one had touched me.

Someone in the pack finally stood up for me, and this was what he got in return. I'd heard him cry out last night. I should have searched harder.

Ryder put a hand on my shoulder. His touch grounded me, so I could think straight. Had I gone out to find Connor last night, we would both be in the center of this circle. I shuddered to think of what might have happened to me. Harvey's threat from the night before rang in my ears again and wouldn't go away no matter how I tried to shake it off.

Alvin noticed me. His gaze flicked to Ryder's hand on my shoulder. Alvin stepped forward, put his boot on Connor's back, and kicked Connor flat onto his face. Connor grunted in pain.

I moved without thinking. I rushed to the center of the circle where Connor was laid out and helped him back up onto his knees. He leaned heavily on me. I thought Alvin had broken him, but Connor whispered in my ear.

"Run."

"No, damn it." Tears made my voice shake. "I'm not going to abandon anyone."

I should have. I should have run years ago. There were other places. I could have asked Ryder to take me back to his clan. Maybe then, I would have had a better idea on how to help him.

Instead, I stuck around this hellhole and let Alvin push me around. I'd grown a backbone and the ability to speak up for myself from time to time. Unfortunately, that meant Alvin had to use the pack to teach me a lesson.

This was all my fault.

Alvin had kept his cruelty hidden until now. If I hadn't stuck around, he would have gone back to hiding it.

Ryder snarled and stepped forward.

"Whoa there, lizard." Alvin laughed. "Careful where you step. You might want to watch yourself before you force my hand."

The Alpha pushed Connor to the ground and stepped over him. With a foot on either side of Connor, Alvin plucked his hunting knife from his belt and bent so he could tuck the blade under Connor's chin.

My lip curled. Fury boomed inside me, a thunderous sound that only I could hear. If I could have called lightning down from the skies, I would have. Instead, I looked to the pack gathering around. Marcus and Jackson stood with Harvey. Their jeering laughter only made the thunder inside me louder.

Others, like Janessa, Haylee, and Kelsey, stayed off to the side. They kept their eyes turned away so they wouldn't find themselves in Connor's place. Catriona openly glared at Alvin until Alvin's wife stepped up in Catriona's face and forced the historian to divert her gaze.

A howl clawed its way up my throat, but I couldn't let it out. No one would rally behind me.

Ryder

NESS TREMBLED BEFORE HER ALPHA. The tremor that shook her shoulders didn't look like fear. Rage simmered under her skin. I watched it roll off her in waves.

Alvin was a garbage person. He twisted his wrist just enough to nick the beaten shifter's throat. A thin trickle of blood fell to the ground and gave off a metallic scent that made the pack restless.

Shifters were hunters. The smell of blood would get them riled up for a hunt. The only one who didn't have a look of disgusted excitement on their face was Ness.

As badly as I wanted to step up beside her, I couldn't risk her friend's life. Hands tied, my beast rioted. Its growl slipped out of me and rumbled loud enough to silence the pack around me. The effect of the blood on the air faded as they turned frightened glances in my direction.

I kept my face blank despite the beast trying to claw its way out of me. If I let out even a single scale, Alvin would drag that blade across that young man's neck. I couldn't have another death on my hands. I refused to bear more blood for anyone.

Alvin jerked his chin in Ness's direction. "You have two choices. Get on your knees and accept a mating bond with my son, or say your goodbyes and bare your neck."

I surged forward. Ness stood and put a hand on my chest, stopping me. She gave me a look that I couldn't read through the haze of my anger. My beast begged me to snap Alvin's neck. There was no reason the world had to suffer any longer. My beast didn't understand what it meant to live with murder on your conscience.

To the beast, it was a fact of life.

To the human part of me, it was a stain on my soul.

Torn between the two parts of myself, I was trapped.

"You can't forge a mate bond," Ness said, her voice surprisingly even for the situation.

Alvin shrugged. "You don't have to love him. Just give him your ass and let him plant a few pups in you."

Pain slammed into my chest as the beast tried to rip its way out of me. It gnashed its teeth and begged for blood. My vision went red. Ness dug her

nails into my chest as I pushed forward with one desire.

Rip Alvin to pieces.

I took another step, but Ness's hiss cleared the red from my vision. She turned her eyes upward so I could see how they wavered with tears. Her pain did nothing to help my rage. This pack was a mess. The lower ranking shifters all cowered while one of their own was being abused. I glanced at the men standing behind Alvin. Their grins disgusted me. Someone needed to fix it.

But did it have to be me?

The sound of Ness's shaky breath told me that I might have to be the one to step up and do what needed to be done. That's what she'd asked of me, after all. Our new agreement was that we would find evidence that might convince her pack to stand up against Alvin.

Would anything move these cowards?

Ness turned away from me. She fell back onto her knees beside the broken shifter. When she bowed her head, her hair veiled her face, so I couldn't read her expression. What the hell was she doing?

"You can't," I whispered.

Alvin nodded. "Smart choice, mutt." Alvin pulled the blade away from the broken shifter's neck and stood, so he could look at his pack. "Everyone, clear out. My son needs to get acquainted with his new fiancée."

I scanned the crowd for Ness's father. He wasn't present, though. It seemed as though Alvin had gathered only the weakest. I hoped that the bastard hadn't sent anyone to Ness's house while we were here. Ness's father had attacked Alvin the night of the hunt. There was no way that Alvin would let that go unpunished.

What mess had I gotten myself tangled in here? This pack needed more help than I could provide alone. If I challenged Alvin, the pack would become mine. I couldn't afford to stay and lead them, though. If Morgan caught up to me...

No, I couldn't risk staying too long. Ness and I would have to dethrone Alvin soon. Morgan already knew my last phone number. I knew it was only a matter of time before he tracked me down.

Help Ness. Make her help me.

Leave.

That was the plan.

Would it go that way? I sure as hell hoped so.

The lower ranking shifters cleared out. Alvin knocked one grinning shifter's head into his brother's. They staggered before spinning to follow Alvin. The yard steadily emptied save for Ness, the broken wolf, and the Alpha's son.

Had they forgotten about me? I focused my anger on the Alpha's son. Before I could take two steps, the Alpha's son put his boot on the broken shifter's back again.

Ness cried out. She jumped forward to help her friend, but the Alpha's son grabbed her by the chin and yanked her off balance. He snarled in her face. The sound he made became low and hungry.

I glanced down to the shifter on the ground. Though his face had been brutalized, I sensed that he was just as angry as I was. The shifter gave a nearly imperceptible nod of his head.

Given the green light, I surged forward. I wound an arm around Ness's middle to pull her away from the Alpha's son. As I twisted to put myself between them, I struck out with my free hand. My knuckles collided with the boy's nose.

He staggered backwards. A flow of blood rushed from his nostrils. It cascaded over his lips and dripped down his chin as he leveled a hot glare in my direction.

Above, a new storm gathered.

"Your father doesn't give a shit about you if he left you alone with me," I said. I rolled my shoulders. My beast filled me with power that gathered in my muscles.

The Alpha's son howled with rage. He stormed away, much to my confusion. He didn't leave, though. The Alpha's son grabbed an axe from a nearby stump and faced us.

I rushed to the beaten man on the ground and pulled him away just as the Alpha's son brought the axe down. The blade slammed into the bloodied earth. The Alpha's son let his rage get the better of him. He roared and pulled the axe from the ground.

"Harvey," Ness snapped. "Don't fight a battle you can't win!"

Ness needed to pick her words better. Red-hot light flared in Harvey's eyes. He rocked away from me and turned on her. When he raised the axe to strike her, I snatched it from his grasp. He staggered, off balance. I brought the butt of the axe down onto his nose.

That man's face would never be straight again.

He fumbled and dropped to his knees. I thought he would stay there, but he launched himself off the ground at me. He slammed, full force, into my solar plexus and shoved me back.

Ness shouted at us, but her friend staggered to his feet and stood between her and the fight. The edges of my vision turned red once I knew she was safe. I balled my fist and slammed it into Harvey's face.

He didn't let go. His fingers lengthened. Claws pierced my skin. My breath hissed as I inhaled in pain. If I pulled on my dragon, I could harden my skin. Would the Alpha see that as an attack? Did it even matter at this point? I'd already attacked his son.

The sound of flesh on flesh overwhelmed me. The pained grunts and furious growls were too much. Connor put himself between me and the fight, but I wasn't going to sit back and let Ryder get hurt.

"He's a dragon," Connor whispered. "He can protect himself. It's just a fistfight."

I put my hands against Connor's back. I wanted to shove him out of my way, but he'd been hurt enough. Standing here and watching others fight for me wasn't an option, though.

Asking Ryder to kill Alvin had been a mistake. No one needed to bleed for me. I was tired of the violence and the pain. My own suffering had been enough. Alvin had crossed the line by involving others. This would end here.

I stepped out from behind Connor. He wasn't fast enough in his state to catch up to me. Heart pounding, I stormed towards Ryder and Harvey. Wolf claws unleashed, Harvey straddled Ryder so he could take swipes at Ryder's face. Ryder had his arms between his face and Harvey's claws. Blood dripped down Ryder's forearms as Harvey tore them to shreds.

I took another step and lightning hit the ground near my feet. The earth smoldered. The smell of char reached my nose. It didn't stop the two shifters, though. The power of lightning crackled in my palm. I flexed my fingers but couldn't figure out how to summon it.

For a brief moment, I thought about the woman from the old records. She'd shown up much like I was approaching Ryder and Harvey. Her appearance had been ominous and powerful. Did I have that kind of power?

If only I'd been able to read the rest of the record, then I would have some kind of an idea of what I could do.

Without that information, I moved on instinct alone. I touched the back of Harvey's neck. Electricity leapt from me to him. It didn't shock him, though. The lightning seemed to shut him down. He collapsed, falling forward onto Ryder's forearms.

Ryder threw Harvey off and prepared to punch the unconscious man. My lip curled.

"He's not fighting anymore," I growled. The thunder that had been trapped in my chest finally reached my tongue. It made my voice rumble.

Ryder stopped and bared his teeth, but not at me. When he leaned forward, I realized that he couldn't move his feet. My command had stopped him in his tracks. My breath rushed out of me in surprise.

With my breath went my control over whatever arcana I had summoned. Ryder stumbled forward and caught himself. To my relief, he didn't attack Harvey. Instead, Ryder straightened and directed an inquisitive stare at me.

I shrugged, clueless.

Oh, shit. I had to convince Ryder that I knew what I was doing. If he suspected that I had little control over myself, he would eventually find out that I couldn't help him. Lying to him felt awful, but there was too much on the line. I had to keep myself and my pack safe.

Even if it meant lying to the only person who could protect me.

"Don't look at me like that," I said coyly. "You got what you deserved."

Exhaustion crept in and made my limbs heavy. The power in my voice must have drained a lot of energy. I passed Ryder and bent to help Connor back to his feet. Once upright, he swayed and leaned on me. Maybe he hadn't been bluffing earlier.

Ryder came over and threw Connor's arm over his shoulder to help my friend limp away. "Let's go. We're not sticking around here."

I pulled my phone out while following Ryder. The ladies at Bad Moon had covered my shift just as Alvin had said. When I offered to head in to work as soon as possible, they told me to take the day off and keep an eye on Connor.

To my surprise, Ryder took Connor back to his apartment and let Connor have his bed. I stared at the broken man before me. Guilt ate at my conscience. This wouldn't have happened had I played along with Harvey. Hell, this wouldn't have happened if I laid low.

Ryder touched my shoulder. “This isn’t your fault. You’re right. Alvin is a monster.”

I swallowed because I couldn’t trust myself to not cry. Unable to respond to Ryder, I did the only other thing I could think of. I crawled onto the bed and curled around Connor. He breathed deep and let out a soft whine that reminded me of the sound I’d heard the night before.

When Ryder left the two of us, I gave in to the tears that had been building inside. I cried until the back of Connor’s shirt was soaked through and through. He didn’t move. Sleep had claimed him. He likely had no idea that I was losing it. Connor had found safety at last, and his body needed sleep to heal.

After a while, when the ache in my soul was nothing more than a dull throb once more, I climbed out of bed and padded down the hall to meet up with Ryder. He stood in the open doorway, talking to someone. For a moment, I stiffened and feared the worst. Then he turned to set down a stack of pizza boxes and closed the door.

Upon seeing me, Ryder lifted his chin in greeting. “Your friends thought it was necessary to track down my rental address and send us some food.”

I chuckled and collapsed onto the sofa. I’d spent more time on this couch than in my own bed recently. This time, Ryder set the stack of pizza boxes onto the coffee table before sitting next to me. Against my better judgement, I leaned into him.

Ryder’s warmth eased some of the tension still nestled between my shoulder blades. I let out a sigh and felt another wave of tears coming. Ryder, however, stiffened like he didn’t know what to do with me. His discomfort made me want to laugh. Instead, I pulled away and gave him his space.

With me no longer on him, he reached forward and opened a pizza box. When he paused, my stomach turned. His gaze slid to me. I could see the suspicion in his eyes.

“Do you even know how to help me?” he asked.

Several emotions reached my face before I could pull a blank mask over my features. If Ryder caught the way my expression flickered with fear and frustration, he didn’t mention it.

I leaned back and shrugged. “No, you haven’t told me what you need yet.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it. The sound that came out of him was a tangled growl that wrenched my heart. I reached out for him but let my hand fall.

Ryder and I weren't even friends. Yet, I wanted to comfort him like a lover. I pushed back the urge to pull his head to my bosom. He wasn't going to cry into my tits, for heaven's sake.

"Listen," I said. "Until you can tell me what you need, I won't know what to do."

"Mhm, sure. You seemed pretty surprised by your own actions today. It almost looked like your arcana got the better of you." He turned that piercing glare upon me.

I'd hoped for a respite, but I could tell that I'd been a fool. I bit the tip of my tongue while I considered my options. I could tell him the truth and promise that I would work on whatever he needed. If Ryder didn't like that, he might leave me alone here.

After seeing what Connor had been put through, no one else in the pack would help. They were all afraid that they would end up like him. If I made one wrong move while they were helpless, then that was it. I doubted that many trusted me to not act up when their lives depended on my submission.

My throat tightened. The lump in it made swallowing difficult.

"I didn't mean to do what I did today," I said. That wasn't exactly a lie. I'd controlled him by accident. "If I offended you, I'm sorry. I didn't want you to kill Harvey. You made it clear that you don't want to be that kind of person."

He narrowed his eyes at me. I kept my face unreadable, or my best approximation of unreadable. Ryder seemed fine with that because his shoulders fell in defeat.

He ran a hand over his face, grabbed a slice of pizza, and took a big bite before letting himself fall back into the couch. Once more, I wanted to crawl into his lap. Despite how I kept lying to him, I still felt safe in his presence.

I wasn't used to the feeling that Ryder provided. I wanted to luxuriate in it because I knew that the moment I stepped outside again, I would be hunted. Once more, Ryder offered to let me stay here. This time, I mulled his offer over.

Today's events had started the moment I left Ryder's house the other night. Harvey had been lying in wait. He would be out there, again.

Especially after what happened. Harvey would want to prove his masculinity.

I shuddered and pulled my knees up to my chest. Harvey's threat echoed in my ears. The memory of his voice left my blood cold.

If Ryder figured out about the things Harvey had told me, then he would hunt Harvey down. I knew that in my very bones. Ryder was a good man. I couldn't let him soil his soul like that.

This was my problem. I just needed a little help to deal with it. That's all.

"Sure," I said, finally. "I'll stay. I'll call someone to have them drop off clothes."

Ryder

I WASN'T SO sure that Ness could help me anymore. The look of shock on her face when she'd taken control of my body had told me as much. Ness might not know what she was doing. If I stayed and helped her, Morgan would find me, and no one would be able to stop him from enacting his revenge.

After today, I suspected that maybe Ness could stop him, literally. The problem with that was that she might not know how to do that on command.

It'd seemed like an accident born out of desperation. I couldn't put my faith in something so fragile. She would be the end of me.

I could feel it.

Still, I watched her answer the door when her father arrived to drop off her overnight bag. The man gave me a lazy salute before taking off once again. He didn't even warn me not to touch his daughter, like any other over-protective father might.

Ness left to change out of her jeans. She returned wearing a pair of silky shorts with little bones all over them. My gut clenched with need. Immediately, I wanted to pull her into my lap so I could run my hands down her legs and savor her soft skin.

Why? Why did the sight of her thighs conjure thoughts like this?

I'd been alone for too long.

If I let my feelings get involved, then this wouldn't work out. I'd get stuck here. No woman was worth that. Not when I had hell on my heels.

I shoved a pizza box in her direction before taking the third box into the bedroom for her friend. On his back, he stared at the ceiling. He must have gotten some sleep because the swelling in his face had gone down.

"Eat," I commanded.

His gaze slid over to me. I stood there and let him look me up and down. The sadness in his eyes turned into a smoldering blaze, which took me aback.

"You're going to steal her away from me," he said, his voice low and accusing.

I snorted. "That woman is more work than I would want to put in. If I'm going to settle down, it's going to be with a soft dragon woman who can rear wyrmlings for me."

That had been the plan before I'd had to run from my home. Now, I wasn't so sure. Women didn't fit into my life anymore. I was lonely and in need of a gentle touch if the way I reacted to Ness proved anything.

I wasn't going to ask her to quench that need, though. I would move on from here after I helped her. Once I left this place behind, then I would consider what I wanted in life.

That was, so long as I escaped this city before Morgan caught up. If my brother arrived while I was still here, there might not be any need to consider my future.

"I don't want Ness."

I hated the way the words felt like a lie. My beast growled at me. I told it to shut the hell up, but it persisted. Rolling my eyes at her friend and my beast, I turned to leave. I had to get away from these shifters. They would drive me insane eventually.

The bell over the door chimed. I stiffened, fear slithering up my spine in a cold wave. Cerri peered past me and tilted her head curiously. Her reaction made me turn to see who had entered.

Connor stood awkwardly in the café lobby. He gave me a stiff smile as he rubbed the back of his neck.

I mirrored Cerri's curious pose. Vi pushed past us, leaned on the ordering counter, and looked up at Connor.

"Are you finally going to kiss Ness's feet and tell her you're a sorry sack of shit?"

My jaw hit the floor. "Vi!"

She laughed, a sound like bells. That woman's mother must have been an angel, because Vi had a devilish charm and a cuteness that threw everyone off.

She gestured to Connor. "Can you blame me?"

I stalked up to my friend and bumped her with my shoulder. "Connor saved my ass the other night."

"And now you're engaged to an asshole," Cerri said with a haggard sigh.

Connor groaned. "Yeah, about that."

My heart raced. I wanted to back away and run into the stock room, but I managed to hold my ground. This was my sanctuary. If I gave up the coffee shop, then I would have nowhere else to go.

Well, I could go to Ryder. He would keep me safe in his shadow. The dragon in him would ward away those who would try to hurt me. I couldn't

count on Ryder forever, though. As safe as I felt with him, he had made it clear that he had no intention of staying forever.

Aside from that, Ryder wanted to use me. He didn't have my best interests in mind. He simply wanted to keep me safe until I could figure out how to help him. Once he discovered that I didn't have any arcana at my disposal, he would abandon me.

"Alvin is organizing another hunt to celebrate your engagement." Connor grimaced.

I blinked, surprised.

"Another hunt?" Cerri threw her hands in the air. "He's just going to use it as an excuse to hurt Ness again. Why does he need to hunt her if she's going to marry his son? I don't understand Alvin's motives."

Connor's brow furrowed as his gaze fell to the floor. "I don't think it was enough that I suffered for helping her. Alvin wants to punish Ness, too. He won't kill her now, but I'm not looking forward to what might happen during this hunt."

Vi straightened and bounced on her heels. With a great big grin on her face, she punched me in the shoulder. "Tell your dragon friend to crash the party again! He'll be able to help."

"Alvin already threatened to kill her for fraternizing with the outsider." Connor shook his head. "If the big guy shows up again, Ness's death sentence will be signed for sure."

Cerri gaped. "You just said Alvin wouldn't kill her!"

"Not as long as she plays along with Alvin's game. If she brings a dangerous new player into the game, then she's fucked." Connor rocked back on his heels. "I have one solution. If you and I elope, then Alvin can't force you to marry Harvey. Plus, if we're married, then Alvin can't accuse you of treason anymore."

I chewed on the tip of my thumb. I could feel Connor's gaze on me. It warmed my skin as I recalled what Harvey had told me the other night. Aside from the nasty things Harvey had said, Harvey had revealed Connor's true feelings about me. I wasn't sure how I felt about them.

Connor had been watching my back and waiting for his moment to strike. I owed him my gratitude for saving me but hated the idea that he was always in my shadow. He didn't own me. No one in this pack could own me, no matter how they tried to help.

Vi leaned over the counter and shoved Connor. “Shut your mouth, you damn fool.”

Connor gaped at us. “What? I offered a viable solution!”

Cerri shook her head. “No. You didn’t. No matter how Ness is associated with the pack, Alvin will find a way to hurt her because he’s afraid. Marrying you will just piss him off even more because it’s in direct defiance of his decree.”

Connor’s soft expression fell away. His features hardened. “Look. I’m just trying to help. If you were a real shifter, then maybe you would know how this works. Since you aren’t, you’ll never understand.”

Vi reached for him, but he moved just out of reach. Unchecked fury from everything that had been happening lately hit me like a wave. I stepped out from behind the counter and stomped up to Connor. I took ahold of him by the front of his shirt and yanked him down so that he had to look me in the eye.

To my surprise, he lowered his gaze. Had Alvin truly broken my old friend, or was there more to this that I wasn’t seeing?

“Thank you.”

His expression flickered with confusion. I wasn’t done, though.

“Thank you for helping me, but I can take it from here.”

He blinked. “Ness,” he said softly. “I don’t think you understand.”

Vi yelled. Cerri said something, but her words were drowned out by Vi’s shout. I held up my hand to silence them both. They quieted to let me speak because they were my friends. They knew when to let me handle my own problems.

“Just because you took my punishment for me once does not mean you understand everything that I’ve endured since I was thirteen, since you abandoned me to save your own ass. Yes, I know that you’ve been trying to help this whole time. Let me tell you something, Connor.” Hot lightning crackled in my chest. My voice remained low, but it rumbled like thunder. “You will never have me. Does that change how you feel? Do you still want to help me?”

I expected his interest to wane once he learned that he would never have me. Instead, Connor stood firm. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his chest. The smell of pack and cut wood overwhelmed my senses.

I couldn’t remember the last time that someone in the pack had hugged me—aside from Cerri. It wasn’t the same with someone who didn’t have an

animal. The warmth of another body and the smell of the wild seeped into me and eased some of the knots that had been cinched tight for years. Tears burned my eyes and threatened to be my undoing. Before I cried into Connor's shirt, I pushed away from him.

"My offer still stands," Connor said quietly.

Vi half-vaulted over the counter and bopped him atop the head with a rolled magazine. "Stop it. Bad wolf!"

Connor cringed. "I'm just trying to help!"

Vi glared at him. Cerri shook her head and gave a customer a friendly smile. The presence of a human meant that we all had to keep quiet. While we waited for the person to get their coffee and leave, I eyed Connor.

Could I get him to help me unseat Alvin? Connor had made his feelings for me clear now. I could use those feelings to get his help, but that seemed wrong. Besides, if Connor was caught helping me again, Alvin wouldn't hesitate to kill him.

The only reason Ryder had survived this long was the fact that he was a dragon shifter. Alvin did not stand a chance against Ryder. If only Ryder would actually challenge Alvin. The fight would be over in a heartbeat.

Instead, I had to play games. I had to find out what Alvin had done that made him so afraid of this prophecy. After that, my fate would be in the hands of my pack. My hope that they would band together was quickly waning.

I stepped away to call Ryder, but the number he gave me was dead. I stared at the screen as the world fell out from under my feet.

Had he given up and left? We'd spoken earlier this morning. He hadn't mentioned wanting to leave. My heart frantically pattered. The last bastion of true safety that I'd had was gone.

When I lifted my gaze to look at Connor, I must have been pale. He reached for me. The bell chimed behind him, and Ryder stepped into view. The world snapped back into place. I dodged Connor's outstretched hand, so I could rush to Ryder.

I stopped myself at the last second. Swaying from my momentum, I looked up at Ryder. He lifted a questioning brow. I had to clench my jaw as a million things rushed to the tip of my tongue at once.

After I swallowed the words back down, I rolled my shoulders back. "I thought you'd left."

He cocked his head in confusion. His smoky eyes hopped from me to the others in the café. I wanted to take ahold of his chin and make him look at me. The urge was odd, considering that Ryder wasn't my mate.

Mate bonds between shifters were rare. The magic that brought pairs together seemed to have faded from the world. I tried to not think about it, but the hope that I would magically find my destined mate someday never really left me. I'd always wanted to know what it would be like to be loved wholly, to have someone protect me with their body and soul.

I wanted to give that back, too. I wanted to be so head over heels that the rest of the world no longer mattered.

What a foolish thought. This damned prophecy had cursed me. There was already too much magic in my life from that prophecy. I wouldn't be granted a destined mate on top of that, too.

It seemed like a shitty hand of cards, to me.

Ryder didn't really care about me. He wanted my favor. That was it.

We would never form a mate bond. He likely had a dragon woman who would wish him a good night every evening.

The jealousy that unfurled from that single thought nearly drowned out my beast. The hound whined and pawed at me. She wanted to get out and rub up against Ryder to mark him as ours. I denied her foolish request.

We can't keep him.

Ryder's brows shot upward as his lips formed a big O. He shamefully rubbed the back of his neck. "I broke my burner phone the other night. I haven't gotten around to replacing it yet."

Vi cackled. "Did you lose on one of those big titty anime girl app games?"

Ryder shook his head, clearly taken aback.

"What the hell, Vi?" I made a gagging gesture.

Her eyes twinkled with delight. What a little demon.

Ryder shuddered as if casting off Vi's chaotic energy. He turned to me, his brows furrowed with gentle concern that nearly broke me. "I'm sorry. I should have told you."

I sucked on my teeth. Ryder wasn't my mate. He didn't have to tell me anything, yet his decision to keep me in the dark hurt.

Connor stepped around Ryder. He touched my cheek. "If you need someone—"

Cerri cut him off. “Ryder. Walk Ness home in a couple hours. Better yet, take her back to your place again.”

I opened my mouth to argue but didn’t get a chance to say anything.

“I’ll escort her back to my rental. Don’t you worry.” Ryder’s voice rumbled low, almost intimately.

“There will be no escorting!” I snapped. A hot blush erupted across my cheeks.

TWO CELL PHONES rang at the same time. Mine buzzed in my pocket while Connor’s let out a small tune. We locked eyes. Fear hit my veins again. If we both received messages, then I knew what had happened.

I twisted to glance at the moon on the back wall. The light illuminated the entire face of the moon, which meant that it was time for the pack’s full moon hunt. I hadn’t expected Alvin to call another so soon after his failed attempt to punish me.

Just to make sure, I pulled my phone from my pocket with trembling hands. Just as I thought, Alvin’s message lit up the top half of my screen.

Ryder grabbed ahold of my wrist. “You don’t have to go. Stay home tonight.”

My stomach dropped just thinking about what might happen if I didn’t show up. I glanced at Connor. I’d already seen how far Alvin was willing to go. He knew that hurting the others would get my attention.

“I can’t,” I croaked out.

This time, if Ryder intervened, Alvin might take it out on the pack. Alvin hadn’t punished my father yet. It was only a matter of time before the cruel Alpha turned his attention on my loved ones.

I cursed under my breath. My hands were tied. I had to survive this hunt. If I didn’t, then nothing would change. I doubted that Alvin would go back to pretending that he was the good guy after I was gone.

The thought made me fold my arms around myself.

After I was gone? Was I so willing to give in? I wanted a future for myself. I would hold out hope for safety and even the possibility of a mate bond because I was not going to let Alvin win.

“Ness,” Ryder beseeched.

Connor interceded. “I’ll keep her safe. You won’t have to worry.”

Ryder snarled. “You’re going to get yourself killed, pup.”

Connor whirled on him. "Are you calling me weak, lizard?"

Vi slapped the countertop. The air burst with fiery heat. Everyone stopped and stared at her. A bonfire flickered in her eyes as she glared at everyone.

"No pissing contests inside," Cerri said softly. "Take it outside."

Ryder and Connor turned their attention back to each other. They eyed one another in a way that made me wonder why they needed to fight about this at all. Could I dig deep and summon the arcana to enforce Vi's command? I doubted it, but the power would have been nice. We had two strong shifters looking to rip one another apart inside the café.

A thought filled my chest with gentle warmth. Up until a week ago, I'd felt alone and unloved. Now, the café was filled with people fighting to keep me safe. My co-workers always had my back. Ryder might need something from me, but he didn't let that keep him from giving me his all.

Then, there was Connor.

I studied my russet haired friend. I'd loved him, once. Our mothers had been best friends and raised us side by side until my first shift marked me as an outcast. Before that day, Connor and I had been inseparable. For every stupid idea one of us had, the other followed through with fervor.

He wasn't the same man anymore. The shadows of conflict danced across his face. I could see the fear brewing deep inside him. That fear would always stand between us, no matter what he believed. I couldn't put my faith in him so long as he held onto that fear.

"Ryder," I said in an attempt to break the tension.

He didn't look away from Connor, but he made a sound in his throat to acknowledge me.

I sighed. After pulling my debit card from my pocket, I slapped it into his hand. "Go get us some food. I'll be done with my shift in two hours. Then you can walk me home."

He groaned. "You'd be safer if you came with me. I'll kidnap you if I have to. I'd much rather know where you are at all times than risk leaving you alone."

"I won't be alone. My parents will be home."

Moving out had sounded nice until I'd realized that I would be alone most of the time. While my friends and some of the other shifters my age had gleefully thrown themselves from the nest once they were old enough, I

hid in my parents' shadows. It was safer there, even if it meant little to no privacy.

Connor mumbled something about how Ryder just wanted to get in my pants. Before Ryder could turn on him, I said:

"And if he does? What does that matter to you? Maybe I want him in my pants. Maybe I want to get down and dirty with the dragon. That's none of your damn business, Connor."

The red blush of anger that washed over his face drowned out his charming freckles. I watched the beast flicker in his eyes. He needed to get out of here.

Ryder pocketed my debit card and grabbed Connor by the back of his shirt. After saying a quick goodbye, Ryder tossed Connor out the door and followed suit.

Ryder

I SHOVED the wolf shifter forward. He staggered, then spun and rose to his full height, so he could face me. He pulled his lips back in a snarl. I rolled my eyes, grabbed his sleeve, and dragged him down the road.

While he bristled, I sniffed the air to see if there were any good restaurants in the area. Being a shifter came in handy like that.

"You're an outsider," Connor hissed. "You're not going to stay and keep her safe forever, so stop pretending like you can be her white knight."

"Are you fucking serious?" I shoved the guy forward.

I didn't have time for this. The medallion from the fae queen pulsed against my chest. It warned me that I was already neck deep in this shit. Lakesedge had been a spider's web waiting to trap me this whole time, and I'd walked right into it.

"For one thing," I said, a growl in my voice, "stop *trying* to be her white knight. Ness survived this long without your help. That scrappy little woman will continue to protect herself without your help long after Alvin puts you in the ground for being an ass."

I caught the smell of waffles on the air and made a sharp turn. My stomach growled, further adding to my irritation. The beast hated this man

for the way he treated Ness. Had Connor touched Ness back in the café, I wasn't sure I would have been able to hold the beast back.

She didn't belong to me, either. I needed to remember that. I was only here for her help, which seemed further and further out of reach.

Running a hand through my hair, I scanned the street for the waffle shop. It sat low, behind a set of stairs that led down into a basement restaurant. My stomach pinched tight. Ness's debit card burned a hole in my pocket, but I ignored it and pulled out my own wallet.

I really was going soft if I was going to buy her food again. The night before, I'd lied about the pizzas. It'd been a gut reaction to seeing her looking so forlorn. I could already see the guilt of what happened that day weighing on her, then she'd looked at the medallion behind my shirt. I hadn't wanted her to feel indebted to me any more than she already was.

It'd been a foolish thought. She owed me big time. Buying me lunch was the least she could do to pay me back. Better yet, she could tell me what she was capable of, so I knew how she could help me.

I was hesitant to reveal what I'd done. Guilt tied my tongue in knots every time I tried to speak about my sins. Instead, I'd pressed her for information. I'd asked her what kind of arcana she possessed. We'd already gotten a taste of what she could do at Alvin's little performance. That wasn't enough to help me, though.

Most Alphas had the power to issue commands with their voice alone. Ness's little trick wouldn't stop a rampaging dragon intent on ripping my head off.

"Did you even hear me?" Connor asked when he caught up.

I shrugged. "Were you still trying to tell me how you're better than me?"

His jaw dropped. Clearly aghast, he struggled to reply.

I shoved my way through the door of the restaurant and prayed this one wasn't owned by fae, too. We weren't in Lakesedge, but Bad Moon Café smelled of supernaturals, so I wouldn't have been surprised if there were other supernatural establishments throughout the city. I didn't have the patience to encounter any of Beryl's subjects right now.

Trapped. Stuck. Screwed.

The words kept tumbling through my mind. I didn't know how to escape this place anymore. Ness's plight kept me here, like I was a man who knew how to do the right thing. I wasn't. I hadn't been that man for a

while now. Why I felt the need to pretend to be him anymore was beyond me.

Connor couldn't pester me while we were inside because this was, in fact, a human establishment. I grinned the whole time. His silence was a blessing for now. If he kept up his ways, I would smear his face on the concrete later. Ness might get mad at me, but she could deal with it.

He glowered at me from his spot near the door while I ordered fifteen waffles and a bucket of whipped cream.

"Hey," I called back. "How does Ness feel about strawberries? Or would she prefer something like chicken on her waffles?"

Connor opened his mouth. Then, when his lips formed an O of confusion, he shut it again. His brows rippled as they arched and fell flat. I watched his shoulders droop in defeat. The man didn't know.

I hoped that was enough to show him that he was out of line.

In the end, I left with several bags. I bought a little of everything, so we could make our own lunch. Something about buying Ness lunch almost felt like a date. I reminded myself that I didn't have time for such things, but the beast growled.

The beast reminded me of what Ness had said moments before I'd left the café.

Maybe I want him in my pants.

The beast made my blood boil. Images of Ness in my shirt filled my mind. I growled, hungry for the taste of her skin. I had to shake myself to clear my thoughts. They kept coming back. No matter how I tried to clear the corners of my mind, I found Ness behind every shadow.

My brother would have laughed at me and told me to pursue her. Morgan would have told me that I deserved a mate with an attitude like Ness's. Mom had always told me to find a mate capable of shaking me out of my head.

I couldn't show Ness off to my family, though. Not that I wanted to. Ness was someone who could help me. She wasn't my mate.

Connor stalked behind me. I glanced back to make sure he was still there.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" I asked.

He gave the barest shake of his head. "Because of the shit that went down yesterday, I missed one too many days at work. Helping Ness cost me my job."

I whirled on him and flicked him in the nose. He recoiled, stunned. After blinking away the pain, he turned his outrage on me. I didn't give him time to say anything.

"Ness didn't cause you to lose your job," I growled. "That was your Alpha's doing."

I cocked my head and stared at this man. I didn't get why Ness was so damned determined to save this pack. Back home, I'd known good people. They'd helped one another in the face of a greater, much stronger danger. Alvin was just a wolf.

He wasn't a dragon stricken with Treasure Sickness.

These cowards could band together and take care of Alvin by themselves. They only had to overcome their own selfishness first. Maybe then, they would have a functioning pack rather than a bunch of insipid fools cowering before a tyrant.

"Just because you're a dragon, you think you have everything figured out." Connor sneered.

I gave him a look of warning. We were on the human side of the city. He needed to watch his words.

"You're bigger and stronger than the rest of us, so you think you know how things should go down. It doesn't occur to you to be frightened of someone beneath you. News flash, asshole. Alvin isn't beneath us. He's the strongest of us."

I sucked my teeth and weighed the potential consequences of breaking this man's teeth.

"No one wants to look like I did yesterday. They don't want Alvin to slip when he puts the knife to their throats."

A human woman walking by picked up pace to rush past us. She glanced back warily before scurrying around the nearest corner. Her attention on us made me bite my tongue. That forced me to take time to mull over Connor's words.

Alone, they were weak. They were vulnerable. If only they would band together, though. I didn't know how to tell him that they could be the changes they wanted to see.

Then again, my own clan couldn't do what needed to be done. They had seen the evidence, hadn't they? I'd told myself for so long that the clan hadn't noticed the effects of the Treasure Sickness. After all, hadn't I done everything in my power to keep it from them?

There was no way they hadn't noticed our clan leader's decline. The entire clan had felt the repercussions. In the end, they'd left me to deal with it. Hadn't that been my duty as the heir, anyway?

This time, duty fell on me for another reason. My desperation forced my hand. If only I could have stood up to my brother. Instead, I yearned for the chance to reason with him.

Outside Bad Moon Café, a scent reached my nose. I paused and peered down the alleyway between the buildings. Before Connor could run into me, I palmed his face and brought him to a halt. He grumbled under my hand, but his voice was muted by my grasp. I held my finger to my lips before letting him go.

The scent grew stronger. I could feel Connor bristle, the tension in the air growing thicker, as he realized what was ahead of us.

Anger simmered under my skin. It flooded my mind the moment I saw Harvey kneeling beside Ness's car. I surged forward and grabbed ahold of the back of his shirt. He acted quickly, throwing up his arms. Harvey slithered out of his shirt and rolled away.

Something dropped to the ground between us. A black stone sparked with magic. It made the air heavy. I struggled to breathe in its presence. Harvey glanced at the stone then looked to Ness's car. He hesitated.

I chose that moment to strike. I rushed Harvey. He leapt to his feet and vaulted over a nearby car. My beast snarled and poured power into my legs. I jumped clear over the car and crashed into Harvey's back. He crumpled to the ground with me on top of him.

Pulling back my clenched fist, I paused. Ness's voice command rang through my head again. It sent a ripple through me that stiffened every muscle in my body.

Harvey bucked and threw me off. The spell broke when I hit the ground. My skull throbbed as I picked myself up. By the time I got back onto my own two feet, Harvey was gone.

Connor used the hem of his shirt to pick up the black stone before approaching me. He lifted a brow quizzically, but I could see the gears working behind his eyes.

"Ness did something to you," he said.

I said nothing. The beast pushed me in Harvey's direction. The rat's scent still hung in the air. It would be easy to track him down. However, the

glimmer of the stone cupped in Connor's hand left me uneasy. Harvey almost put that on Ness's car.

I had no idea what it would do, but the potion-maker inside would know exactly what it was for. I yanked a handkerchief from my pocket and took the stone from Connor. The waffle bags were akimbo, but I picked them up and scanned them for any leakage. It seemed like some maple syrup had escaped its container, but stickiness was the least of my worries while this stone pulsed in my hand.

Inside, the conversation halted. Three women looked up at me with a range of irritation and confusion. I tossed the stone down onto the counter for all to see since the café was empty.

Ness cocked her head. The girl with the short blond hair leaned forward for a closer peek before throwing a hand over her mouth like she'd just vomited. The potion-maker, however, stared with wide eyes.

She knew exactly what it was.

"Where did you find that?" she asked, her voice tight as if it were constricted in her throat.

"The Alpha's cum stain was trying to attach that to Ness's car." My lip curled. A wave of tension rippled over me, a hunger for blood gripping my core tight.

If I ever saw that man again, I was going to make sure he didn't have enough fingers left to ever lay a hand on anyone ever again.

Ness blinked. "C-cum stain?"

Connor spoke up. "Harvey. He means Harvey."

The girl with the pixie cut cackled in the background. She laughed so hard that she had to sit down on the floor behind the counter. Her glee lightened the mood in the room, but only barely. The potion-maker stared at the black stone as if there were no one else in the room.

"What is it, Cerri?" Ness asked.

I added, "What does it do?"

Cerri's lips twisted to the side. "I can't say for sure, but I can tell you that it won't do anything good. There's only one person in Lakesedge who can make curses like that."

The room fell silent. No one dared draw a breath in the stone's vicinity. Then, Ness broke the silence.

"Curse?"

Cerri nodded. The bell over the door chimed and everyone stiffened. The brunette that paused in the doorway glanced between those present. When Ness, Cerri, and the vixen on the floor relaxed, I did as well.

“What did I just walk into?” the brunette asked.

“Just the person I need,” Cerri said.

She rounded the counter, snatched the stone with her bare hand, and approached the brunette. When she reached over the brunette’s shoulder and flipped the Open sign to Closed, the rest of us shared a glance.

Ness chewed nervously on her lower lip as she watched her friends. Cerri placed the stone in the brunette’s hand. The brunette stiffened, her wide eyes dropping to the stone.

“Addie, I need your help to break this. If each of us use our arcana to pull, we can shatter it. Whatever Harvey used to attach this curse to Ness will break, too.”

Addie nodded, but I could see the hesitation written across her face when she turned her attention to the stone Cerri presented. When Addie covered Cerri’s open palm with her own, the room filled with shadows. A gentle light rippled around Cerri. It was a bright contrast to the way the shadows slithered closer to Addie. My stomach dropped when the shadows grew faces and limbs. They reached up with spindly fingers and dragged them down Addie’s pantleg, as if beseeching her for attention.

If the woman noticed the spirits around her, she paid them no attention. The vixen crouched behind the counter saw them, too, if the way her eyes lingered on Addie’s legs told me anything.

A crack resounded through the café. A burst of wind blew our hair back. Cerri staggered back. I stepped forward to catch her. Addie slammed into the closed door behind her. The way her chest heaved, I thought she might have a panic attack, but she shook herself, and her fright vanished.

Ness had a strange group of friends. I peered at them all and wondered who they were. While I could recognize most shifters on sight and sniff out witches and vampires easily, this crew left me confused. I could not figure out what they were.

Ness stared at the cracked stone on the floor. The air no longer seemed as thick. I stepped forward and lifted my foot with the intention of crushing it beneath my boot.

“Wait!” Ness called out.

She jumped over the counter and snatched the stone before I could destroy it. With my foot still hovering in the air, I gave her a questioning look.

“We should find the witch who made it and talk to her. She might be able to tell us what Harvey meant to do with it.”

“Do you really think a curse crafter will share that kind of information with you?” I asked.

Ness shrugged. “Maybe? I’m not sure, but we can try.”

Sitting in the passenger seat of Ryder's muscle car, I sucked on my iced hazelnut mocha like it would give me the answers to the universe.

Beside me, Ryder tucked a chicken strip into a folded waffle, drizzled it with syrup, and handed it to me. The salty sweet sustenance eased the knot growing in my chest.

Cerri had given us the address of the witch who'd crafted that curse. I still couldn't believe that Harvey had been about to plant a curse on my car. I shuddered to think of what it might have done. Harvey didn't want me dead the way his father did. Harvey had made his intentions clear.

The food in my stomach churned. I paused between bites and stared down at the chicken in my hand.

Things were getting out of hand. I wondered if asking Ryder for help might have frightened Alvin too much. It seemed as though Alvin and Harvey were getting more and more violent. Had I caused that change in them?

Ryder studied me. "None of this is your fault."

Unconvinced, I grunted. How he could read me so easily, I didn't know. His scrutiny left me uncomfortable. I could feel something else behind that gaze that he didn't want to share with me just yet.

"Shut up and eat your food," Ryder said.

"I don't have much of an appetite right now."

Down the street sat an unassuming house. It was a small cookie-cutter home built in the baby-boom era. More just like it lined the streets of this

part of Lakesedge. Those unfamiliar with witchcraft wouldn't know a witch lived here.

I, however, noticed the bones in the windchime hanging from the porch. I saw the chalk sigils on the sidewalk leading up to the house. The curtains were wide open, revealing the hanging plants and the grumpy cat inside.

Was it a cat, or a demon familiar taking the shape of a cat? I would have to bring Vi along to find out. She would be able to see through demonic illusions.

Ryder didn't have much else to say. He'd been protective, yet distant since the ordeal with the curse. I didn't know how to ask him what was wrong, and I prayed that he hadn't figured out that I didn't know how to help him.

Part of why I'd wanted to visit the witch had been to ask for answers. Now that we were close, I wanted to run in the opposite direction. The thought of seeing a witch face-to-face frightened me. I did not want another witch telling me that I had to do something.

No more prophecies, please.

"Eat the rest of your food," Ryder commanded.

I had the waffle halfway to my mouth before I stopped myself. His command gripped my shoulders and pushed me to continue eating. I glared at Ryder for using his alpha dragon powers on me. It wasn't like I didn't already have my own Alpha doing that all the time.

Every damn time I thought he was cute or sweet, he had to go and be a dumbass like that. I shook off his command, shoved the waffle back into the take-out container, and shoved my door open. Outside the car, I could suck in a deep breath.

"You need to eat, damn it." Ryder got out of the car and glared at me over the roof.

"I do what I want," I growled.

The twist of his lips bothered me. My stomach flipped nervously. What had that look been about? It had almost seemed like he hated me for a reason he would not share. Though I wanted to say I hadn't done anything to deserve that ire, I recalled the fight at Alvin's house. I'd used my voice to stop him, too.

I hadn't meant to, but there was no way I could tell him that. If I did, he would figure out that I had no idea what I was doing. Then, he would

abandon me here. Alone, I wasn't enough to help my pack. I needed Ryder's help if I was ever going to change anything.

"All right," I said. "Let's get this done and over with."

Ryder nodded and followed me up to the witch's front door. Her wards made my skin crawl like a million bugs had swarmed me all at once. I rubbed at my arms and willed the sensation to go away, but to no avail.

A woman with her hair in dreads opened the door and barred the entryway by sliding one, dark hand up the doorjamb. She leaned forward and narrowed her eyes at us. There wasn't even a crack in her feline eyeliner as she looked Ryder up and down.

Without thinking, I imposed myself between Ryder and the witch. She lifted her brows, her lips forming a pursed smile. I mentally kicked myself. Ryder could handle the witch on his own; he didn't need me to protect him.

Then again, he'd gone into Queen Beryl's court and left with a pact. Maybe he did need protection against hot women. This witch was, in fact, very hot. She wore a sheer black bodysuit with lace roses and snakes rising to cover her abdomen and bust. The snakes' tails disappeared in the waistband of her black high-rise jeans.

Inside, she paused and glanced back with a come-hither look glowing in her eyes. I sighed.

"Well," she asked, her voice as smooth as glass with a jagged edge. "Are you going to come inside?"

I stood my ground in the doorway. "I don't think we need to—"

Ryder shoved past me and stepped inside. I gaped up at him, appalled that he would step into another trap so easily. Why was he so damn stupid when it came to women?

"Ma'am, we need to ask you about a curse you wrought for someone in my pack," I said from the doorway.

The witch ignored me. She approached a metal bar cart at the other end of the room and began mixing herself a drink. It didn't have the shimmer of arcana that Cerri's potions did, so I relaxed a bit. The witch turned, cradling her drink in one hand and a tarot deck in the other.

She lifted a brow at me. "What makes you think I'll tell you anything? I don't know you. What I can do is offer you my services, though. If you would like a reading or a hex of your own, then I can help you."

I stomped inside, dug the cursed stone from my pocket, and shoved it at her. At first, she didn't bat an eyelash. Then, as she took it in, she slowly

tilted her head. When she plucked it from my palm, she lifted it to the light to study it.

When she lowered her gaze to meet mine, she asked, “Who broke this curse? Tell me that, and I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

I bit my tongue. Though I wanted to know more about the curse, I did not want to give up my friends’ secrets. I couldn’t go tell everyone about Cerri or Addie. Hell, I didn’t even know what Addie could do. Her arcana was a secret to me. She did not like talking about it with anyone.

The witch watched me intently. The corners of her mouth lifted like she knew she had me cornered. If I wouldn’t give up what I knew, then she could keep her own secrets. Did I really have to know what Harvey had planned with the cursed stone?

I was tempted to tell her that I’d done it, but I needed more information from this witch. If she knew anything about Black Hounds, then I couldn’t lie to her because she would know.

“I saved you from the recompense from that curse,” I said, instead. “You could have suffered the karmic fallout, but now there’s no curse to worry about.”

She grinned. The sensation of bugs crawling up my skin returned. I shuddered and suppressed the urge to rub my arms or scratch at my scalp.

She cackled. “You’re funny. Do you really think I would sell curses and hexes with the threat of recompense over my head? I work hard to protect myself from such things. Even now, should you attack me, the insects would burrow into your skin. Not even your shifter healing would protect you from my wards.”

Ryder stepped up behind me. His growl filled the room. I glanced back, surprised. His burning gaze had settled on the witch.

The witch’s eyes widened excitedly. She took my hand. She darted forward and snatched Ryder’s, too, before he could escape. She peered at our palms one by one, then turned them over. When she brought our hands close to her lips and breathed on our skin, I shuddered.

Arcana sparked in the air like tiny stars. For a moment, I swore I could see the whole cosmos. Every constellation shimmered around us. The ground fell away beneath my feet and sent me plummeting through every possibility Fate ever considered.

Then my feet hit the ground again. I swayed uncertainly before straightening my spine. When I went to rip my hand away from the witch’s

grasp, I paused. A jagged lightning bolt glowed on the back of my hand. The same one glowed on Ryder's hand, too.

"Fate has bound the two of you together," the witch said, smugly. "Oh, this is hilarious. If you think that either of you could walk away from one another after this, then you're wrong."

Ryder yanked his hand from the witch's grasp. He backed away, his face twisted with rage all the while. I gaped at him, but he ignored me. Before anyone could say anything else, he lurched out the door. It slammed behind him, leaving my ears ringing.

"He's got a lot to deal with," The witch said with a shake of her head. "If he doesn't deal with his guilt, it will taint his beast, and he'll fall to the same fate as his father. It makes one wonder what his father was guilty of."

I blinked, trying to process the witch's words. Why were witches always so ominous? Everything they said left me slightly off balance.

Shaking myself, I turned my attention back to her. Words sat on the tip of my tongue, but they wouldn't come out. I did not want to put myself into debt with a witch. Ryder had made his own mistake with the fae queen. I would not do that here.

But the witch read me like an open book.

"Thanks for the warning," I mumbled.

She grabbed my wrist. "Don't go running off on me. You owe me for the reading."

A growl rumbled in my chest, but before I could say anything, pain flared hot across my skin. It felt as though I were being ripped open in a hundred different ways. I opened my mouth to scream, but only a hoarse moan left me.

No. I was done with people trying to bend me to their will. Through the pain, I forced myself upright. I clenched my jaw and focused my ire on the witch. Her eyes widened. She snapped back, but not before lightning leapt from me to her.

It made her stiffen for a brief moment. In that time, the pain of her ward eased. My skin ached, but no longer felt like it was being shredded. I took a step back, away from the witch.

"You're a strange mutt," she said between clenched teeth as she doubled over, her hands braced on her knees.

"Yeah, I've been told that a few times now. I take it that means you don't know what I am." My hopes sank.

Were there no others like me in the world? How few and far between were we that no one had ever heard of us? I wanted to know where I could find others like myself, but there were no clues to follow. The records spoke of a Black Hound like myself, a woman even. Someone had gone to great lengths to destroy the entry, though.

Why was that? What had happened that no one wanted future generations to know about? I needed to ask Catriona who else had access to the records. She'd known about the Black Hound entry, because she'd pulled it out for me. Had someone else found it recently and decided to remove information from the book?

When I'd asked, she'd acted strange. I could have chalked that up to frustration if someone had broken into her records. However, I wasn't sure if I could completely trust her. She'd brushed me off too quickly. Her defensiveness had been like a solid brick wall between us. There was more hidden behind it if only I could find a way through.

If I was going to get any answers, I would have to go back and force them out of Catriona.

The witch had recovered from the shock. She held a hand over her abdomen as she looked me up and down. When, finally, she shook her head, I stifled my sigh and left.

Outside, Ryder gave me a questioning look with one brow raised. I ignored him and headed back to his car where the waffles awaited me. They weren't warm by any means, but the sweet vehicle for chicken strips settled the anxious hound inside me.

I wouldn't stop searching. There were other ways for me to find out more about what I was. I just had to keep searching.

Ryder caught up and leaned over the open passenger side door where I was shoveling food into my face. I looked up, quizzical.

He sighed and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. When his gaze flicked to the back of his hand, I knew what he wanted to talk about.

"Look, I don't know what's going on any more than you do," I said between mouthfuls of food.

The sound he made told me that wasn't enough for him. "How do you think we can break this bond? I don't like being subjected to something I didn't agree to."

I laughed. "And you think I do? I've been trapped under the weight of every other witch's premonitions for years. Get used to it, boy."

When he huffed and stomped around to the driver's side of the car, I pulled out my phone and fired a quick text to Cerri. She wouldn't see it at work, but I hoped that she would be able to help me later. If anyone could help me get rid of this mark that the witch had revealed, it would be Cerri.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket as Ryder took his seat. He glanced at me, so I offered him a tight smile. He didn't want to be bound to me either. If I could get rid of it on my end, then it would be a win for the both of us.

If that was the case, then why was I hiding it from him? Why was I acting like what I was doing was wrong? Nothing made any damn sense to me anymore.

Ryder took me back to his place. He said it would be safer for me there, but it seemed like we were growing more and more comfortable with each other's presence. How long had he been on the road? Perhaps he needed someone's company, and I happened to be in need of a dragon friend.

Once again, I got the bed. Ryder didn't seem to care in the least that I kept taking his bedroom. I knew that this was nothing more than a stop on his journey and that this wasn't really *his* bedroom, but I felt bad for taking the bed from him.

Besides, if I was going to sneak out, then I needed to be closer to the door.

I stepped out into the living room. Ryder looked up, his eyes widening at the sight of me. I didn't think my cropped, oversized tee was that appealing, but I tugged at the hem, nonetheless. His gaze darkened before he shook himself.

I cleared my throat. "How about you take the bed tonight?"

"I'd rather stand between you and the door," he said with a shake of his head.

Hell, this man would be the end of me. My heart swelled and tears burned my eyes. So few were willing to protect me that it was my undoing every time. Unlike Connor, Ryder did it without any expectation of gratitude or affection. He only wanted my help in return.

I turned my face away so Ryder couldn't see the way he affected me. "I don't think Alvin is going to raid your apartment tonight. We're fine. You deserve to sleep in your bed once in a while."

He shrugged. "It's not my bed. Besides, a couch is better than my car's back seat. Have you seen my car?"

“How does a man like yourself fit on that narrow seat?” I laughed and shook my head.

“I don’t.”

This wasn’t going anywhere. I guess I could shift and jump out the window. Maybe that would be the safer option. Then, no one could ambush me at the front door the way Harvey had. Once the sun went down, my hound would vanish into the night.

Still, I lingered in the hall. I could feel Ryder’s gaze heating my skin. It would be too easy to crawl onto that couch beside him and lay my head into his lap. I craved the sensation of his hand in my hair.

“Ness,” he said, his voice hoarse.

My heart leapt excitedly as I turned my face back to him.

He bit his lower lip as he regarded me. My stomach clenched tight at the sight.

“Do you know how to control your arcana?”

My stomach hit the floor. I almost backpedaled but somehow managed to dig in my heels and hold my ground. Swallowing, I tried to buy time to think of a lie. If Ryder left me, then this would be so much harder. Alvin had already proved that he could kill Connor if he stood up for me again.

“Maybe it looks like I don’t know what I’m doing,”—*Because I really don’t know anything*—“but I can assure you that I am more than capable of doing whatever needs to be done once you finally tell me what you need.”

When Ryder shook his head, I lost my train of thought. My words trailed off and my mind cleared. I opened my mouth to try again, but I couldn’t think of anything that might convince Ryder to stay.

For a moment, I considered seducing him. I wondered if he might want to stay if I climbed onto his lap and kissed him hard. Shaking myself free of the thought, I shrugged instead.

I had already lied to Ryder. I couldn’t try to manipulate him any more than I already had. Though I could promise to figure out my arcana for him, he might not believe me. The best I could do was practice in private. Maybe then, when the time came, I would know what to do.

“Never mind,” Ryder said quietly.

Jaw clenched so hard my temples throbbed, I nodded and retreated back into the bedroom. There, I waited for Cerri’s text signal. When she finally notified me that she was done mixing potions, I opened the bedroom

window. I spared a moment to look back to make sure Ryder wasn't right behind me.

When the coast was clear, I shifted and shook out my fur. My tight joints loosened as my hound settled into the new form. The world seemed so much larger in this shape. The window that would have barely fit my human form seemed to yawn wide in anticipation. I jumped out and hit the ground. The clear scent of the evening comforted me. I couldn't smell Harvey or anyone else in the vicinity.

I sprinted back to Lakesedge without a problem. Cerri lived in one of the renovated warehouses by the water. The smell of wet earth and metal filled me with comfort in a strange way. It reminded me of my friend, who I was excited to see tonight.

Behind the warehouse, Cerri opened her window and tossed a bag out. It landed on the ground with a soft plop. With clothes at hand, I shifted back to my human form and dressed quickly. Cerri buzzed the door to let me inside. When the door closed behind me, the feeling of being watched dissipated.

I hadn't even been aware of the feeling until it vanished. At this point, with Alvin breathing down my neck all the time, it never really left. All eyes were on me, so I'd become blind to the sensation. Yet, the walls around me offered a small bit of protection. Knowing Cerri awaited me ahead allowed me to breathe deep for once.

At her apartment door, she tugged me inside and crushed me in a tight hug. Addie napped on the nearby couch. Vi leaned against the single kitchen counter in this little studio apartment. Vi pushed off the counter and slapped Addie on the shoulder. The brunette startled awake.

"I didn't raise that!" Addie said, panicked.

Her chest heaved as she took in her surroundings. A soft blush crept to her cheeks as she offered an apologetic smile. We all did our duty and ignored the outburst.

Addie's secrets were her own. Vi leapt over the back of the couch and settled beside our friend to comfort her. The two leaned into one another. Before my eyes, they each visibly relaxed.

Though my life had been shit since I'd discovered what I was, I couldn't help but be grateful for these girls. I'd found them by accident. While prowling Lakesedge for job applications, I'd wandered a little too far and found myself standing under the full moon sign of Bad Moon Café.

The smell of coffee and chocolate had pulled me inside. The only one working at the time had been Addie. Desperate for help behind the counter, she'd shoved an application into my hands, and begged me to fill it out right then and there. I'd known from the smell of dirt and death around her that she wasn't a human.

I'd barely finished the application before a door in the back opened and an ethereal woman appeared. Her hooded eyes had pinned me to the spot. The way she'd looked me up and down before nodding and beckoning me to follow had left me feeling seen in a way I'd never known before.

Audra Miura gave me a short interview while peering at me the entire time. I'd tried to scent the air around her to get an idea of who I was dealing with, but she somehow kept her identity a secret. We could all tell that Audra was a supernatural, likely a powerful one, too. She collected the misfits of Lakesedge like we were puppies at a pound.

The analogy seemed harsh, but we had found a better home in one another. Addie, Vi, Cerri, and I were better together. That's why, whenever they begged me to leave, I held firm. I couldn't abandon them. They wouldn't abandon me, either.

"All right," Cerri said. She turned to lead me to the tables set up near her small kitchen.

A cauldron with wisps of steam rising from inside it sat on her stovetop. The air smelled faintly herbal, but Cerri's arcana nearly drowned it out. Her arcana had a very particular scent that marked it as hers. It always reminded me of pomegranates and flowers.

"Can I see the mark?" she asked, holding her hand out.

I lifted my hand so she could see the mark, but it had disappeared. I scowled at my bare skin. It'd been hours since the witch had revealed the mark. Where could it have gone?

But Cerri didn't bat an eye. She wiggled her fingers in anticipation as she scanned her table for something.

"Aha!" she said as she picked up a small bell.

I scowled at the bell, unsure of what it might do. When she held it close to my skin and gave it a shake, I felt the power rush through my skin and sink into my flesh. Electricity snapped along my forearm as the light of the mark rose to the surface again.

Cerri grinned, her triumphant gaze sliding to mine. "Too many witches rely on stolen magics when their own ancestors gave them all the tools.

Sound is just as powerful as smoke, and I don't have to burn anything that might make it hard for my shifter friends to breathe."

I nodded, as if I knew what she was talking about. Cerri might have been born to shifter parents, but no animal ever manifested in her. She found her arcana much by accident. Stuck home alone, she'd been in charge of her own meals. After stirring her arcana into her canned ravioli a few too many times, she realized that she could direct that magic elsewhere.

I looked up to my friend for her resourcefulness. If she resented her situation, she never showed it. Cerri had grown into a powerful potion-maker while I'd struggled to find peace under Alvin's boot. I hoped that my circumstances kept Alvin from berating her for her lack of an animal, because I worried that he would have stifled her arcana had I not taken up his attention.

She leaned close to my outstretched hand to get a better look. Finally, she shrugged and confessed that she didn't know much about this. She had, however, prepared several cleansing potions, some powerful enough to break curses.

"Please keep that curse breaking potion on hand from now on," Addie said, her voice small and weak. "I'm glad I could help earlier, but..."

We watched Addie's gaze drift away from the present. I wondered what she saw but couldn't bring myself to ask. More than once, I'd wished she would trust us with her secret the way that Vi had, but I couldn't force that trust to manifest.

Vi seemed much more at ease with her identity. Her mother had a brief and fiery affair with a demon, which had resulted in Vi.

While distracted by my friends, Cerri poured a potion over my hand. I yelped as it burned into my skin. Though my skin didn't blister, the heat intensified. The mark glowed bright. I had to shield my eyes from the flare.

When the light faded, the pain remained. I had a sigh of relief ready, but it turned into a growl of frustration when I lowered my arm and the mark still remained. It flickered angrily, as if it were upset with me.

For a moment, I clutched my arm close to my chest and wondered if Ryder could feel what I'd done. Though Cerri's potion hadn't dispelled the mark, he might have felt the attempt. He didn't want it there any more than I did, but I didn't need him finding out that I'd snuck out of the apartment without telling him.

We tried several more potions. The next couple didn't burn as much as the first had, but they didn't feel great, either. The next one made my fingernails glow for twenty minutes. The third one tossed me out of my own body. I hovered behind myself in the astral plane like I was playing a third person video game. When I crashed back into my body, I lurched to the sink and hurled.

"Well, that didn't work," Vi said between potato chips.

I glared over my shoulder at her, but she flashed me a dramatic wink that made me laugh despite myself.

When I recovered, I pointed to potion three and told Cerri that I would never touch that ever again. She cursed under her breath and put her hands on her hips. When she started tapping her foot, her gaze drifted off. I wondered what kind of mental vault she was sorting through.

It seemed that she couldn't find anything in there because she threw her hands in the air and stomped across the room, so she could fall onto the couch. There, she crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at the floor.

"It's all right," I said, trying to stifle my disappointment. "I'll figure out a way to break the bond."

Addie cocked her head. Her attention narrowed on my hand. "Are you sure this isn't a mate bond?"

My face warmed almost as much as that first potion had warmed me. "Oh, I highly doubt that! Ryder has made it clear that he barely gives a shit about me. He just wants me to do something for him."

Addie threw up her hands in surrender. "Calm down. I didn't mean to push your buttons. I see that it's a sensitive subject for you."

I balked.

Vi, however, cackled in delight. "*Ness and Ryder sitting in a tree! K-I-S* —"

"Grow up, Vi!" I snapped.

Undaunted, she let out a gremlin laugh and popped another chip into her mouth.

My shoulders slumped. I'd hoped to be free of this magical bond tonight, but I felt more cornered than ever. If Addie was right, then I might be trapped in a loveless bond. My dream of being cherished by someone might fall to pieces, and I wasn't going to let that happen.

Ryder

“STUPID FUCKING DOG,” I muttered as I crossed my arms over my chest.

I listened to the women shout and laugh in the apartment above as I kept an eye on the street outside. I didn’t know why Ness had to sneak out of the rental place without telling me, but I knew that I couldn’t let her wander around on her own.

Lakesedge might be her home, but it wouldn’t be safe until her Alpha had been dealt with. We needed to move forward on our plan. I wanted to protect her during the upcoming hunt, but intervening would only get her in trouble again. Instead, I would search Alvin’s home for any clues that might help us.

I had already asked Queen Beryl for help hiding my scent. She’d pulled me close and pressed the softest kiss to my lips before tapping the medallion around my neck.

“Done,” she’d said, her breath still mingling with mine.

I clenched my jaw as Ness’s disgruntled face came to mind. The hound would hate me for what I’d done, but it was absolutely necessary. If I didn’t find a way to hide my scent, Alvin would know that I’d been there. That was the trouble with trying to deceive shifters. They could always smell a B&E.

The sounds above quieted. I heard Ness’s heavy footfalls stomping down the metal stairs inside. She strongarmed the door open and stepped outside, clueless to the fact that I was right behind her. When she inhaled deep, her startled gaze flicked to me.

“Where the hell did you come from?” she asked.

“My mother,” I said as I pushed off the wall.

She gave me the most unimpressed look before turning around and storming off into the night. There were a few clouds lingering overhead from her earlier shift. I marveled at how the storms followed in her wake. I even wondered if maybe her attitude had something to do with it. Electricity seemed to spark around her like a fence barring others from getting too close.

Not that I minded. I hadn’t come here to make friends, or even find lovers. Ness and I needed each other to fulfill certain tasks. That was all.

I'd started to doubt her control lately. She had displayed arcana, but it seemed that she had no idea how it worked. Her command to stop hurting Harvey had stayed with me. I'd learned earlier that I couldn't hurt the smarmy little rat anymore. I highly doubted that Ness had done that on purpose.

She glanced back at me, as if checking to see if I were still following. Upon seeing me, her shoulders eased away from her ears. A slight smile curled the corners of her mouth. My heart seized at the little bit of comfort she displayed.

This woman who had been abandoned by everyone else in her pack found safety in my presence. It made leaving that much harder. I had to do it, though. Once I found the evidence she needed to turn the pack against Alvin, I would hit the road again.

Despite what the witch said, Ness couldn't help me. She didn't have the power. Had Ness been given the room to discover her arcana at an earlier age, then this might have been different. Instead, Ness got to use me.

I would do what I could here, then go. I had to leave. If I stayed much longer, then Morgan would catch up.

"You look miserable," Ness said. "What's eating at you?"

"It could be the fact that the person I've been trying to protect snuck out without telling me. That's the kind of a thing that really weighs on a person's mind."

Ness stuck her tongue out at me. I wanted to bite down on it. I wanted to pull her into me and push my tongue past her lips. Instead, I crossed my arms over my chest. This loneliness wouldn't get the best of me. Getting involved with Ness was a one-way ticket to trouble town.

Once the pack denounced Alvin and started protecting each other, Ness had a possible future with Connor. The male wolf shifter had annoyed me, but he seemed like he had Ness's best interests in mind.

The thought brought my dragon to the surface. It growled and bared its teeth at me. The sky above cracked, lightning arcing across it. I inhaled and forced the dragon back down, where it belonged. It fought me, though. The beast thrashed and rebelled against my control.

Ness's eyes rose skyward before coming back down to show her concern. "Are you sure you're okay, big man? It's pretty hard to hide your feelings when the whole sky is your mood ring."

"I was thinking the same thing about you, earlier."

Her nose wrinkled. This time, she flipped me off. Had she stuck out her tongue again, I might not have been able to control myself. Even now, watching her walk in front of me scrambled my thoughts.

“Are you ready for the hunt?” I asked.

She stumbled, her feet tangling together. I caught her before she could fall face-first. She gripped my forearm pressed against her chest. For a moment, I thought she was angry that I’d touched her. Then I saw the way her lower lip trembled. She quickly bit down on it to hide her fear, but it was too late.

“You’re not ready,” I said.

“I thought I’d have more...I don’t know. Time? Power? Something that would make this easier? I’m not sure.”

Ness shoved off my arm. She swayed for half a heartbeat before straightening. Though I’d gotten a glimpse of her fear, she quickly hid it behind a thick layer of attitude once more. She walked backwards and spread her arms wide.

“What’s the worst that can happen?”

A dark shape darted out of nowhere and crashed into Ness.

The ground rushed up to meet me. It greeted me with stinging pain as I slid across the concrete. Hot breath hit my face before I could move. The wolf growled, low and menacingly. I froze and waited for the blow.

It never came. Ryder grabbed the wolf by the back of its neck before it could bite me. I blinked as the familiar wolf form went flying across the street. Ryder snarled at the first wolf until a second one leapt onto his back.

Marcus and Jackson had returned. The hunt was only a day away. I didn't know why they wanted to attack me now. I'd thought that everyone would save their torture for the night of the hunt.

Ryder went down to one knee when Jackson bit into the dragon shifter's shoulder. Ryder reached back and grabbed Jackson by the scruff of his neck. I looked up with the hope that someone in Lakesedge would see what was going down. Someone had to come help us, right?

Right?

The houses were surprisingly dark, even though supernaturals stayed up late. It seemed as though everyone else was turning a blind eye.

Well, fuck them, I thought.

I lurched to my feet and let my hound come forward for the second time tonight. Shifting again would drain me of the last of my energy, but I wasn't going to let these two hurt Ryder. I watched the fight as my form changed. As soon as Ryder threw off one wolf, another leapt for him. They took turns biting and tearing at the man.

I hit the ground running and rammed into Marcus's side. He tumbled across the ground. Jackson snapped at me, but Ryder grabbed ahold of him before the wolf's teeth made contact. Ryder tossed Jackson into his brother. The two struggled to get back to their feet.

As Ryder stood, I spared a quick glance at him. Blood ran down the front of his ragged shirt. His lip curled as he stared the two wolves down. The brothers recovered and prowled in opposite directions. I kept an eye on Jackson while Ryder watched Marcus.

Though I wasn't as strong as the wolves in my pack, Ryder more than made up for it as a dragon shifter. Here, Ryder didn't have to hide his strength. No one outside of Lakesedge would notice if he shifted. And, if he happened to wake up the entire neighborhood, then I wouldn't feel bad.

But his breathing became labored. I tore my attention from Jackson to check on Ryder. His skin had paled. Even in the dark, I could see the layer of sweat beading on his forehead. Something wasn't right. Ryder should have been stronger.

Two wolves couldn't take down a dragon.

Not without help.

In that moment, I watched Jackson spit something out. He rubbed his tongue against the roof of his mouth and heaved, gagging. A small bag steamed on the ground. Revulsed, I stared in disgust. The side of the bag had been ripped open.

My stomach plummeted. I threw my head back and released a howl for help. I hated involving my friends, but I prayed that they heard me. Cerri would be able to identify the poison. She had to. I didn't know what I would do if she couldn't help Ryder.

Already, he leaned against me. His back heaved. I prowled around him like a shark. Any moment now, the brothers would strike. I didn't know if Ryder's reflexes would help him. I could take one, but the other brother would get past me.

The sky rumbled with the familiar storm that followed me everywhere. If my friends hadn't heard my howl, they would hear the storm. We weren't far from Cerri's apartment. Until then, I tried to pull lightning from the brewing clouds.

Electricity rippled down my back. It made my fur stand on end. The brothers paused and shared a look. When nothing happened, they attacked. I leapt for Jackson's throat. He dodged my bite. His claws scratched across

the concrete as he slid and changed direction. I faltered and struggled to get my feet under me again.

The air grew thick. The smell of ozone crept in. I could feel the electricity bouncing between every hair follicle along my back. Before I could focus it, Ryder cried out. He grunted and collapsed under Marcus's attack.

Blood spilled across the ground. My heart jumped into my throat. I rushed forward, but Jackson pinned me down. My muzzle hit the ground and made my teeth clatter.

"We're not playing this game tonight, boys." Vi's voice drifted down the street.

My breath rushed out of me as relief overcame me. Light flickered in Vi's direction. My eyes widened. Jackson yelped and leapt off me. The smell of burnt fur assaulted my senses and made me sneeze.

Leave it to Vi to set people on fire.

I stood as Vi launched another bolt of fire at the wolf brothers. She could ward them off with her flames. Meanwhile, I had to return to my human form. I pushed, trying to break through hound. She wasn't ready to let go. There were too many packmates in trouble. They needed her help.

These people weren't all pack, though. I didn't understand what the hound was trying to say. Vi was my friend, and Ryder certainly wasn't pack. Still, the hound saw them that way all the same.

She wasn't going to leave them unprotected. She needed claws and teeth to fight off the wolves hurting her family. I gave in because there was no fighting her now. Thankfully, Cerri and Addie rushed past me.

Together, they helped Ryder up from the ground while Vi pushed back the wolf brothers. I prowled around Vi's legs while she laughed. When that laughter started to echo strangely, I nipped her in the calf. She startled and turned a snarl to me.

Her brow rippled as recognition slowly set in. I tilted my head questioningly to ask if she was okay. The light in her eyes flared, revealing that bonfire blazing inside her. The corners of her mouth lifted in a devious smile once more. I tensed and prepared myself for the worst.

Vi squeezed her eyes shut. Her smile slipped away, replaced by shame. She shook herself and took a step back. I made sure that Jackson and Marcus had retreated before herding Vi back to Cerri's apartment.

Vi didn't fight me. She seemed stiff but eager to get away from the scene. I wasn't done yet, though. When I knew Vi was safe with my friends, I doubled back to grab the bag of poison that Jackson had left behind. After seeing what it'd done to Ryder, I didn't take any chances. The bag had already been ripped open. If I grabbed it with my teeth, I would risk ingesting it. Maybe it needed to be introduced to the blood stream to be effective, but there was also a chance that Jackson had taken the antidote before the fight.

I shifted back. My hound wasn't pleased, but she understood. So long as Ryder was in trouble, she would do whatever it took to help him. I didn't give that sentiment too much attention. I did not have time to unpack whatever it meant.

In my human form, my dark vision wasn't as good as the hound's. The reek of the bag's contents told me where it was, though. I snatched it from the ground and tried to ignore the slimy feeling of wolf saliva.

No one attacked during the quick jog back to Cerri's apartment. Maybe they didn't feel like messing with a naked woman running through the streets. I paid no attention to the fact that I was streaking through my own neighborhood. The residents of Lakesedge should be used to shifters by now.

When I burst through Cerri's door, Addie was there with a blanket. She threw it over my shoulders as I rushed to Cerri, who stood over her potions table. Indecision and panic left dark lines across her face as she stared at the book open before her. Breathless, I stretched out my arm, the poisoned bag in my palm. Cerri's eyes widened.

"Yes! You foolish hound. I love you!" Cerri cupped my cheeks and kissed my forehead before taking the poisoned bag.

She ripped it open with a fancy knife and spilled its contents across a plate. I made a mental note to never use her dinnerware ever again. Not even a dishwasher could get rid of the taint of that bag.

While Cerri worked, I clutched the blanket around my shoulders and went over to Ryder. My mind raced as I knelt in front of him. Someone had covered Cerri's couch in towels to absorb the blood still dripping from his wounds. He should have healed by now. When I touched his knee, he barely lifted his head to acknowledge me.

This wouldn't have happened had I not snuck out. That truth sat in the forefront of my mind. It mocked me and told me that I was a failure. How

would I ever make my pack better if I couldn't make good decisions?

It seemed like no matter what I did, someone got hurt. Connor had been beaten within an inch of his life for helping me. Ryder was fading fast, and if Cerri couldn't find the antidote, then I feared the worst.

I reached out and squeezed his hand. "Hang in there with me."

The marks on our hands flared softly. If anyone else in the room noticed, they didn't mention it. I stared at the jagged lightning bolts and wondered what they meant. It wasn't like I could feel energy being funneled from me to him, so I doubted the bond was an open line. I wished I could use it to anchor him to the world of the living.

"Uh, Cerri?" Addie called out. "The dragon isn't looking so good."

Cerri hissed, her movements becoming rushed. I twisted and peered up at Addie, who lingered nearby. She wore a grimace, but her gaze seemed to hover around Ryder rather than actually on him. I tried to find what she was looking at, but there was nothing in the air.

"How can you tell?" Vi asked from her position in the corner of the room.

Addie opened her mouth, let out a pained sound, then shook her head. It likely had to do with the arcana she didn't want anyone to know about. Both Vi and I nodded, trusting our friend.

Vi had been in that corner for a while now. She hugged herself tightly as she stared out the wide windows. Something had happened out there. She'd encountered a part of herself that didn't fit into who she wanted to be. It would have taken her over had I not been there. Though I could have told her that we would keep her from losing that battle, I didn't trust myself enough to know if it would be a lie or not.

Ryder's fingers curled around mine. His head fell back, and I feared the worst. He let out a pained groan that told us he was still alive, even if he was suffering. His entire body stiffened. He nearly crushed my fingers in his as he clenched his fist.

I gritted my teeth and endured his grip until the wave of pain passed. The poison was digging deep. I would have gladly traded places with him. He'd come out here to protect my dumb ass. If I could have taken the poison from him, I would have. Waiting for Cerri to find an antidote was killing me—which was a cruel thing to think when Ryder was actually dying right in front of me.

Standing, I crawled into his lap and pressed my ear to his chest so I could listen to his heartbeat. He wound his arms around me and held me tight. I would owe Cerri a new blanket and maybe more after this, but it was worth it.

Ryder's heartbeat thumped softly, each pulse growing dimmer and dimmer. His grip on me loosened by the moment. I buried my face in his chest to hide the tears trying to escape. I hammered his chest and told him that he was too damn strong to go out like this.

"Don't you go yet," I growled into his ragged shirt.

"I will die how I damn well please," he rasped.

I laughed weakly even though I knew how much energy that one line took.

"Aha!" Cerri cried out.

I didn't lift my head when Cerri leaned over me. The sound of her breathing stopped as she worked. I held my breath, too. Ryder's heartbeat continued to grow weaker. What had they given him? Could Cerri counteract it on the fly?

This man never wanted to stay here. I could tell that from the way he constantly watched the horizon. The mark glowed on the back of my hand as I pressed it over his heart. He'd stayed to help me, and I was in his debt for how much he'd sacrificed in doing so.

Ryder coughed and groaned. "The hell...was...in that?"

"A myriad of counteractive agents. Would you like a chaser to make it go down easier?" Cerri said.

"I think I left my tequila here," Vi called out from the corner. "You can have the rest of the bottle if you want."

Ryder groaned. "Tempting...as...that is..."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. Ryder's heart pumped harder and harder. He tightened his arm around my waist. Across the room, Addie sighed audibly, too.

"Fucking hell," Addie said with obvious strain in her voice. "I really thought we weren't going to make that."

When I tried to remove myself from Ryder's lap, he put another arm around me. He clutched me like I was a plushie, which wouldn't have been all that bad had I not been butt naked and in a room with my best friends.

I cleared my throat. "I, ah, need to put some clothes on."

Ryder's attention made every hair on my body stand on end. I was aware of my naked breasts and my ass on his lap. This hadn't been sexual in the beginning, but the tension around us was quickly growing hot.

"All right," Vi said. "I'm heading home for the night. I feel the need to start a bonfire and stare into it while I drink my loneliness away. Do you want to keep me company, Addie?"

"I don't like girls," Addie said, matter-of-factly.

"That's alright. I just want someone to keep me from losing my shit again."

The two shared a look of understanding that made me wonder what they were going through. I'd been drowning in the conflict within my pack. It'd kept me from seeing how my friends had problems of their own.

Vi and Addie made their exit. Cerri collapsed on a chair across from Ryder and me. She dragged her hands over her face before letting her head fall back. The urgency in the room had evaporated and left behind nothing but exhaustion.

Honestly, I was afraid of leaving again. If we walked, we might run into another ambush. Ryder wasn't in any shape to endure another fight like that, even if the antidote worked. I couldn't carry him, either. Not in any form.

I peered up at him. Though I was tempted to ask him if he could shift and fly us to the edge of the neighborhood, he couldn't fly all the way back to his rental. That left me with one option.

"Can I borrow your phone?" I asked Cerri. "You have the pack number database on it, right? I need to give Connor a call."

An unfamiliar car pulled up outside the apartment complex. I gave Ness a wary look. Her grimace disguised as a grin did not instill any confidence in me. Unfortunately, I could barely stand on my own two feet yet. The women hovered around me like they might be able to catch me if I collapsed.

I'd like to see them try, but I managed to keep myself upright the entire way down the stairs. Ness kept ahold of my mangled shirt the whole time. I didn't tell her that it was useless because I enjoyed her proximity. Earlier, holding her had given me an anchor when it'd felt like my soul might slip away from this world.

Someone cared if I lived or not. I knew my family wanted me dead for what I did, but at least Ness wanted me alive. She'd risked her friends' safety to help me. Though I'd only known her for a short time, I knew that she hated involving others if she could help it. She was the kind of person to take a beating for someone else.

Her friends had saved me tonight. Had it not been for them, those wolves would have killed me, then Ness. They'd done something to poison me. I'd known it from that first bite. It'd stung all the way through my chest like claws reaching deep inside me. That poison had tried to hollow me out.

Even now, my beast's voice was weak. I wasn't used to the silence inside my own head. I loathed it. No matter how I pulled, the beast would not come closer. I could not give it power to make it stronger because I had nothing left to give.

Connor jumped out of his stupid hatchback sedan and raced around to the back. When he opened the hatch, I glared at him. He shrugged. "I figured you might want to lie down. Besides, the seats are still down, and we don't have time to lift them."

Connor wanted to get Ness alone. Who was I to say no? She wasn't my mate. She wouldn't leave this place with me when I moved on. She needed someone who would be here for her.

Yet the way she crossed her arms over her chest and backed away from Connor annoyed me. I grumbled, yanked open the passenger door, and folded myself into the seat. Ness laughed and climbed into the back. Her laugh eased something tight inside my chest. I sighed and slouched in the seat, wondering what the hell I thought I was doing.

I could have died tonight.

Those damn wolves shouldn't have had the strength to bring down a dragon. That had made me cocky, though. They clearly didn't want to play by the rules. I should have known that when I caught Harvey trying to put a curse on Ness's car. Of course, they would find a way to hinder me.

Would I be up for my job the night of the hunt? My part in Ness's plan was simple enough. All I had to do was get in and snoop around. So long as no one found me, then I would be fine.

I wasn't sure I would have my strength back by then, though. I couldn't tell Ness that. She would call off the plan. That's the kind of person she was. I wasn't going to wait another month to get the same chance, though. In that time, two things would happen:

Morgan would catch up to me.

And Ness would die.

I hated having her life on my conscience. What else was I going to do, though? I couldn't abandon the woman who'd held me while I felt my life slip away. If she hadn't done that, maybe I would feel better about leaving.

Ness stuck her head between the front two seats. Connor gave her a glance, which made my beast rise closer to the surface. I marveled at the dumb creature's possessiveness. Nothing else I'd done had made my dragon stronger, but the moment someone looked at the hound shifter, my beast lost its mind.

Great.

"Are you ready for the hunt?" Connor asked.

Ness groaned but didn't respond. I sank further into my seat and closed my eyes.

In my dreams, Alvin's face became my father's.

I helped Ryder inside where he could fall into the bed. He made a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl as he rolled onto his side and slipped back into sleep. I watched him for a few heartbeats, as if the poison might kick in again now that we were away from Cerri. When that didn't happen, I retreated back to Connor.

"Thanks again," I said.

Connor gave a half-shrug. "Don't worry about it. I have a favor to ask in return, actually."

My stomach flipped. When my hound whined inside my head, I knew that something was up. Connor loved me, though. I'd been blind to it until the day Alvin tried to make an example out of him. Perhaps, I could see his guilt over our past. Maybe that's why my hound didn't like where this was going.

"Can we go for a drive and talk? I want to get some things off my chest." He jingled his keys.

I glanced over my shoulder to the hall where I'd left Ryder. He needed someone to watch over him, but a short drive shouldn't hurt.

The night didn't feel safe anymore, yet I followed Connor to his car and claimed the front seat. I expected it to smell like Ryder. I would have been more comfortable if it had. Ryder had smelled like himself when I'd curled in his lap, so I didn't understand why his scent didn't linger on the seat.

Connor pulled away from the curb while my mind churned. I didn't pay attention to where he was taking me or the fact that he stayed silent for too long. Maybe I was tired. Maybe I trusted him too soon.

Before I knew it, Alvin's house loomed outside the windshield. Two wolves prowled the front lawn, their heads low and hackles raised. I tensed and turned a panicked look at Connor.

He gripped his steering wheel so tight that his knuckles were white. He wouldn't look at me. No matter how I tried to get his attention—snapping my fingers, shouting, shaking him—he would not look at me.

"Alvin said that he would let you survive the hunt if I brought you to him," Connor said under his breath.

"You stupid mother—" My words were cut off when someone yanked my door open and ripped me out of my seat.

I scrambled to get back onto my feet, but Harvey jerked me off balance every time I came close. If I went slack, maybe I would fall out of his grip. He would kick me, though. I knew he wouldn't hesitate to hurt me. I was already tired from shifting twice. I didn't have the energy to heal broken ribs tonight.

"Good job, Connor," Alvin said as he stepped up with his hands in his pockets like this was a casual meeting. He put a fatherly hand on Connor's shoulder. "You did the right thing. The traitor needs to be taught a lesson."

Connor opened his mouth. Alvin didn't give him time to argue. Jackson and Marcus swarmed around Connor's legs. They herded him back to his car.

"You said she would be safe!" Connor shouted. He tried to push past the wolves, but they bit his calves and held him back.

Connor grunted and dragged the wolves along as he pushed forward. The smell of blood rose on the night air. My stomach turned. Alvin shook his head and approached Connor. When Alvin leaned forward to whisper in Connor's ear, Connor's face drained of all color. My once-friend looked to me with horror and fear across his face.

Harvey yanked me off balance again. The world turned into a blur before my face met the ground. Pain reverberated through my skull. My shoulders throbbed. I wanted to cry for help, but no one had my back here.

I couldn't rely on Ryder. My friends weren't nearby.

I was alone once again.

Harvey grabbed my hair and lifted me. I hissed and tried to follow to ease the stinging pain in my scalp.

"Good girl," Harvey purred.

Vomit seared the back of my throat. I wouldn't be upset if I threw up on him, but there was nothing in my stomach anymore.

Connor shouted behind me.

The sound turned into a howl as Harvey dragged me inside. He didn't throw me to the ground like I thought. Instead, Alvin stepped around him and opened a door that led down into the darkness. The smell of mold and earth reached my nose. I thrashed in Harvey's grip, but that only made him laugh.

Damn Connor. Damn him to hell. He was a naïve fool for thinking that Alvin ever had good intentions. No one wanted to believe that Alvin was really a bad man despite the evidence. They all wanted to go back to the days before. I refused to believe that the days before my first shift were truly better.

Alvin lost his mind over that damn prophecy for a reason.

Harvey dragged me down the stairs. By now, the fight had bled out of me. Instead of struggling to escape, I scanned my surroundings. Though the basement was dark, I noted the narrow windows near the ceiling. I watched Alvin close the door behind him and wondered if there was a deadbolt.

Harvey threw me to the cement floor. The uneven surface grated my palms when I caught myself.

"I'm really sorry, but I'm not going to participate in your father-son bukkake bonding session. It's just not my jam." I needed to learn to keep my mouth shut.

Harvey laughed before he kicked me in the jaw. My head snapped back. Pain lanced from my chin to the back of my skull. I swallowed my groan because I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

I leaned back, my weight on my stinging palms. "Are you going to kill me and tell the pack that I died in a boating accident?"

Someone in the pack would question a lie like that. Connor would know. My dad would know. I liked to think that Haylee and Kelsey would absolutely know. Would they act on that, though? Would they rise up and say that Alvin had finally crossed the line?

Or, would they go back to their peaceful lives built on lies? That would be the safer option. I didn't blame them for wanting to protect themselves, but that peace wouldn't last. Someone else would piss Alvin off. So long as I was here, Alvin had someone to hurt that wasn't my packmates.

Fuck, I hated making myself the sacrificial goat. Why did I keep doing it?

Alvin crouched beside me. His upper lip twitched as he looked me up and down. I could see his hatred for me simmering inside him. No matter how he tried to keep his cool and appear strong, my presence managed to unravel him.

“Abandon the outsider, and you might survive the hunt,” Alvin said.

Ah, so that’s what this was about. I knew Alvin would be threatened by Ryder, but I hadn’t imagined he would go so far as to kidnap me.

“Audra Miura is going to go looking for me when I don’t show up to work tomorrow,” I said.

I didn’t know the validity of that statement. I liked to think that Audra protected us, but we didn’t even know if she had the power to do so.

No one could come for me right now. Ryder was still healing from the poison. Connor was a dipshit. My friends had all gone to bed. I was alone, again.

“You’re going to stay down here until the outsider leaves,” Alvin said. “If he doesn’t give up by the time the hunt starts, then you’re going to have to fight hard to survive.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you even hear yourself? I can’t tell Ryder to leave if I’m stuck in your basement. You should let me go so I can tell him to his face. I don’t even have my phone.”

It was on the side of the street near Cerri’s apartment from when I shifted in a hurry. I’d been too distracted by Ryder’s pain to notice if it’d started raining there or not. However, that gave me a great idea.

My hound perked up, but she was still panting from the two shifts tonight. I told her that we would try it later. If I was lucky, then Alvin and Harvey would go to bed, soon. I might be able to get in a nap so that I could shift again. The storms that followed me around would act like a beacon over Alvin’s house.

All of Lakesedge would know where I was.

The way Harvey watched me made me doubt I would get any sleep. My skin crawled as if I’d stepped into the witch’s house again. It wasn’t that she’d cast a ward over this house. Harvey had his own creepy aura that set off alarms.

Alvin stood. “You better hope that the outsider gets the message.”

“How can he?” I asked, exasperated.

I flinched, expecting a boot to the face. It never came. When I cracked an eye open, I noticed that Alvin had retreated to the stairs. He shook his head in disappointment. Meanwhile, Harvey still hovered over me.

“If only you hadn’t given in to the witchcraft.” Alvin shook his head in disappointment.

“Are you seriously going to blame a prophecy on me? I didn’t ask for that. Your son, here, bought a curse. If you hate witchcraft, then crucify this dipshit’s ass.”

My words weren’t going to free me, yet they made me feel a little better. Once I got out of here, I was going to drink a gallon’s worth of iced hazelnut mochas. I was going to get sushi from that place outside the city.

When I got out of here... Fear slithered up my spine in a cold wave. Ice formed in my veins and made me shudder.

No. I wasn’t going to consider any other option. I was going to escape this basement one way or another.

Harvey stepped closer. I lurched back and scrambled to my feet. Unfortunately, that put my back against the wall. My hound growled, making my chest rumble. I could feel her preparing to fight. My entire body stiffened.

Connor wasn’t here to witness anything. They hadn’t dragged him down here with me, so I foolishly hoped that Harvey wouldn’t try to hurt me. It was a strange hope.

Remember how you said you wanted to violate me in front of Connor? Well, he’s not here. Can I get a rain check?

My hound’s growl turned into a soft whimper for a moment. I had to pull myself back together. There wasn’t a chance in hell that I would fall apart in front of Harvey.

I scanned my surroundings for anything I could possibly use as a weapon. Basements were always filled with junk. I noticed something behind a stack of storage totes that looked like a mallet. This would have been my lucky day had it not been for...well, you know.

Harvey prowled closer. I slid to the right, but Harvey snapped out an arm and blocked my way. I sucked in a breath. That was my first mistake. That breath had telegraphed what I was about to do. Just as I began to duck under his outstretched arm, Harvey grabbed me by my hair.

He yanked me back and shoved me onto the nearby cot. The springs jabbed my back as they groaned from my weight. I hissed and arched my

back. My scalp throbbed. When this was over, I was going to shave my head. I was tired of having a weak spot that anyone could grab.

A dark form loomed over me. I tensed, waiting for Harvey to strike. He bent over me, and revulsion curdled my stomach. His breath was hot and moist on my skin as his face hovered over my throat. I gagged again, but all I had was bile.

I was stunned when Harvey reached past me. Stupidly curious, I waited to see what he was doing. The clink of metal on metal sent adrenaline pumping through my body. I flew upwards in a frantic attempt to escape, but Harvey put his palm against my chest and shoved me back down.

Every spring in the cot groaned when I crashed into it for a second time. Harvey pulled a set of handcuffs out from behind the cot. One cuff was attached to a pipe running along the wall. He yanked my arm back and slapped the other cuff around my wrist. I grimaced when pain lanced down my side from Harvey's not-so-gentle hands.

If he thought he was going to get away with some creepy BDSM down here, then he was horribly wrong. I would give him an involuntary vasectomy before he could touch me. I waited for my hound to agree, but there was no sound in my head.

I dug and dug but couldn't find my hound anywhere. My jaw dropped. Harvey stepped back and put his hands on his hips. He grinned with idiotic pride. I gaped. My chest heaved as panic set in.

"Wha-what did you do?" I yanked on the cuff, but it refused to give.

I noticed the sigils inscribed around the edge of the cuff. They writhed and flickered darkly, like they were living shadows bound into the shape of the sigils.

"You would be surprised how much money can buy," Harvey said smugly.

I spit at him. It landed at his feet rather disappointingly. I wanted to hide my fear. Though I'd known that I was weaker than the other shifters for most of my adult life, I had been made even weaker. I was practically human with this cuff on my wrist.

"Has anyone ever told you that you smell like wolf piss?" I asked, because I could not stop the false bravado falling from my lips. "I could smell you from a mile out. Did the entire pack line up and take turns urinating on you? Or is this all you?"

Harvey rolled his eyes. He didn't rise to my bait. Not that I knew what I would do if he struck. If he would come closer, then maybe I could do something. I could pick his pocket for the key to these cursed cuffs or knock his thick skull into the wall and knock him out.

Instead, Harvey backed away. His grin widened. He knew what he was doing. I would wait down here, wondering when my demise would come. The hours would stretch, and my panic would wear me thin. Though I knew what he was doing, I wasn't sure if I could avoid it. I couldn't stop my heart from pounding or will the ice in my veins to melt.

"Have fun in the dark, Ness." Harvey flicked the light switch and the single, dim light blinked out.

I threw myself down onto the cot. Staring into the dark did nothing to ease my fear. Without my hound, I was truly alone for the first time in years. I kept digging, as if she was buried deep within myself. The cursed cuffs had stolen her from me.

Tears burned the back of my eyelids, but I refused to cry. I wouldn't do it. If I told myself not to, it simply wouldn't happen.

That was a nice thought, but the hot tears still rolled down my cheeks anyway. I turned to face the wall, if only to ease the strain in my shoulder from being cuffed to the pipe. Rattling it might have sent some annoying clatter up the pipe, but the pipe itself refused to budge. I considered rattling it for the hell of it, but I didn't have any will left in me.

I drifted off into a cursed sleep. Over and over, I watched Ryder fall to his knees. Each time Ryder dropped, I woke with a gasp. Despite the chill of the basement, a layer of sweat beaded across my forehead and the back of my neck.

The smells of mildew and dust assaulted me every time I woke. I wrinkled my nose and peered at the windows above for a glimpse of morning light. The sky outside remained dark.

Had I slept through the day? Did anyone notice my absence today?

I groaned and tugged on the cuffs again. Of course, they didn't budge, but the clanking sound satisfied me. How long until I drove Alvin's wife crazy? She had to be up there, somewhere.

I counted the clanks before drifting back to sleep and falling back into the same cycle of cursed dreams.

At first, I thought the banging came from inside my skull. The throbbing jarred my soul. I groaned as I came to. At the first glimpse of light, pain stabbed through my skull. I pressed my eyes shut once more and prayed that the throbbing would end soon.

The sound never stopped. Soon, a voice found its way inside.

“Open up this damn door,” a female shouted from outside.

As much as I loathed the idea of getting up, I managed to force myself into a standing position. The world tipped back and forth, but I pushed forward until it settled back into place as I made my way down the hall. It took some time, but the harsh light softened a little by the time I reached the living room. I let out a haggard sigh and opened the door.

The potion-maker, Cerri, glared up at me. She gripped the strap of her purse tightly with one hand. The other hand, however, trembled in a fist at her side.

I blinked several times. The throbbing hadn’t let up. It hammered the front of my skull and kept me from processing why Ness’s friend might be on my doorstep. I took a clumsy step back and gestured for her to enter. She gaped at me, then shook herself.

“Where is she? Are the two of you having a hot sex marathon? Is that why she won’t answer her damn phone? I’ve been trying to reach Ness all day!”

Taken aback, I ran my hand over my face. My stubble scraped at my palm. The sensation grounded me—but only barely. I still felt as though someone wanted to rip my soul out of my body.

“Contrary to common belief, I do not want to bone your friend.”

She laughed and tapped the lobe of her pointed ear. “I know a lie when I hear one.”

I cocked my head. “Are you a fae?”

She stopped, her eyes widening slightly. “What? Why would you say that?”

“It’s nothing. Never mind. You said you haven’t been able to get ahold of Ness?” I paused and tried to recall the events of the night before. “She shifted, for the fight near your apartment. Maybe she lost her phone in the process?”

I turned to find Ness and realized that the apartment was empty. I’d been asleep in the bed. If Ness had been there, I would have seen her. Hell, she was hard to miss. Ness made her presence known. At least, she did when she was around me.

Once more, I rubbed at my face. I tried to will the poison hangover away, but it was relentless. My stomach churned. I clenched my teeth and dragged in a deep breath. It did little to actually settle me, but I likely looked better. Now wasn’t the time to reveal just how weak I felt.

Cerri wasn’t fooled, though. Her upper lips curled. Before I could stop her, she rushed past me and began pawing through the cupboards. Like Ness, she bemoaned the lack of food in the house. I wanted to tell her that I had no plans to stay. I wasn’t going to make a home out of this place.

Instead, I watched wordlessly as Cerri grabbed several boxes of complimentary tea from the cupboard. She snatched up a pair of scissors and cut the tea bags open. Meticulously, she plucked ingredients from each small pile of herbs and dropped them into a cup.

“I would prefer to have my cauldron for this, but a microwave can be a magical vessel in a pinch.” She filled a mug with water and shoved it into the microwave.

The machine’s beep nearly split my skull in half. I wanted to howl from the pain, but I kept my mouth shut. In what seemed like a heartbeat, Cerri pressed a hot mug into my hand. The mug wasn’t as hot as I’d expected, though.

How long had I been caught in the pain of that sound? It’d seemed like there hadn’t been enough time for Cerri to imbue the potion with her arcana. Still, I trusted her, cursed myself, and threw back the contents of the mug.

Barely a breath later, the pain faded. My chest expanded as I breathed deep. I could open my eyes now that the world wasn't trying to sear the inside of my skull.

"I'm sorry about the hangover," she said. "I didn't even think about that last night."

"Remind me to call you the next time I party too hard."

Her laugh was weak. I could see her smile already starting to fail as worry for Ness crept back in. As if catching herself wringing her hands, she wrenched them apart and grabbed the mug from me so she could put it in the sink.

With her back to me, she said, "I've been searching for storms all day, too. Why can't I find her anywhere?"

The events of the night came back to me. I hadn't been able to forget the fight where those wolves poisoned me, but the rest of the night had been a blur until now. Ness had called on Connor for help. He was the last person who'd seen her.

I had an awful feeling.

"Do you know how to get ahold of Connor?"

Cerri grimaced. "Him again?"



I PULLED up outside of a trailer set deep into a trailer park on the edge of the supernatural territory. It was on the other side of the lake. From here, I could see the warehouses of Lakesedge lining the opposite shore of Lake Onondaga.

Outside, the air smelled of wolves. I surmised a number of shifters lived here. If I picked a fight with Connor, would they come to his aid? No one wanted to help Ness, so I doubted they would stick their necks out for Connor, either.

I made a note of all the ways Connor could run. There were several windows in the trailer that a human body could fit through. The trailer likely had a back door, but that wouldn't be hard to find. As I took in the park, I tried to guess which way Connor might run and how I could cut him off if it came down to it.

Cerri didn't bother waiting for me. She leapt up the front steps and pounded on the door much the same way she had with mine. This time, the door swung open when she slammed it. Cerri froze and glanced back at me.

This was where I came in. I pushed past her. If Connor had any traps set up at the front door, I would walk into them instead of Cerri. Connor hadn't set any traps, though. He wasn't in any shape to do so, apparently. Slouched on the couch across from me, Connor raised the beer bottle in his hand. His eyes were distant as he stared at the floor. A cloud of shame surrounded him.

My beast stirred. Anger made lightning ripple beneath my skin. It demanded to be let out. The skies wanted to open up and expose the rage brewing inside me. I kept it locked down as I watched Connor.

"What did you do?" I asked.

Connor's lips curled angrily. "You need to get the hell out of here. You're screwing everything up. They wouldn't be so mad at her had you not set up camp here."

Before I could say anything, Cerri shoved past me. The sound of her slap reverberated through the room. Connor's head snapped to the side, but that sneer stayed on his face. Cerri wasted no time. She brought her foot down on Connor's instep.

"Tell us what you did, damn it."

I made a mental note to stay away from Ness's friends. I got the sense that if she didn't stand between them and the pack, they would have burnt it to the ground for her by now.

Cerri grabbed ahold of Connor's shirt and shook him. I stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder to calm her down. She stiffened but never took her eyes off Connor.

"You were supposed to be her friend," Cerri said weakly.

I gently pulled her away from Connor so I could insert myself between them. If Cerri's assault hurt at all, Connor didn't show it. Dread slithered in the pits of my gut.

"What did you do?"

Connor lurched forward and threw his head into his hands. I stumbled back, ready for a fight only to watch him crumple. His shoulders collapsed under the weight of whatever he hid from us.

"I wanted to help," Connor said, his voice muffled by his hands. When they fell away, he didn't lift his head. "Alvin said we would talk. I thought I

would be able to stand beside her and keep her safe. All I want is for her to have a future here.”

Cerri kicked him in the shin. “So, you took her straight to Alvin? Are you really that stupid?”

Connor lifted his head. His brows arched as he grimaced. His gaze flicked to Cerri. “I was ready to sacrifice myself for Ness, but Alvin said... he said he’d let Harvey hurt you. I’ve seen what Harvey likes to do to women. Ness will hate me for what I did to her, but she’d gut me if she found out that I’d sacrificed you for her.”

I caught Cerri by the elbows before she could crumple. She quickly straightened and backpedaled, all while avoiding Connor’s gaze. He gave a curt yet grave nod in understanding. Even he hated himself.

I just nodded. “If I find out that she’s...”

I couldn’t bring myself to finish that sentence. My beast rioted. Electricity snapped in the air around me. The beast’s rage could no longer be contained. I glared down at the man on the couch. He couldn’t see my fury, but I was damn sure that he could feel it.

I changed my words so I could complete my warning. “If I get to Alvin’s and Ness is hurt, then I’m going to come back and bury you six feet under. I won’t bother to kill you first, either.”

Cerri’s head snapped back, her wide eyes flying up to me before she stiffened and nodded in agreement. There was a fury in her eyes, too. It reminded me of the other Bad Moon employee, the one with the fire. She might be a liability, though. She’d had little control over herself last night.

Outside, the sun remained bright in the sky. No storms gathered overhead. I wished the sky would open up and rumble with my beast’s violence, but the day seemed too stubborn to admit that things were about to take a dark turn.

The sound of movement behind me made me spin. I braced for Connor’s attack, but he didn’t throw himself at me. Instead, he stood in the doorway and tried to lift himself to his full height. He couldn’t quite do it, like the weight of what he’d done still pushed him into the earth.

“I’m coming with you,” Connor said, though he showed no intention of moving.

I raised both brows and waited. Connor’s eyes were a little too wide as he looked between me and the car. Cerri stood with her arms crossed over

her chest. She clearly had no patience for him. If her attitude scared him, then he was in for a surprise when he discovered how I really felt.

My beast still thrashed with a hungry fervor. It wanted me to shift and eat Connor whole. Dog didn't taste very good, but it would be better than this—better than watching the man who'd betrayed his friend.

I didn't ask the idiot why he'd done it. Alvin manipulated his pack into doing exactly what he wanted. He wouldn't settle for anything less than submission from them. That was no excuse for Connor's behavior, though.

When all was said and done, I hoped that they expelled him from the pack. When Alvin was dead and in the ground, I hoped Connor got thrown into the deepest pits of the earth for being the spineless weakling he was. For a man who'd risked his life for Ness barely a day and a half ago, he infuriated me.

Ness

HOW MANY DAYS HAD PASSED? I slept on and off because there was little else to do. Without my hound to stand guard, I found my will to fight bleeding away. My anger at Connor faded. The pack that I'd wanted to protect so badly never truly cared about me. They were worms at Alvin's feet.

I never should have put my faith in any of them.

Oh well, this all had to come to an end eventually. Right?

My anger flared, hot and sharp. It wasn't at the pack, but at myself. I was better than this. There were so many other reasons to live, like iced hazelnut mochas and hot dragon men. I grabbed ahold of that indignation and held it tight so that it might warm me in this damp basement.

I didn't want to die yet. My life had been a stretch of miserable years. There should have been so many more ahead of me. I had a chance yet to grasp the kind of future that I wanted for myself.

For fuck's sake, I was going to bang that dragon man if it was the last thing I did. Men like him, incredibly hot and protective, didn't come along all that often. I wanted to know what his lips tasted like before my life came

to an end. I would feel his hands all over my body before I let anyone take me out of this world.

I held my hand up over my face and wondered if the cursed cuffs blocked the bond between Ryder and me. As I tilted my hand back and forth, I noticed a pale glow beneath my skin. It rippled like the clouds before a lightning strike.

So, the bond wasn't completely dead. I'd discovered that the bond didn't grant us any kind of communication the night we tried to break it. I wished, though, that I could send an SOS down the line to Ryder. I didn't like the idea of waiting for him to rescue me, but I was tired and out of hope.

All I had left was this anger like a flame that guttered in the wind. I held on tight to it and tried to let it fill me. Was this the end? How could I let Alvin win without a fight?

The idea of weakly submitting to Alvin's tyranny gave me the motivation to sit up. The cursed cuff slid down the pipe with an annoying clatter. I grinned and hoped that someone upstairs heard it. I rattled it several more times, just to savor the idea that I had to be inconveniencing someone.

I flexed the hand that bore the lightning mark. Ryder had to be on his way. Like he would let me do anything on my own. He'd followed me to Cerri's the night before. When he woke and realized I wasn't there again, he would find me.

Until then, I had to do more than survive. I looked to the mallet leaning against the far wall. It was about seven feet out of reach. Scanning the boxes and storage totes, I couldn't find anything that would give me the reach I needed. I had to get these cuffs off, first.

Without my hound, I couldn't shift and slip out of the cuffs. That meant I would have to get the other cuff off the pipe first. I didn't know how easy it would be to break the pipe. I'd tried several times already. Once again, my missing hound hindered me. My shifter strength failed me without her present.

"Ooh, I have an idea," I whispered.

I peeled the thin mattress up and grabbed one of the rusted springs from beneath. It didn't want to give, at first, but the cot was old and falling apart. The spring snapped at a rusted bend and came free. I wondered what dump they'd dragged this out of.

After straightening the piece of metal, I jammed one end of it into the keyhole of my cuff. It hit an invisible barrier and ricocheted off. The metal spring scraped along the cuff, much to my disappointment.

“Stupid witch, thinking of everything.” I clenched my fist around the metal spring.

Though I wanted to give up, I eyed the other cuff. The runes didn’t move with an unnatural liveliness the way they did around my wrist. I shrugged and made a second attempt with the keyhole of the other cuff. Much to my surprise, the spring slid into the keyhole without any resistance.

The cuff popped open and slid free of the pipe. I glared at the inconvenience and wondered if the witch had planned for this. I felt like she had left the second keyhole unhexed on purpose. She was playing a game that I did not understand, but I was grateful for the assistance even if it was a nuisance.

The cuff dangled from my wrist. I hated being separated from my hound, but I couldn’t let it deter me from trying to escape. I peered up at the narrow windows above. If I sucked in my stomach, I might be able to slide out them, but I was wary of getting stuck halfway through. It seemed to me that the windows might have been smaller than usual.

I glanced back at the cot and up at the windows. Had that cot been there all along? I didn’t want to think on it too long, but this was my chance to find the skeletons in Alvin’s closet. My stomach churned as I wondered who Alvin had kept down here.

Before I opened any of the boxes or totes, I grabbed the mallet against the far wall. It was heavy in my hand. If it was down here, then I got the sense that Alvin hadn’t kept anyone in his basement for a while. Maybe he’d been too distracted by my presence in his pack.

I hadn’t put much thought into what Alvin might have to hide. All this time, I’d been determined to air his dirty laundry, but I hadn’t considered what that might mean. Why couldn’t it be something simple like tax evasion or money laundering? Why did these clues point to something much darker?

As I reached for the first box, I glanced at the door at the top of the stairs. When it didn’t move, I pried the box open. Inside was a tangled mess of Christmas lights. After pawing through it, I decided there wasn’t

anything inside that would tell me anything. I grabbed a nearby tote and tugged the lid free. Once again, I found nothing.

I wished I had my hound. If I could smell anything other than mold and mildew, then maybe this would be easier. I had an uncomfortable feeling that I would smell rot.

The doorknob rattled. My heart lurched. I tucked the mallet behind the cot and tossed myself down onto the mattress before the door opened. At the last second, I remembered to hide the cuff behind the cot, as well.

Harvey sauntered through the door. He kicked it shut behind himself before descending the stairs with a devious grin. The urge to put my foot through his teeth overwhelmed me, but I couldn't do that until I got the key to the cuffs off him.

I hated what that meant.

"How did you like your stay in our fine hotel?" Harvey asked.

"Man, the continental breakfast sucked. It was like eating nothing but air."

His smile never slipped. He laughed and shook his head. I knew when he laughed that this wasn't going to end well. I wrapped my hand around the mallet handle behind the cot.

"Your white knights aren't here," Harvey said as he braced one hand against the wall behind the cot and leaned over me.

My heart thumped. Harvey blocked my exit. I would have to fight my way out if I was going to escape. Without my hound, I didn't like those odds. Not even the weight of the mallet could temper my shaking hands.

Harvey looked me up and down with hungry eyes. "I don't get why Connor wants to put a ring on you. If I were him, I'd take what I want and put you down."

My lip curled. Harvey's smile widened menacingly. Before I could react, he grabbed me by the throat. He shoved me back. My teeth rattled in my head. He laughed as he straddled me. His hand tightened around my throat.

Like hell would I die like this. I brought the mallet up, but it caught on the cot's mattress. Harvey noticed me struggling. He peered to the side and noticed the wooden handle half sticking out from behind the bed. His gaze tracked to the pipe.

"Crafty mutt," he growled.

He ripped the mallet from my hand and tossed it across the room. My hopes sank. I'd exposed all the cards up my sleeve only to have them fail.

I growled. Like hell would I give in. I tossed my arm. The loose cuff slapped Harvey across the face. Blood arched in the air as he reeled back. When he took his hand off my throat, I sat up and shoved him. Harvey tumbled back off the cot, his limbs akimbo.

Scrambling off the mattress, I ran for the mallet and snatched it off the floor. My feet tangled beneath me, but I caught myself and darted for the stairs. I doubted anyone had locked it from the outside.

Harvey's laugh taunted me.

I hesitated. When I glanced back, I didn't look at him. Instead, my gaze fell on the windows. Dusk had set in. The hunt would begin shortly.

Harvey hadn't come down here to kill me. He'd come down to bring me to the hunt. I fired off a quick curse and flung the door open and surged out onto the first floor. The house was suspiciously empty. I looked towards the back of the house, as if I could see the pack through the walls.

"Not today," I whispered to myself as I hefted the mallet.

I made a break for the front door and kept running. A wolf broke from the bushes to my right. I swung the mallet. The impact made a meaty sound when it connected with the wolf's muzzle. The wolf crumpled with a whine.

I didn't bother to see who I'd maimed. My guess was Jackson or Marcus. Either one deserved it.

The free cuff slapped against my arm as I ran. I turned my attention to the sky, half hoping that Ryder would descend from above. If I could shift, then my storm would have marked my location. Instead, I was alone.

Nothing new, I thought to myself. I'd survived this long on my own. I would keep kicking so that I could reveal Alvin's skeletons once and for all.

Howls filled the air behind me. I stumbled, my heart stuttering. There were more howls than I expected. Had Alvin threatened them into hunting me? Had he lied to them about me?

I didn't stop. So long as I kept to the road, the wolves might not give chase. I doubted the pack wanted all of Lakesedge to turn against them for disrupting the peace. If I could stay on public property, I might be safe.

A wolf leapt out of the trees to my right. I swung the mallet, but the wolf feinted and snapped at my leg. The wolf caught my pantleg and tugged

me off balance. I let out a cry as the earth came out from under my feet. The sky shuddered when I hit the ground.

Now would have been a good time for a storm. I tried to will a lightning bolt to strike the wolf dragging me away from the road, but nothing happened. Now wasn't the time to lean on my unknown arcana. Instead, I sat up and swung the mallet again. The wolf leapt out of the way, but that meant it had to let go of my pantleg.

Thunder rolled overhead. I stilled and cast a wary glance at the sky. I couldn't tell if I'd summoned that or not. It didn't seem like it. If I had, then my arcana had an annoying delay.

A car peeled out behind me. Before it could even stop, a figure rose out of the driver's seat. I glimpsed Cerri's alarmed face as she frantically reached for the steering wheel. Ryder, however, had set his sight on the wolf in front of me.

Ryder's face was dark with shadows that I'd never seen before. His anger had taken on the darkness of storm clouds long coming, the kind of storm that raged across the seaboard. When he cracked his knuckles, lightning danced within the gathering clouds above.

"I don't need you to save me," I shouted back at him even though I'd hoped he would show up.

His shadows softened when he cast an amused look in my direction. I lifted my chin in greeting before sidling up beside him.

The pack had caught up. I could see them moving between the trees that lined this road. Behind us, the city reached towards the sky. If we could get further away, the pack would lose their cover among the trees.

I opened my mouth to tell Ryder. Before I could say anything, a wolf leapt at me. Teeth bore down, sinking past skin and ripping into flesh. I hissed. My knees buckled beneath me. The rush of blood over my skin reminded me that I would not heal this.

The wolf dragged me down to my knees. Hitting the asphalt jarred my bones. I struggled away from the wolf but couldn't get away. Without my hound's senses, I couldn't tell who had caught me. The wolf was a blur of brown and grey.

More wolves poured out of the woods to surround Ryder. There were fewer wolves than I originally thought. This wasn't the entire pack. Alvin's supporters had been moving so much that I thought there were more of

them. I spared a thought to hope that no one had brought that poison with them again.

Ryder grabbed ahold of the muzzle of the wolf trapping me. The wolf tried to bite down harder on me, but couldn't fight against Ryder's grip. The sound of snapping teeth embedded itself into my mind as Ryder clenched his fist around the wolf's muzzle. He threw the wolf to the side before kneeling to cradle me in his arms.

Behind him, the wolves rushed us. Ryder straightened and glared at the shifters. The clouds rumbled in warning. The wolves skidded to a halt. Their eyes were wild as they looked to the clouds above.

When I turned my gaze on Alvin, my heart stopped. I flung myself from Ryder's arms. He protested, but I ignored him as I ducked under his reach. Alvin stood, a hundred feet away, with a sadistic grin on his face. My father knelt on the ground at Alvin's feet. Dad lifted his head, but Alvin palmed Dad's scalp and forced him to face the ground once more.

I ran without thinking. My heart hammered and sent more blood pouring down my chest from the bite wound in my shoulder. What could I do? I didn't know, but I was going to try.

Cerri and Ryder called my name. I couldn't stop, though. My father might have been an asshole, but he was still my father.

Alvin's grin widened. I could see the whites of his eyes as his excitement overcame him. His grip on my father's head tightened. I'd run right back into Alvin's trap. I would hand myself over again, though. Alvin knew how to manipulate me. I'd shown him what I was willing to do for those around me.

Damn my stupid bleeding heart.

Why couldn't I have been cold and unfeeling? Why couldn't I walk away to save myself?

I never made it to Alvin, though. Ryder appeared before me. He held out his arm to stop me. I opened my mouth to argue, but desperation gripped my throat tight. Ryder's hand hovered in the air over my shoulder. He hesitated at the sight of the blood then let his hand fall back down where it curled into a fist.

"Let me handle this," Ryder said.

The medallion around his neck flared in the dim light. The smell of flowers and earth danced on the air. I stumbled back into Cerri, who'd caught up to us.

“Beryl’s power,” Cerri whispered, awestruck.

Ryder

“IF YOU WANT TO PLAY DIRTY,” I said, “then you can’t be mad at her when she asks for help.”

My beast clawed at me from the inside and demanded to be unleashed. I would not be the first to shift, though. I would hold myself together and wait for Alvin to be the first to make a move. Weak and sniveling as he was, Alvin would be the first to break.

The Lakesedge Alpha drew a blade from the sheath at his waist and bent to tuck it under her father’s chin. My beast poured power into me. I leapt forward and closed my hand around the blade. Its edge bit into my palm, but I didn’t flinch.

Alvin did.

He jerked back, startled. I ripped the knife from his hand and tossed it to the side without breaking eye contact. He didn’t run, but I could see how he wavered. He swayed as the excitement bled out of his eyes to make room for fear.

His nose wrinkled. He leaned in and said through clenched teeth, “At least I don’t have to get on my knees for a fae whore.”

The words threw me off for a moment. Alvin reached behind him and pulled out something I couldn’t see. I jumped back to put space between us before he could attack. I saw nothing in his hand, though.

What had he done? I didn’t have time to find out. I pushed forward to get him away from Ness’s father. I made the first attack. Alvin ducked back, out of the reach of my swing. That forced him to take a step back, though, so I kept swinging until he was away from Ness’s father.

Ness rushed to her father and helped him back onto his feet. Alvin’s wolves moved to leap on them, but Ness’s voice rang out.

“No!”

The wolves stopped in their tracks. Their eyes glazed over. Once again, she’d used her arcana without giving a full command.

I didn't have time to ruminate on her lack of control. Alvin swiped at me. The air around his clenched fist rippled as though he held something sharp and invisible in his grasp. I jumped back, but the invisible weapon tore at the front of my shirt.

The smell of burnt cotton drifted up to my nose. I cocked my head as I searched for clues to what Alvin held. The air around him crackled. I stiffened. The scent of ozone blossomed between us.

Ness groaned behind me. I couldn't turn and check on her. Alvin rushed me. I dodged his first blow, but the second one grazed my side. Searing heat raced up my ribs. The beast in me savored the pain. I let it fuel my rage.

Heedless of Alvin's weapon, I reached for his throat. He brought the invisible blade down onto my forearm. My skin blistered and burned. The smell was almost unbearable. It dredged up memories better left buried.

I sank into them. I saw my father's face again. The smell of my own body burning assaulted my senses. I could feel his lightning coursing through my body. I'd gritted my teeth through the pain so I could deliver the final blow.

He'd left his scars on me. The path of his lightning marked my shoulders and back. Every mirror reminded me of what I'd done in the name of justice. Justice felt like a lie. It ripped my soul to shreds.

One would think that my broken soul would allow me to do what needed to be done again. I closed my hand around Alvin's throat as the world came back into focus. His lips twisted in a snarl. He gripped my wrist with one hand and lifted the other to bring that invisible blade down again.

I caught his forearm and twisted. He hissed and dropped the blade. I thought the fight would end there, but Alvin was undeterred. His form morphed beneath my hands. Skin turned to fur as he fell out of my grasp.

I corrected my stance and threw up my arms to prepare against Alvin's attack. He didn't come at me from the front, though. The wolf quickly scrambled around behind me. His teeth grazed my side. I jerked out of the way so that he caught nothing but my shirt.

Lacing my fingers together, I brought my combined fists down onto Alvin's head. He crumpled, but only for a second before leaping away once more. He put space between us so he could prowl while he awaited an opening.

So long as I didn't give him one, this fight was over.

I could have shifted and eaten him in one bite. There was a reason dragons usually stayed out of the business of other shifters. I didn't want to cause any more of a scene in Lakesedge. This town didn't need a storm dragon causing trouble in their streets.

I could end it.

I was making excuses. The beast reminded me that this could be easy. The beast had no qualms about causing a scene. It had no reservations when it came to killing Alvin once and for all.

My indecision created an opening. Alvin attacked. His teeth sank into the back of my thigh. I snarled. My beast lashed its tail angrily. I had the power to stop this. I could end Alvin.

But I did not want to be the one to do it. No more blood on my hands. This did not have to end in death.

Right?

I reached back and grabbed Alvin by the scruff of his neck. Pain flared hot across the back of my thigh when I ripped him off me. His teeth tore through my flesh, but I had no other option.

With the wolf in my grasp, I threw him. He rocketed down the street, out of sight.

My chest heaved. That wouldn't kill him, but it would give us all time to leave. I turned and marched over to Ness. She'd collapsed beside her father.

"Get up," I growled at the man as I gathered his daughter in my arms.

Self-loathing churned in the pit of my stomach, but I kept it off my face. I held Ness tightly so that she couldn't look up, just in case she could see through me.

I could have ended this.

So, why didn't I?

I wanted the best for my pack, but as we walked back to Ryder's car, I wondered what that meant. Alvin stood a hundred feet back, his back hunched as he watched us. He whistled, and the wolves rallied around him. I could see Harvey, standing at the head of the pack. While the others eyed Ryder with varying degrees of fear, Harvey watched me.

If I was going to save my pack, then I would have to burn half of it to the ground.

How I would do that, I wasn't sure. I dug my fingers into Ryder's chest. He tightened his grip on me.

"It sucks," I whispered meekly. "I hate having to be saved."

Ryder grunted. He wouldn't look at me. The tightness of his jaw betrayed an emotion that I couldn't quite decipher. Something rattled through his mind, but he wasn't going to tell me.

"Why aren't they attacking?" I asked softly as I peered over Ryder's shoulder.

After a moment, he growled, "They're a bunch of cowards."

I turned my attention to Alvin, still hunched and breathing hard. Ire writhed like a twisted dark thing inside my soul. It reached up my throat and coated my tongue as I spoke.

"I hope you go down kicking and screaming under the claws of the ones you should have protected. I hope you know the pain you've caused."

Ryder's steps faltered, but only for a moment. He didn't stop. He didn't turn around. He kept moving forward, away from this fight. I buried my head in his shoulder and breathed in his scent. The twisted, dark thing

inside of me settled and disappeared again. Empty once more, I yearned for the company of my hound. I missed her dearly.

Cerri opened the car door so Ryder could tuck me into the backseat. I wanted to protest that I could walk on my own, but my vision swam as he set me down. I swallowed my words and closed my eyes.

I heard my father's muffled voice outside the car. He asked Ryder something in a hushed tone. I couldn't understand their conversation from where I sat. Though I wanted to sit forward and listen in, I couldn't bring myself to move yet.

When I cracked my eye open, I watched Dad nod. He looked down the street to where Alvin waited. Fear gripped me and squeezed my lungs tight. He couldn't go back. I wouldn't let him.

I grabbed for the seat in front of me, so I could pull myself upright. Cerri protested, but I did it anyway. By the time I could lean between the seats, Dad had walked away. I opened my mouth to ask where he was going, but Ryder threw himself into the seat in front of me. Cerri put the seat back and climbed into the car as Ryder took off. The engine revved and the tires squealed before I heard Cerri's door shut.

Alvin's house disappeared behind the trees. Soon, we found ourselves in a residential part of Lakesedge. The view around me made my chest clench. This should have been home, but the view left me unsettled.

I wanted to take Vi up on her offer and let her burn Alvin's house to the ground, but I needed whatever Alvin had hidden in there.

"Every time I think I'm going to leave," Ryder growled. "Every damn time I think I'm going to leave, something happens to you."

"It's not her fault," Cerri said softly.

Ryder snarled. The sound echoed in the small space. I jangled my cuffs to shut them both up. This thing needed to come off. I couldn't bear having it on me any longer.

I slumped in the backseat of Ryder's muscle car. Though I couldn't smell much with the cuff still around my wrist, Ryder's scent still wrapped around me. If someone had asked why his presence made me feel so safe, I might have mentioned Ryder's dragon or his kindness. But, as I stared at the back of his head, I knew there was more to it than that.

The world outside became a blur. Ryder pressed a little too hard on the gas, but I wasn't about to complain.

"We can't go ahead with the plan," Ryder announced.

I bolted upright. "Excuse me? Why not?"

He jerked the steering wheel. I slid to the left before I caught myself on the back of his seat.

"I'm not letting you get into that situation again." Ryder said it with such finality one could have assumed he was my mate.

"Listen here, you oversized lizard," I snapped. I was too damn tired for anyone to tell me what I could and couldn't do. "That asshole has something hidden in his basement. People don't keep cots in their basement for the fun of it."

Cerri twisted in her seat. We locked gazes as she bit her lip. "I...I don't think I want to know what you're implying."

Alvin hurt people. I didn't know why he kept them in his basement, but I had to figure it out. Once I knew what he'd been up to, I could show the pack. They hadn't come to Alvin's hunt, so there was hope for them yet.

For them all except Connor.

I wanted to believe that he'd done what he thought was right, but his idea of right and wrong was clouded. If Connor couldn't tell that Alvin had been lying to him, then I couldn't trust Connor ever again.

The thought hurt. I wanted my friend back. After he'd helped me escape Harvey, I'd thought better of him. I really had. To know that Connor could turn around and hand me over to Alvin like that was more than I could bear right now.

Ryder

"YOU'RE GOING to lay low until..." My voice trailed off.

Until what? Until I challenged Alvin? I didn't want leadership of this pack. That wasn't a job I wanted anymore. I'd had the chance once before, and I'd failed my clan. I wouldn't fail another pack, especially one as damaged as the Lakesedge pack.

The thought of wrapping my bare hands around Alvin's throat filled me with a sadistic glee that I did not like. The beast in me growled happily. I wouldn't give in, though. Not even Ness could make me do something so horrid again.

I glanced at the rearview mirror, at the woman with wild hair and blood on her shirt. She stared forlornly out the window. Her skin was deathly pale. She'd survived a night in Alvin's hands. If Alvin didn't get off on playing with his victims, then she might not have had the chance to escape.

My knuckles turned white against the steering wheel. Damn this place and damn Ness for trapping me. All I needed was her help, but somehow I'd gotten tangled in this pack's mess. The reason I couldn't leave didn't sit well with me, so I told myself that I still needed Ness's help.

What if the witch had been wrong? What if Ness wasn't the one who would help me? Could I leave her to this fate if she couldn't help me? I wanted to say yes, but every time she needed help, I ran into the fray.

Sacrificing myself for Ness wouldn't bring my father back, though. Nothing I did would ever turn back time and prevent what had happened.

My beast snarled and lashed its tail. The beast wanted to say that this was not about my soul or the stains upon it. Those stains would never go away, no matter what I did. I could not be saved.

A roar stuck in my throat. The steering wheel groaned under my grip. The blonde in the passenger seat gave me a wary look. I ignored her and focused on the road ahead.

"She won't survive the hunt," I said, flatly.

Ness lifted her wrist. In the rearview mirror, I noticed a flash of metal. A pair of cuffs dangled from her arm.

"I won't be so vulnerable once I get these off!" She glared at the cuffs. "They do something. I can't shift. My hound is...gone."

Cerri grumbled as she twisted in the passenger seat. The blonde bemoaned what she assumed to be the local witch's handiwork as she turned the cuffs over.

I hadn't noticed it before, but the wound on Ness's shoulder still hadn't healed. It should have started closing up by now, even if she hadn't eaten in a while. The bloodless color of her skin unnerved me.

Alvin and his son relied on magic a lot. I owed the witch another visit.

I wanted nothing more than to sleep, but the cuff needed to come off. Aside from that, the threat of the coming hunt still haunted me. I could feel it over my shoulder. It was as if Alvin and the others were waiting for me to let my guard down.

“You don’t have to go,” Cerri said, softly. “I can call the others, and we can keep you safe tonight.”

I shook my head. “Tonight isn’t the only night that I’ll be in danger. I’ll have to hide for the rest of my life to escape Alvin.”

She tilted her head and peered up at me. “I mean, you could. It’s not too late to find another pack.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but I can’t just leave!” My throat tightened. “I have to stay and help.”

“Stop trying to put everyone else before yourself. You don’t owe them anything.” Cerri shook her head. She sighed, her shoulders falling as she gave me a somber look. “I hope you know you deserve better than this.”

My eyes prickled. “So does everyone else in our pack. What is going to happen when I leave? Who will Alvin and Harvey hurt next?”

Cerri stiffened. She quickly recovered, but I caught her reaction all the same.

Instead of trying to pry information out of her, I let her get back to her work and looked behind me. Ryder had been standing outside for the past hour and a half. He faced away from us, like he didn’t want to see me.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. I’d dumped my problems on his lap without warning him what that might entail. He’d been poisoned recently.

I'd listened to his heartbeat and feared the worst. If my mess got him killed...I'd never forgive myself.

If the fight earlier taught me anything, it was that Alvin was seriously outmatched. Ryder was bigger, faster, and stronger. He could easily overthrow Alvin if he gave the fight his all. Ryder had hesitated several times, though.

He didn't want to be here. Hell, he'd said that himself. I could tell him to leave, but a selfish part of me still wanted to keep him around. I needed his help. Without Ryder's strength, I wasn't sure that I could do what needed to be done.

It helped that his presence grounded me. With Ryder around, my hound didn't feel so alone. Strange that she would become so attached to a dragon and not one of her own kind. She had no interest in the local canids, even if there were decent men here who tried to stay out of Alvin's machinations.

I wanted one dragon.

Maybe...maybe if I indulged the hound, then I wouldn't want him so badly. If I could have one night with him, then I would be able to let him go in the morning. That was always how Vi made it sound. She yearned for someone until she caught them in her grasp.

I, on the other hand, had little to no experience in that area.

I didn't know anything about love. Sex, I had a better grasp on even if I'd never experienced it myself.

I shook myself and tried to cast my thoughts away. But Ryder chose that moment to look back. We locked eyes through the window. My heart leapt into my throat. My hound was still locked away, but I had the feeling that she would have rolled over for him in that moment.

My cheeks warmed. I turned around to focus on Cerri and her work.

I shouldn't think about Ryder that way. It didn't matter what my hound or my body wanted. I couldn't get involved with him while I was lying to him. That wasn't fair to either of us.

I let out a strangled laugh. "Cerri? I don't want to die a virgin."

She threw her head back and cackled. I slapped my free hand over her mouth to silence her, but she continued to laugh even though I'd muffled her. I cast a panicked glance back at Ryder to see if he'd heard. He hadn't moved from his spot, though.

Cerri pried my hand away from her face. She wiggled her brows in Ryder's direction. "The dragon likes you. Why else would he keep risking

his life to help you?"

I sighed. "He needs me to help him with something. He won't say what, and...well, I haven't been very forthcoming about my abilities because I'm just now discovering that I actually have anything other than a knack for attracting trouble. Besides, he doesn't have to risk much as a dragon."

"That man nearly died on my couch for you. He's risking a lot."

Cerri had a point. I hung my head, defeated. Ryder and I couldn't have anything, though. My lie would always stand between us. Ryder would ask me for help, eventually. When I failed to do what he asked of me, then it would all come crumbling down on my head.

Cerri finished with the cuff. The sigils stopped writhing and the cuff fell to the floor. We both jumped back as the thud rang through the living room. When we shared a look, we both understood that pair of cuffs would stay there until someone else was dumb enough to pick them up.

I left my friend to take photos of the cursed cuffs while I stepped outside to speak with Ryder. I owed him my gratitude.

He didn't acknowledge me at first. He wouldn't tear his gaze away from the grey horizon. The sky was still heavy with storm clouds. I bet the local meteorologists were losing their minds with all these sudden storms.

The thought made me laugh. That sound quickly died when Ryder narrowed his eyes at me. My stomach turned to ice.

"When were you going to tell me?" he asked.

I stiffened. Fear sent a subtle wave of cold through my veins.

"I don't...I don't know what you're talking about." Yeah, that was real inconspicuous.

Ryder's lips formed a grim line that left me nervous. I opened my mouth to explain, then shut it before I could rat myself out. So far, I didn't know what Ryder was talking about. If I spilled my guts now, I could expose myself.

He shook his head and turned away from me. I couldn't help but notice how tightly he clenched his jaw.

This wasn't looking good. I jammed my hands in my pockets because I wanted to reach out for him, but I doubted that would be a good idea. My nails bit into my palms from how hard I tightened my fists.

When Ryder fixed his dark glare on me, I knew he'd found out. The burning ire in his eyes carried the weight of every lie I'd fed him up until

now. His expression held something else, too. I saw a heavy guilt behind it all.

I sighed and adjusted my beanie. “Ryder, I can explain...”

“Explain what? That you were just using me? I want to help you, Ness. I really do. No one should have to live like this, but I don’t want to be a pawn in this game.”

“You’re not a pawn!” I reached for his shirt to pull him close and stopped myself at the last second. “You’re not.”

“Then, when were you going to tell me that you couldn’t help me?”

My hound rioted. She could help. Give her time. I wanted to tell him that. In time, I could figure out what I was capable of. If he could just trust me for a little while, then...

But he couldn’t trust me since I’d lied to begin with. It’d been a lie of omission, but that was enough. I’d put the wrong foot forward and fallen on my face for it.

“Ryder...” My voice wobbled.

“You could have told me to move on. If I’d known that I was wasting my time here, then I never would have stayed.” His nose wrinkled.

Was I wrong, or did I see the glimmer of unshed tears in his eyes? My lie had cost him. What he’d paid, I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that Ryder had little left to give up.

“Then go,” I said. “I’ll break into Alvin’s house on my own. I’ll find what I need, and the pack will help me.”

Ryder threw his hands in the air. Lightning snapped in the air, flashing here and there around him. His growl rumbled like thunder, but I held my ground in the face of his anger. I had my own storm raging inside of me.

“When did I have time to discover my arcana?” I asked, irate. “Should I study it between giving Alvin my schedule? Should I practice it before Alvin takes my friends and uses them as an example? When, exactly, did I have time to figure any of this out?”

Ryder’s anger faltered for a moment. I saw a brief flash of pity that only made me angrier. That dark, twisted presence unfolded inside me. This time, it filled the space between my hound and myself. I was too full. It needed out. I wanted to unleash it on Ryder.

Instead, I swallowed it down. My heart trembled. I had no idea what that thing was. This new part of me, summoned by anger, couldn’t be good. I would not unleash it upon Ryder. He didn’t deserve it.

Ryder's anger was justified, no matter how badly I wanted to fight. I shouldn't have lied.

The dark presence settled back down into the depths of my gut. I shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable with the knowledge that it was there. It had to be some kind of arcana, but I wasn't in any hurry to find out how it worked.

"I will help during the hunt, but I'm leaving after that." Ryder glanced at the skyline. "I have to. If I stay much longer..."

I wrapped my arms around myself and nodded. Though I should have thanked him, I kept my mouth shut as I turned away.

My hound howled with loneliness. She wanted me to go back to Ryder. He would come around. He would understand in time. The hound desperately tried to fling me back to Ryder's feet. Her feelings for him were so strong that I fumbled in the doorway.

Ryder reached out to catch me, but I jerked out of his reach.

He growled, likely frustrated.

I straightened and fixed him with a glare. That dark presence unfurled once more. This time, it seemed to reach for the sky. It grabbed at the clouds and pulled down a lightning strike. The bolt slammed into the ground near the base of the porch steps behind Ryder.

He glanced over his shoulder at the darkened patch of ground.

Now, if only I could control that.

I went home to wait out the last few hours before Alvin's hunt. Ryder had promised to hold up his end of the plan. After that, he would leave.

Though my hound was ready and willing to beg him to stay, I wasn't going to fold. I had bigger problems on my hands.

Thankfully, Cerri had stopped by and dropped off a bag of potions. She explained how to use them. Most were to make me harder to find. There were a few that I could throw to protect myself, but that seemed difficult to manage in my hound form. I just told Cerri that I would do my best.

When I closed the door behind me, I found my dad waiting in the foyer. He looked worse for wear. There were dark circles under his eyes. If I wasn't mistaken, he looked as though he'd lost a few pounds, too.

I wrapped my arms around Cerri's backpack and waited for Dad to say something.

"That man shouldn't be able to leave you now," Dad said.

I slowly narrowed my eyes. "What does that mean?"

"He made a deal with Beryl. The Unseelie Queen isn't going to let him go anywhere, now. Your dragon friend should be stuck here. So...so, you'll be safer now."

"Dad!" I caught the backpack before it could slide out of my grasp. I did not need the contents shattering on the floor. "Did you tell Ryder to meet with Beryl so that Ryder wouldn't be able to leave? Is that why you did that?"

He met my eyes and nodded. "You needed someone to protect you. That dragon is more than capable of keeping you safe. So long as Beryl is

interested in him, then he'll have to stay. She can't resist collecting fae and shifters. I knew he would fall for it."

I took a step back. Ryder would hate me even more now. My lie had kept him here, but my father's machinations had trapped him. I couldn't help but feel as though I'd somehow destroyed Ryder's life. I hadn't done it myself, at least I'd had no intention to do so, yet his world had crumbled all the same.

Ryder was a good man. He didn't deserve this.

"Fuck," I whispered. "Shit."

I ran up the stairs so I could have a moment alone.

"You'll thank me for this, someday!" Dad called up to me.

I stopped at the top of the stairs and glared down at him. "Sure, I'll thank you when Ryder betrays us all for what we've done to him. You should be ashamed of yourself. You're better than Alvin, yet you sunk to manipulation just like him."

Dad's face drained of all color. He looked as though he would argue for a moment. Then his gaze dropped. I left him to consider what he'd done.

Outside, the sky slowly darkened. Night was coming. There was nothing I could do to stop it. The hunt would begin soon. I leaned into my bedroom window and craned my neck to peer up at the sky. The full moon hung, pale and steady, in the sky.

I wished the sight filled me with anticipation. Instead, I felt dread.

Cerri had given me the tools to survive tonight. Vi had promised to wait at the edge of Alvin's territory, just in case I needed her. My friends had my back tonight. I just had to hope that Ryder didn't completely loathe me.

If he could do this one thing for me, then I wouldn't need him anymore. I would be able to convince the pack to work together. They would understand, once and for all, that Alvin had never been a good man.

I just had to survive.

Ryder

NIGHT HAD SET. My dragon wanted nothing more than to get out and kill Alvin. It took everything in me to hold the beast back. The dragon refused

to listen to me when I told it there would be no more bloodshed. It cared about Ness's safety and nothing else tonight.

I didn't know why the damned beast was so fixated on her. She'd lied to me. I couldn't trust her ever again. Because of her, I'd wasted too much time. Morgan would catch up, soon. I wondered if he'd found where I was already. Would he hesitate to confront me? Or, would my brother face me head on?

The pack's howls echoed in the dark. They'd gathered, at Alvin's request. How many of them were ready and willing to hunt Ness? The beast pushed me in their direction, but I held my ground. Now wasn't the time to break away from the plan. Besides, Ness had her friends on her side.

Alvin's house was dark save for a few lights glowing dimly from deep inside. I guessed they hadn't left the porch light or the entryway lights on since their shifter eyes would need to adjust to the light first. I would have appreciated a porch light as I knelt in front of the door and pulled a lockpick set from my pocket.

The beast whispered that I should break the door knob. That would give away my presence, though. I wanted to leave no trace. Alvin didn't need to know that I'd been here. That was why I'd called on Beryl for another gift.

The memory of greeting her again made my stomach churn. I had a sinking feeling that the deal with the Unseelie Queen had not been a good idea. What was done was done, though. I couldn't take it back right this second.

The lockpick slid into place, making my heartrate double. I held my breath as I slowly twisted the knob. The door creaked open to announce my presence. I stiffened and awaited an attack, but it never came.

Everyone was on the hunt.

I glanced into the woods where the wolves ran. Which of them would stand up for Ness tonight? Connor had to make up for his past sins. The others needed to band together, but I doubted that would happen tonight.

They were too scared. The only one among them with any gumption was Ness, and I suspected she had little respect for her own life these days.

I took a careful step past the threshold and paused. Nothing happened, so I pushed forward. Ness had mentioned evidence in the basement, so I turned to the door that led down into the inky darkness. Her scent still hung in the air.

Had her shoulder healed properly? Had she eaten enough before the hunt?

Why did my thoughts keep turning back to her? I had a job to do, and I couldn't focus if Ness took up every available inch of space inside my skull. I shook my head to get her out. The beast clung tight to her. The dragon nearly vibrated with violence. It was ready for a fight.

Tonight shouldn't come to that. I wouldn't have to spill blood tonight.

Ness

MY HANDS SHOOK at my sides. I tried to grip the backpack straps to still them, but that did little to stop the fear pumping through my body. I didn't meet the others at Alvin's house, like we would for any other hunt.

Instead, I'd asked Vi to drop me off at the furthest edge of the pack's territory. She waited in her Jeep, ready to drive away at the drop of a hat if things got too bad. All I needed to do was buy Ryder some time tonight. I didn't have to participate in Alvin's brutish hunt.

My hound reassured me that we would survive tonight. I would have felt better about that if the new arcana inside me would show itself, but it seemed out of reach. Perhaps my fear had chased it away. Maybe it'd deemed me unworthy since I couldn't shake this fear. I didn't like either explanation.

I paused and listened to the sound of movement deep within the woods. The wolves were getting closer. Half the pack wouldn't hurt me. I knew that down to my bones. People like Janessa, Haylee, and Kelsey would keep to themselves. Catriona wouldn't pay me any attention. My father...I didn't know what he would do. I just prayed he would stay out of trouble.

Kneeling, I unzipped Cerri's bag. I downed the first two potions. They wouldn't make me invisible, but I called them invisibility potions all the same. Cerri had explained that the first would make me blurry to others. The second would give me an ethereal shield that should stop the first few attacks. It wouldn't last the whole night, but it was more protection than I'd had to begin with.

The last three bottles were weapons. I slung the bag over one shoulder and let it slump under my arm for easy access. Once I ran out of the potion bombs, I would have to shift.

Motion caught my attention. The wolves were easier to identify now that I had my sense of smell back. Kelsey ran to my left. I exhaled, relaxing once I realized it was only her. Her scent distracted me, though. The moment I let my guard down, a wolf slammed into my back.

I flew forward and nearly crushed the potion bag. I managed to throw my hands out and catch myself at the last second. One bottle tumbled out of the open bag and crashed on the ground. An acrid smoke curled up from the mess of broken glass.

Someone would have to pick that up, but it wouldn't be me.

I stumbled back and made a break for it. Fallen logs and twisting vines tried to trip me, but I jumped over them in my attempt to get away from my attacker. The scents on the air began to mingle, telling me there were more wolves than just one behind me.

A large wolf broke out of the trees ahead. Harvey.

He lowered his head, his hackles rising as he bared his teeth in a snarl. I flashed him a middle finger and flung a potion at his face. I hoped the glass caught him where it hurt. Harvey leapt out of the way, though. The potion shattered against a tree behind him. Triumph gleamed in his eyes until the potion dripped onto his back.

The potion sizzled on his fur. Harvey yelped and leapt as if he could escape the acidic brew digging into his skin. That should keep him busy.

My real concern was Alvin. I peered around, but the woods were dark and unsympathetic. The shadows revealed little to me. Anxiety made my heart thump against the inside of my sternum. Could Alvin hear my fear?

The asshole was probably nearby, savoring the sound of my heart going into panic mode while I waited. I hated him with every ounce of my being. I wanted him dead and gone so that the world would never have to experience his cruelty ever again.

"Where are you, asshole?" I muttered under my breath.

I couldn't end Alvin on my own. I could barely handle Harvey. The thought chilled me. I sucked in a deep breath, but my lungs refused to expand. Knowing that Vi wasn't far behind me helped, but only barely.

She couldn't take on Alvin and his posse, either. Not without losing control, at least. I wouldn't put my friend in that predicament. I had to do

this on my own.

“Well?” I called out. My voice didn’t shake as much as it could have. “Come out and face me.”

I clutched the last potion bomb in my hand. If I gripped it too tightly, I might break the frail glass and hurt myself. That was the last thing I needed tonight. Harvey whimpered nearby. He hadn’t caught much of the potion. Soon, he would shake off the pain and strike. This last potion was for him.

The smell of putrid breath reached me just as another wolf leapt out of the darkness. I lurched out of the way. The wolf flew over me as I stumbled back. My breath heaved out of me. I twisted and regained my footing. The wolf skidded into Harvey.

The impact seemed to knock sense into Harvey. He snarled at the wolf that’d hit him. Jackson, I think, lowered his head and bared his throat to Harvey. I swallowed a curse and turned tail. I wasn’t going to wait for the two of them to stop fighting and attack me together.

Marcus had lain in wait, though. I got about five feet before he emerged from the darkness. He stalked in front of me. The crunch of undergrowth behind me told me that Harvey and Jackson were flanking me.

I glanced at the single potion in my hands. The milky white contents glimmered in the dark. How the hell was I going to hit all of them with one potion? The answer was simple.

I couldn’t.

That didn’t matter, because they parted to let a larger wolf step forward.

“Hey boss,” I said. This time, my voice trembled. I lifted the potion. “I have a gift for you. You’ll have to come over here to take it, though.”

Alvin’s eyes flashed red in the moonlight. My stomach dropped. Forget the potion. My hound screamed at me to run. I was going to listen to her.

Jackson lunged, teeth bared. I swung the potion bottle and slammed it against his jaw. Glass and potion cascaded over his tongue. He yelped and fumbled. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shake his head. That potion wasn’t going to go away that easily, though.

That’s what you get for poisoning Ryder, I thought to myself.

Alvin howled behind me. My feet tangled beneath me. My hound surged forward and took over my body. My form flowed seamlessly from one shape to another. The shift untangled my feet so that I landed on all fours in a loping gait.

In this form, the world was brighter. The glow of the moon above illuminated everything. I could see the other wolves, keeping their distance from me. Behind me, I heard the hammering footsteps of the others giving chase.

The smell of ozone rippled on the sudden breeze rushing past me. My heart soared with hope.

Just as hope hit me, a heavy weight shoved me to the ground.

I didn't turn on any of the lights in the basement in case the glow bled out the narrow windows near the ceiling. Instead, I dug my old phone from my pocket. Turning it on was a risk, but, I tempted fate anyway.

The flashlight revealed several stacked boxes and storage totes. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The cot to my right bothered me, but only because it reeked of Ness and despair. My beast snarled as a bloodlust washed over me. I did my best to swallow it down and reached for the first box.

The howls outside made me stiffen. My shoulders cinched tighter and tighter together each time I heard them. I should have been outside, helping Ness. Instead, she had me in here.

She'd lied to me and led me on. I shouldn't have cared for her. She wasn't like anyone I'd ever known, though. Though weak compared to her packmates, Ness held her ground and often sacrificed herself for the better of her pack.

No, that reminded me of someone. A person that I'd been before my life fell to shit. I would never be that person ever again. The least I could do was help Ness hold onto her ideals.

The boxes and storage totes revealed nothing interesting. If anything, the pack Alpha had a hoarding problem. There were boxes of women's clothing with bits of jewelry, such as small pendants and bracelets, caught in the folds.

There were no women here. At least, aside from Alvin's wife. Though I'd seen little of her since arriving in Lakesedge, I doubted she wore frilly

dressess like these. There was a bright sundress that would have been too small for even Ness. Maybe Vi would have fit into it. Another dress looked closer to Ness's size.

As I pulled them out and listened to the clink of jewelry hitting the bottom of the box, my dread grew heavier and heavier. The dresses were all different sizes and styles.

Why did Alvin have a collection of dresses? He wasn't wearing them in his free time, that was for sure. The sizes were all wrong.

I held one up to my nose. It didn't smell of shifter. Instead, the myriad of scents—from shampoo to perfume to car exhaust—made me think this had belonged to a human. The others smelled similar.

"The fucker has been hunting humans and taking trophies." My stomach curdled.

I closed the box and tucked it under my arm. As I turned to leave, the floor above creaked. I hesitated and held my breath.

Beryl's magic should have covered my scent. I couldn't smell myself, so I'd assumed that it'd worked. If she'd pulled a trick and blinded me to my own scent, then I would burn her restaurant to the ground after this.

The floor above creaked again. Something heavy prowled upstairs. Had it heard me? I glanced at the windows near the ceiling. They were too narrow for anyone to crawl through. That meant I had no other choice but to go upstairs.

A howl in the distance filled my blood with ice. The floor creaked, as if whoever was upstairs had jumped at the sound. I waited several more heartbeats for the shifter to leave before climbing the stairs.

A silhouette in the foyer drew me to a halt.

Ness

ALVIN ANNOUNCED his victory with a chilling howl. I'd be damned if I was going to go down that easily, though. The storm above seemed to fight itself, thunder-filled clouds pressing against one another as they flared with electrical light. I willed some of that lightning to come down and smite Alvin, but nothing worked.

I would have to do this the old-fashioned way. I wiggled out from under Alvin's paws. He swiped at me, but I ducked his attack.

No. I wouldn't fall tonight. Alvin would go down before I did. I would have it no other way.

Without any real strength or arcana on my side, I ran. I darted between the trees to frustrate Alvin. His larger form couldn't fit so easily through the smaller spaces. When I slid beneath a fallen log, he had to leap over it. He cleared the log and landed in front of me.

I made a sharp turn and ran right into Harvey. He prowled closer. Thin rivulets of drool dripped from his muzzle. Revolted, I backpedaled. Unfortunately, Alvin was there. He lunged to bite, but I dropped to the ground. His teeth snapped at the empty air as I rolled out of the way of his attack.

I bounced back onto my feet.

Was Ryder done yet? Had he found anything? We hadn't discussed a signal. Our primary concern had been how long I would be able to hold out against Alvin and the others. Next time, I would know to form a more comprehensive plan.

My hound told me that she could run all day. I knew better. Eventually, we would reach the corner with no exit. Alvin would corner me again. I'd nearly died once before. Ryder had stepped in to save me that night. With Ryder busy elsewhere, I couldn't rely on him to save me.

I had to escape. Hopefully, Ryder had found what he needed by now. I could almost feel Alvin's hot breath on the back of my neck. I knew it was all in my head, but the footfalls behind me were too loud.

Thankfully, the trees ahead parted. The sound of an engine lifted my hopes. Vi's Jeep came into view.

Alvin roared angrily. I jumped for the Jeep's open back. Alvin was faster. His teeth closed around my back paw. He yanked me back and threw me to the ground. The impact reverberated up my spine. I growled, but the sound was weak.

Alvin pressed his paw into my skull and shoved me into the earth. His claws pierced my skin; I could already feel warm blood blossoming.

Vi shouted from her Jeep, but the other wolves snapped and barked at her. She eyed them all warily. I knew she was considering taking them on. Maybe she could do it, but not without risking too much.

I yipped, the sound half-muffled. Vi hesitated. Good. That's what I wanted. I wished I could tell her to leave, so she wouldn't have to see this. My jaw shape wasn't meant for talking, even when there wasn't a wolf on me.

No matter how I wriggled, I couldn't escape Alvin's heavy weight on my body. My skull felt like it would crack and cave in soon. I prayed that he wanted more of a hunt. If he released me with the idea that he might be able to chase me a while longer, then maybe I could escape.

But Alvin didn't let up. He didn't pull back. His growl reverberated inside my skull as he pushed harder and harder. My entire being raged against his presence. My skull throbbed. It would break any moment. Just a little more and I would be paste on the ground.

What a pathetic example of a shifter, I thought, angrily.

Alvin feared everyone. He hid that fear behind violence, but I could see right through him. He'd climbed his way to the top by stepping on everyone else. He kept them beneath him instead of fostering them.

He was weak and useless.

The clouds overhead broke open. Rain pummeled the ground and made the leaves whisper. That wasn't enough though. The rain wouldn't do anything. I needed more. I needed lightning.

The dark presence inside me unfurled. It reached for my tongue before flinching back. Hound muzzles were not meant for speaking. I had to shift back.

Oh man, this was going to hurt.

Still, I did it. My form changed. Claws turned into fingernails digging into the earth. I tensed when the pressure on my skull intensified. Alvin's claws tore into my scalp. But I had my tongue.

The dark presence inside of me filled my mouth. It wrapped around my tongue like a silk sheath. When I spoke, my voice vibrated with power.

"Move," I said.

Alvin's paw left my head. I picked myself up and stumbled towards Vi's Jeep. She cast questioning glances in my direction. I paid her no attention as I started to pull myself into the Jeep.

The one word was not enough. It had no clear direction, nothing to stop Alvin from trying again. He caught the back of my leg. The other wolves followed suit and struck in unison. The arcana from Cerri's potion

shimmered in the air around me. It shattered under the force of the simultaneous attacks.

I cried out. Vi jumped and reached out to help me. I grabbed ahold of her hand, but I wasn't sure if she had the strength to pull me up. The wolves tugged. My flesh burned as they tore through me.

I opened my mouth to issue another command, but the dark presence fizzled out and vanished. A scream escaped me, against my will. It echoed in the night until it was swallowed by thunder. The rumble should have comforted me, but it wasn't enough. Not when I was literally being torn to shreds.

Ryder's grumble broke the panic overcoming me. With a box tucked under one arm, he grabbed ahold of Alvin with his free hand. Alvin went flying back into the woods. The crack of branches would have been satisfying were my legs not burning from the bites all along them.

Ryder hoisted me up by my waist. Though I tried to protest, my voice was weak. I didn't have it in me. I let Ryder set me in the Jeep's backseat. Vi gave me a concerned look, both of her brows vaulted.

"Take her home," Ryder rasped.

I doubted his concern for me had tightened his throat, so why was his voice so strained? Before I could wonder what happened, Ryder reached into the sky, closed his fist, and brought it down. Lightning, ripped from the sky, slammed into the ground where Alvin's posse remained.

They all scattered into the night.

I'd survived, but I would pay for this in blood later. The prophecy had begun, and Alvin would not quit until he'd won.

There wasn't a chance in hell that I would let him have this victory, though.

Vi gunned it away from the woods. Her Jeep bounced over the ground until we hit asphalt. Then, she put the gas pedal to the floorboards. Not long after, I saw Ryder's car behind us.

The cool night air tousled my hair. I wished I could see the moon, but the clouds from my storm had blotted it out.

Back at Ryder's rental apartment, I tugged an oversized shirt over my head and shoved a meal replacement bar into my mouth. There, it turned to concrete, but I swallowed it down all the same.

Vi lingered, but not for long. Once Ryder pulled up alongside us, she gave me a nod and left. I watched my friend go, her red taillights glowing in the night. At least, no one would bother me while Ryder was here. He'd made enough of a show back at the hunting grounds.

I turned to Ryder with gratitude on my lips, but the sight of his grim expression drew me to a halt. I studied him as if I could unlock his secrets with my eyes alone. Ryder gave away nothing.

He shoved a box into my hand and turned his back to me. He gave a half-hearted salute over his shoulder. Heavy with disappointment, my stomach dropped. I stared down at the box. I'd known that Ryder would leave the moment that he got me the evidence that I needed, but that didn't make this any easier.

I'd hoped he would have at least waited until morning. Not just because I needed sleep. I wanted more time to figure out how to make him stay. I couldn't do this without him. The searing pain of the slowly healing bite wounds in the backs of my legs proved that.

My hound snarled. She snapped her teeth as if she might be able to hold onto him. Ryder paid me no attention, though. Fury simmered under my skin. It brought that dark presence with it. As Ryder opened his car door, the clouds rumbled.

He paused.

How dare he walk away now? I couldn't believe that he could leave me like this. He knew what would happen. Maybe this evidence would convince the pack to help me, but Alvin would not go down without a fight. If the pack stood against him, there would be casualties.

If Ryder stayed, if he acted like a barrier, then Alvin wouldn't be able to hurt anyone.

Ryder had to stay. He had to help.

Lightning lashed the ground near Ryder's feet. He looked up and narrowed his eyes at me.

"Really?" he asked. "Are you really going to have a temper tantrum right now?"

I gaped at him. "Do you really think my life isn't worth having a temper tantrum over?"

He clenched his jaw angrily. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Stay. Help me. It isn't going to cost you anything."

His eyes widened. "You don't know a damn thing about me if you can say that. I risked everything to help you, and you couldn't even tell me that you were powerless to help me! I thought we could be honest with one another. Apparently, I was wrong."

Thunder rolled. Was that his anger? Or mine? It was hard to tell our storms apart now.

Ryder slammed the car door and stomped up to me. He towered over me, his anger sparking in the air around him. The wind tugged at his hair. He was storm incarnate. "I am a wanted man for the things I've done. Sooner or later, they will catch up to me. I will have to pay for what I did, even if I had the best intentions when I acted. Staying here to help you meant losing time. Any moment now, hell will rain down upon my head. Do you want to be there when that happens?"

Yes. The word almost left my lips. I stared Ryder in the eye. My hound dug in her claws.

Though I didn't know how to help Ryder, I still wanted to be there for him. That was the difference between us. He'd expected something in return for his service. I simply wanted to help. That's all I ever wanted.

I wanted to help my pack break free from a tyrant. I wanted to stop the cruelty that had broken the ones I loved.

I could have extended that love to Ryder, too, had he not been an asshole about it.

Lightning struck the ground near his feet. The smell of burnt fabric drifted around us as the smoke curled in the air. The sparks dancing around Ryder grew brighter. His eyes flashed white-hot.

I pressed a finger to his chest. "Don't be a coward. Let people help you."

"What can you do to help me? You had to lie to keep me here. Otherwise, you had nothing to offer. I shouldn't have put so much expectation on you. We were both in the wrong here."

I clenched my jaw and swallowed the words caught in my throat. Overhead, the clouds rumbled with everything I wanted to say.

"Someone from my past found me already. Someone told her where I'd be tonight, and I'm not happy that she wandered into Alvin's house without protection. Had anyone else happened to find her there..." Ryder's growl made the very air tremble. "She came to warn me that if I don't move, then my brother will be here sooner rather than later. No one wants that."

It was time to let him go. I knew that, even if I didn't want to see him leave. Ryder had done more than enough to help me, and he'd almost paid for it with his life. If I didn't let him go, he could die here. I wasn't going to sacrifice anyone other than myself.

Instead of saying that, I turned away from him, so I could set the box on the hood of his car. I pried it open, expecting more Christmas lights like last time. Instead, I stared down at a pile of fabric. I shot Ryder a wary glance. I was too tired for this. If this was some sort of prank...

"Alvin has been hunting humans and keeping trophies," Ryder explained.

I lifted a dress from the box. The hem was stained with dirt. My fingers caught in tears that could have only been made by wolf teeth. My stomach flipped. I shoved the dress back into the box and noticed several more. They were all sweet and innocent looking sundresses, soiled from the forest that Alvin made these poor human women run through.

The pack would never forgive Alvin for his twisted sport. Hunting humans had been illegal for at least a century, if not more. This was an offense worthy of the highest punishment. If the pack could not deal with it from within, then someone else in the community might intervene. Beryl or Audra, perhaps?

I closed the box and looked Ryder up and down. He motioned for me to get the box off his car then jerked his door open. I had to let him go.

Yet, he hesitated. He stared me down, his expression softening. His jaw clenched when he glanced back, like danger would be lurking in the shadows behind us. This fight was far from over. He seemed to understand that.

“Are...are you sure you’ll be all right on your own?” Ryder asked.

I bit my lip to keep from begging. My hound howled even though Ryder couldn’t hear her while she was trapped inside me. The wind whipped around us. I tugged the box closer and held the flaps down with one hand. When I turned to Ryder with a *goodbye* on my lips, the wind tore it away from me.

Not yet, I wanted to beg.

Please stay with me.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got this.” I hefted the box Ryder had procured for me.

His knuckles popped when he tightened his fists. He checked the skyline to his left then the shadows to his right. I could tell he wanted to help, even if he was frustrated with me for misleading him.

I counted myself lucky for having met him. Ryder proved that there were good men in this world.

When I opened my mouth to say goodbye one last time, my chest tightened, and tears reached my eyes. The skies opened and small raindrops hid my grief.

A clap echoed in my ears. I jerked back, alarmed. That was not a thunderclap even though it’d been almost as loud. I tore my attention from Ryder and noticed red fabric billowing in the wind. The gales blew Beryl’s dress around her. To some, it might have looked like a blossoming rose. To me, I saw blood swirling around her ivory legs.

Queen Beryl grinned. Her hips swayed as she sauntered up to Ryder. I stiffened when she put a hand on his shoulder. My hound nearly leapt out of me. The beast gnashed her teeth, hungry for Beryl’s hand.

Beryl’s grin became sharp-toothed when she looked to me. “You don’t have to worry about a thing, honey. The dragon isn’t going anywhere.”

I’d forgotten about what my father had told me. Beryl’s hand slid over Ryder’s shoulder and down his chest. Her fingertip touched the pendant around his neck, and it flashed with a blood-red light.

She turned her gaze upon Ryder. There was an affection in her eyes that bordered on possessive. She wrapped her hand around the pendant and

tugged. Ryder spun as if shoved by invisible hands.

“Beryl,” I warned, despite myself. My hound’s growl vibrated in my voice.

Beryl’s attention slid sideways to me. She looked me up and down. “I thought you would be happier. He can continue helping you so long as he worships me. Does that not please you?”

I fought to keep my expression blank. Ryder, however, didn’t bother hiding his rage. His upper lip curled as he glowered at the fae queen. Then, Ryder turned that hot anger to me. This was my father’s fault.

That made this *my* fault.

As if things couldn’t have gotten any worse.

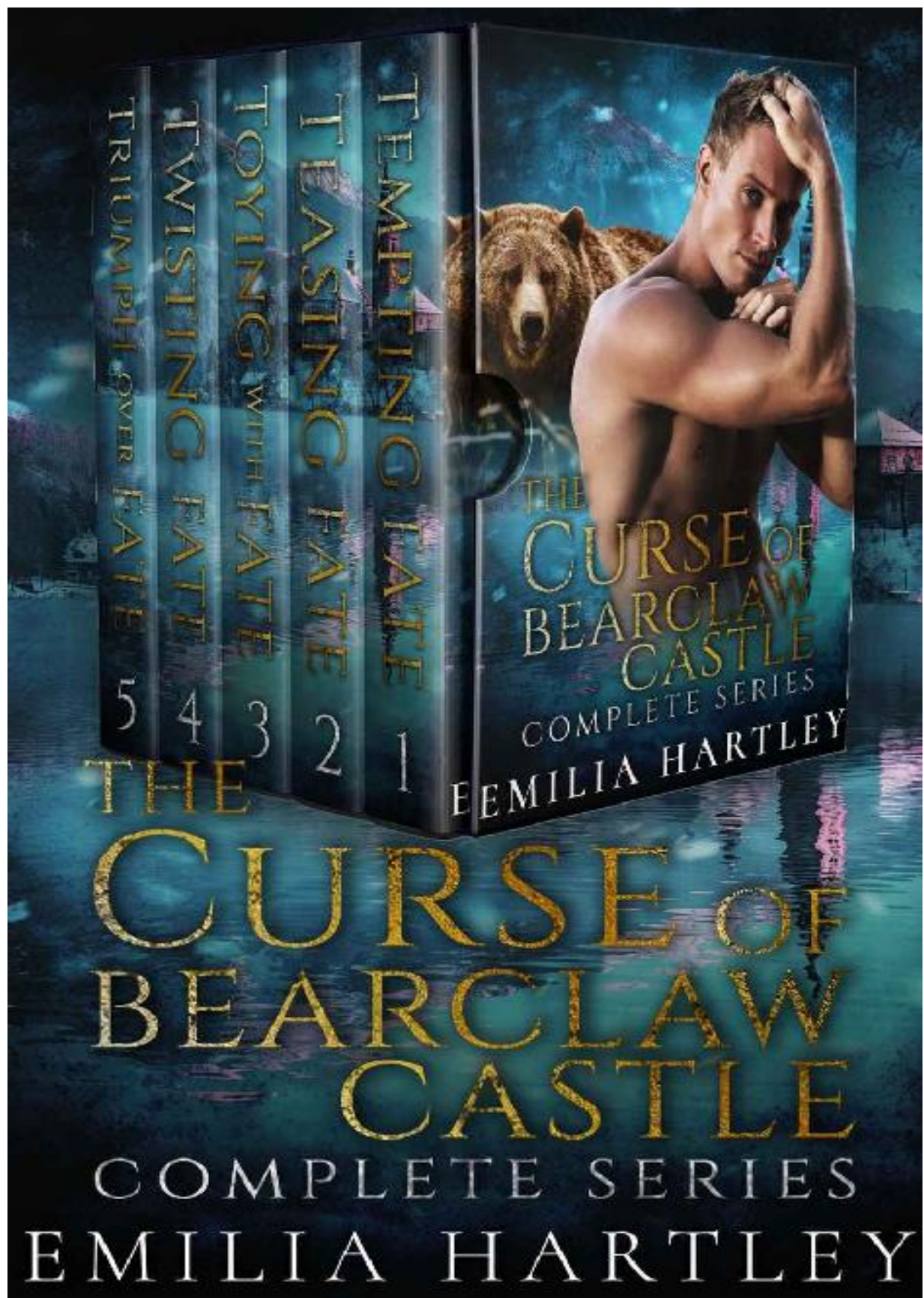
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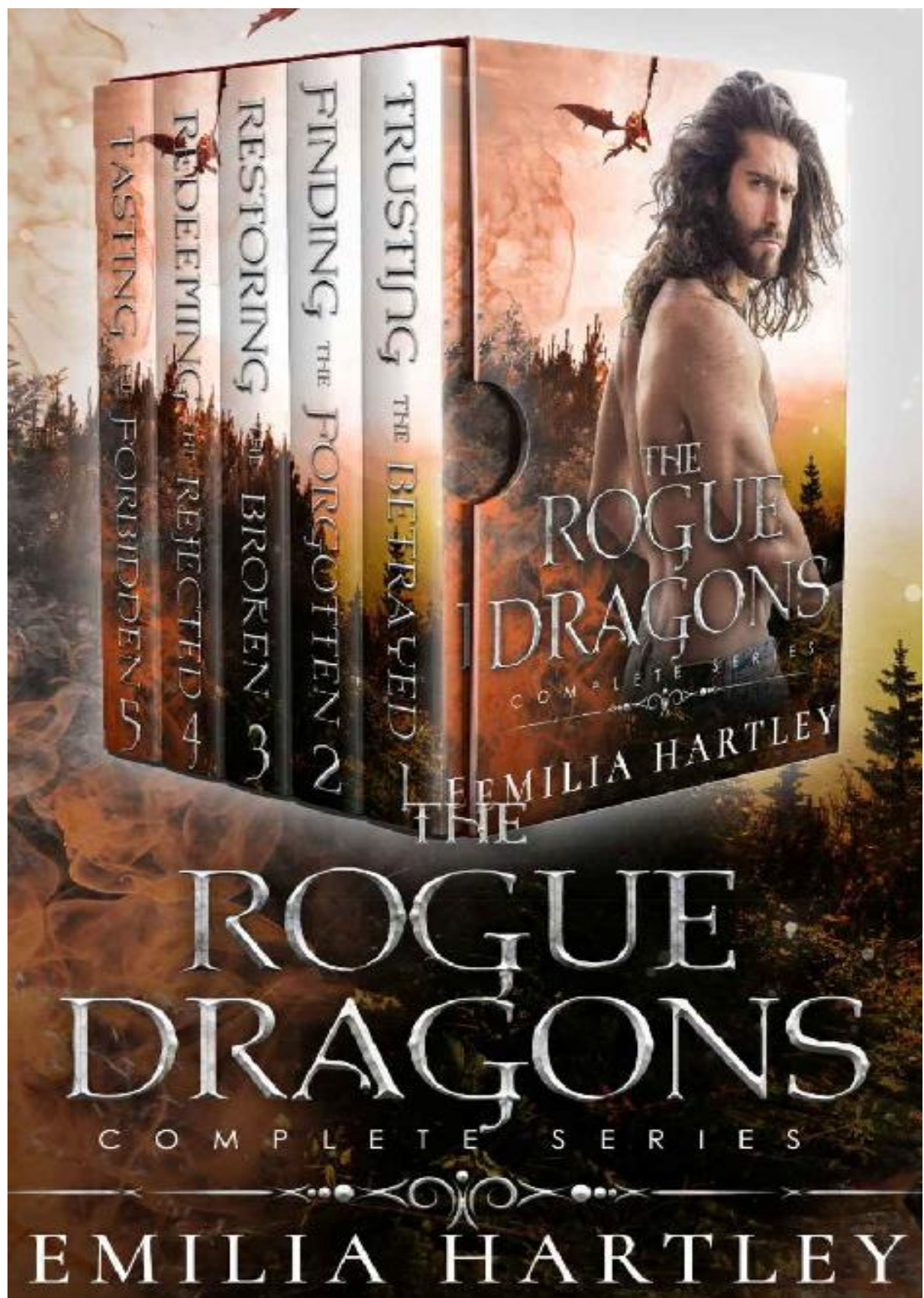


A DANGEROUS PACT

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 2

HEARTLIES BOX SETS





TASTING THE FORBIDDEN
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RESTORING THE BROKEN
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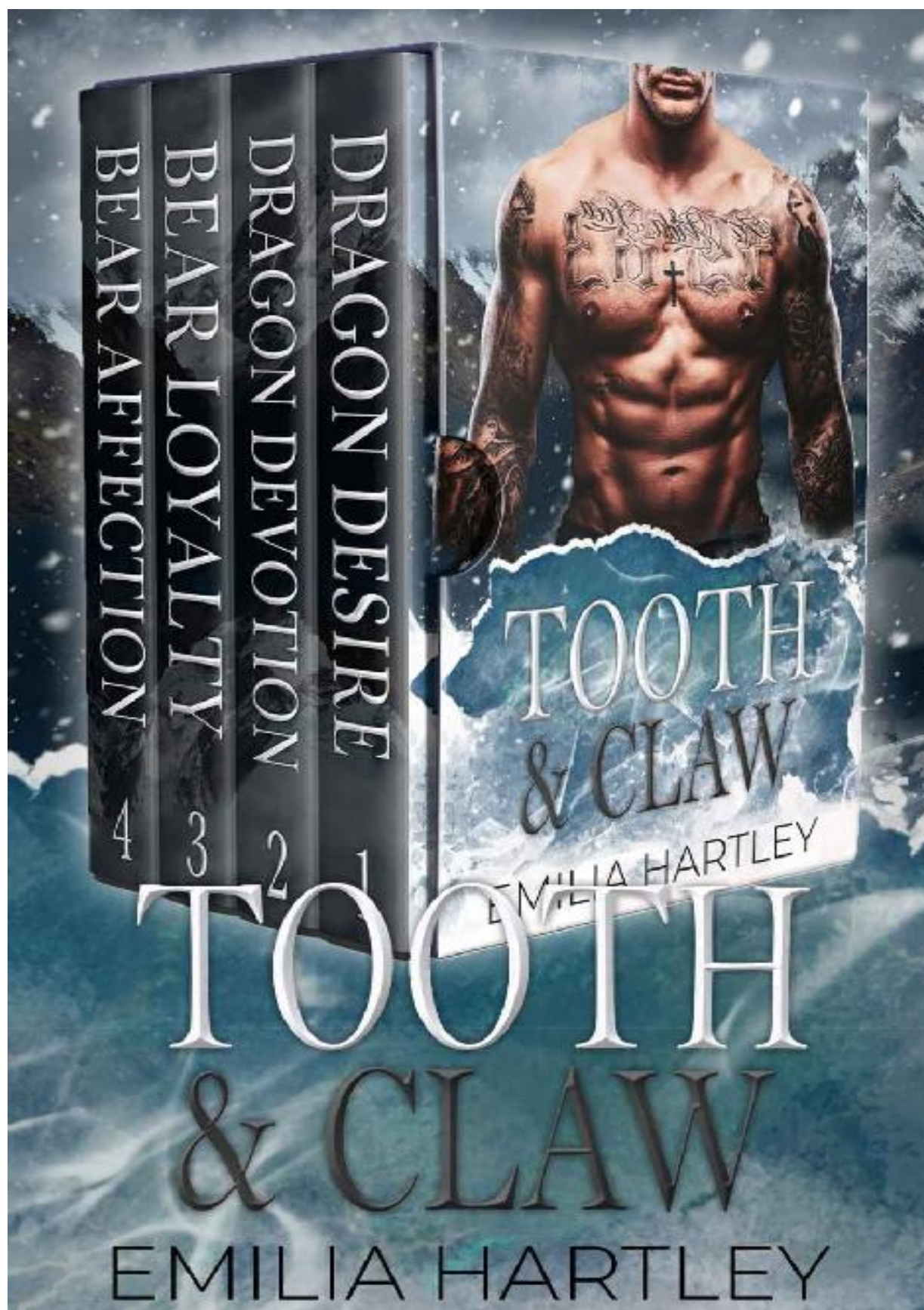
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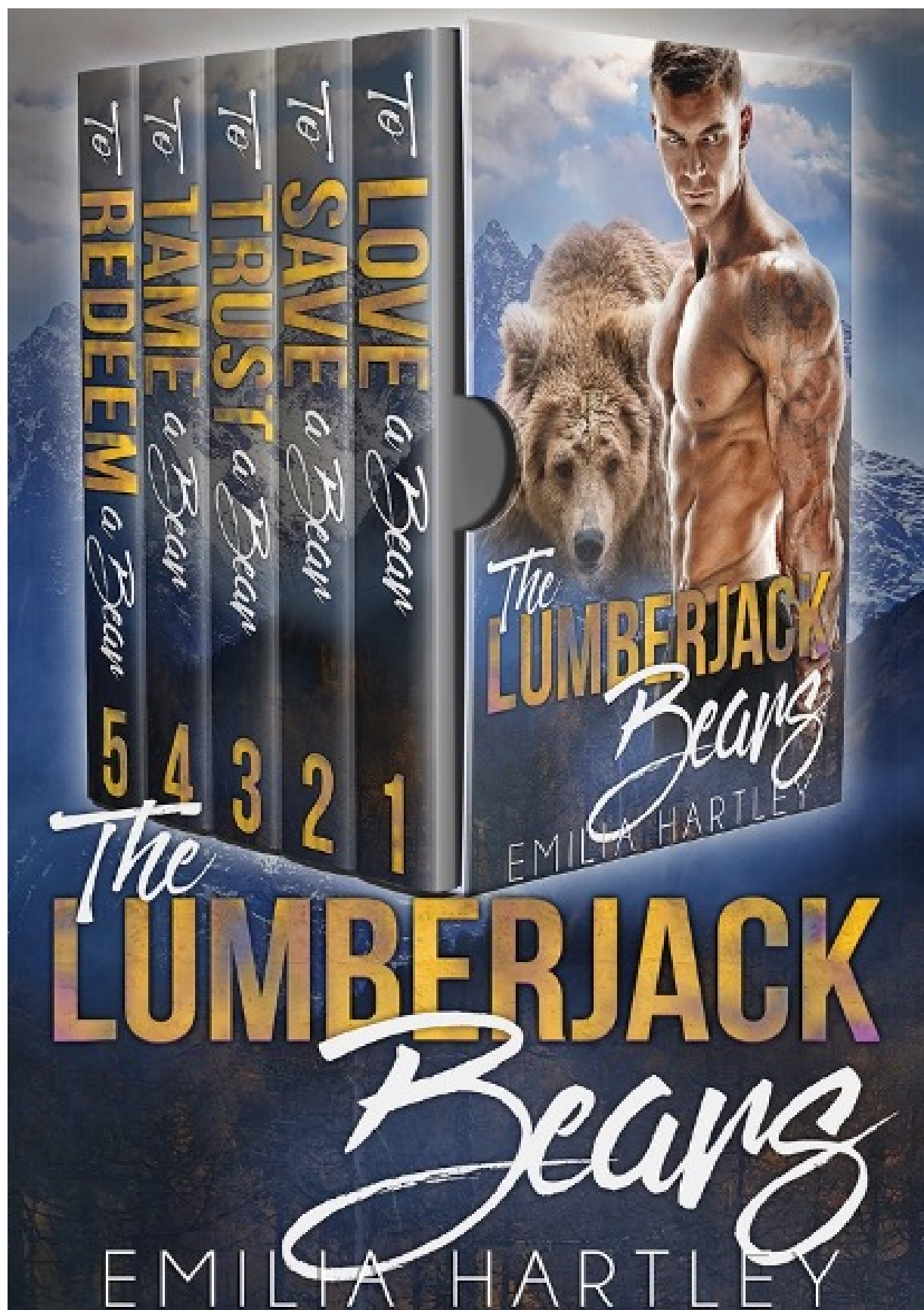
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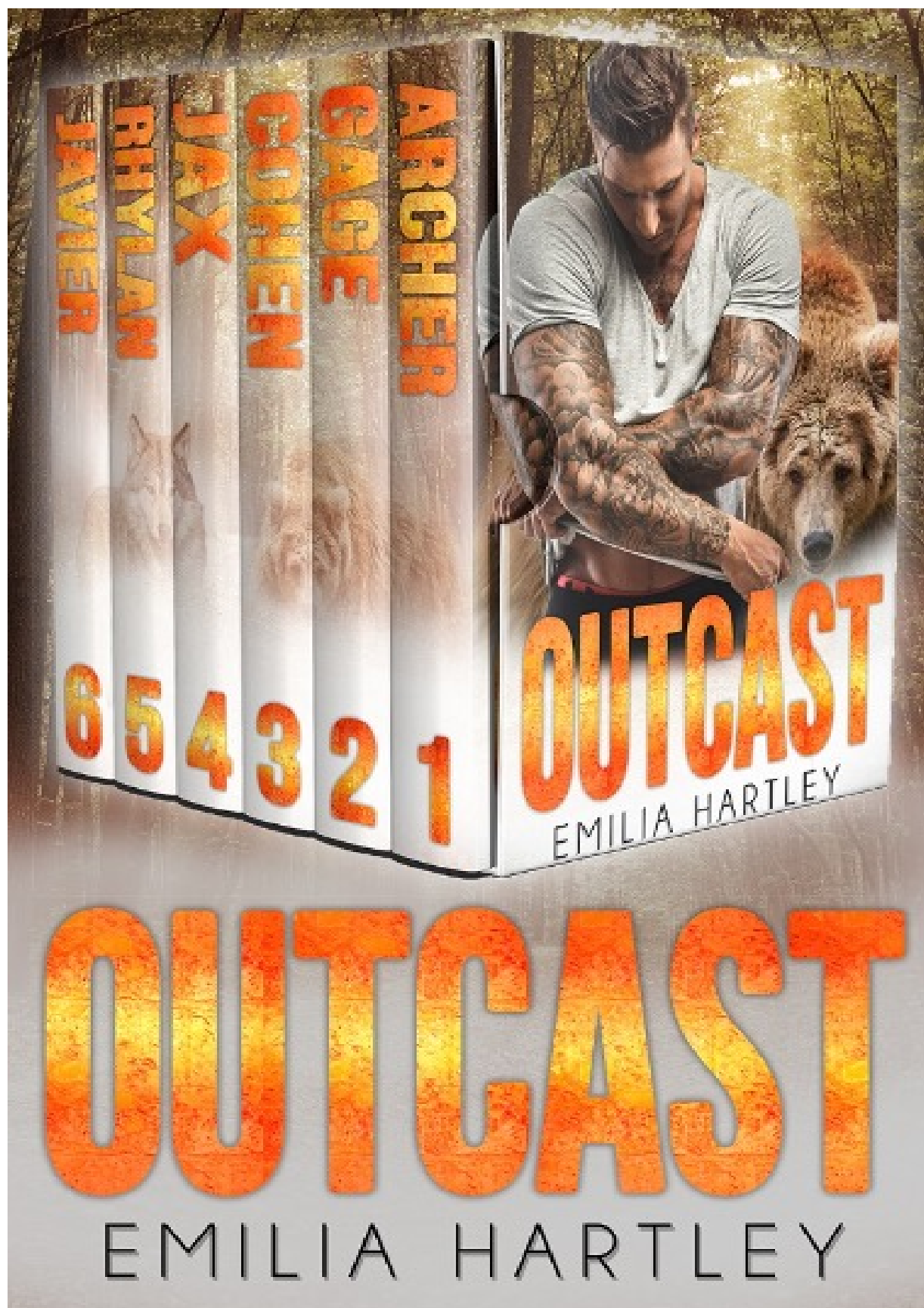
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To SAVE a Bear 2
To TRUST a Bear 3
To TAME a Bear 4
To REDEEM a Bear 5

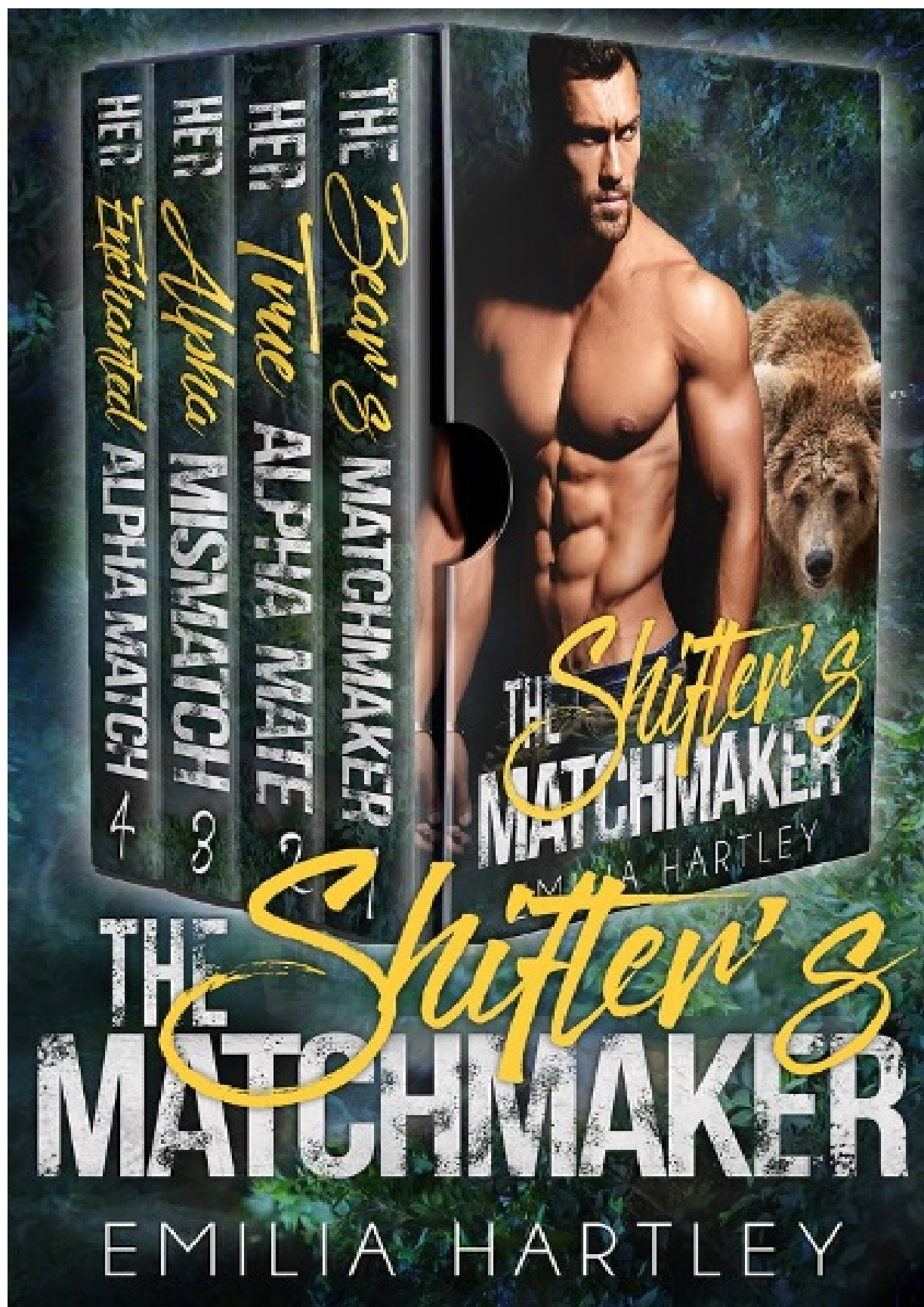
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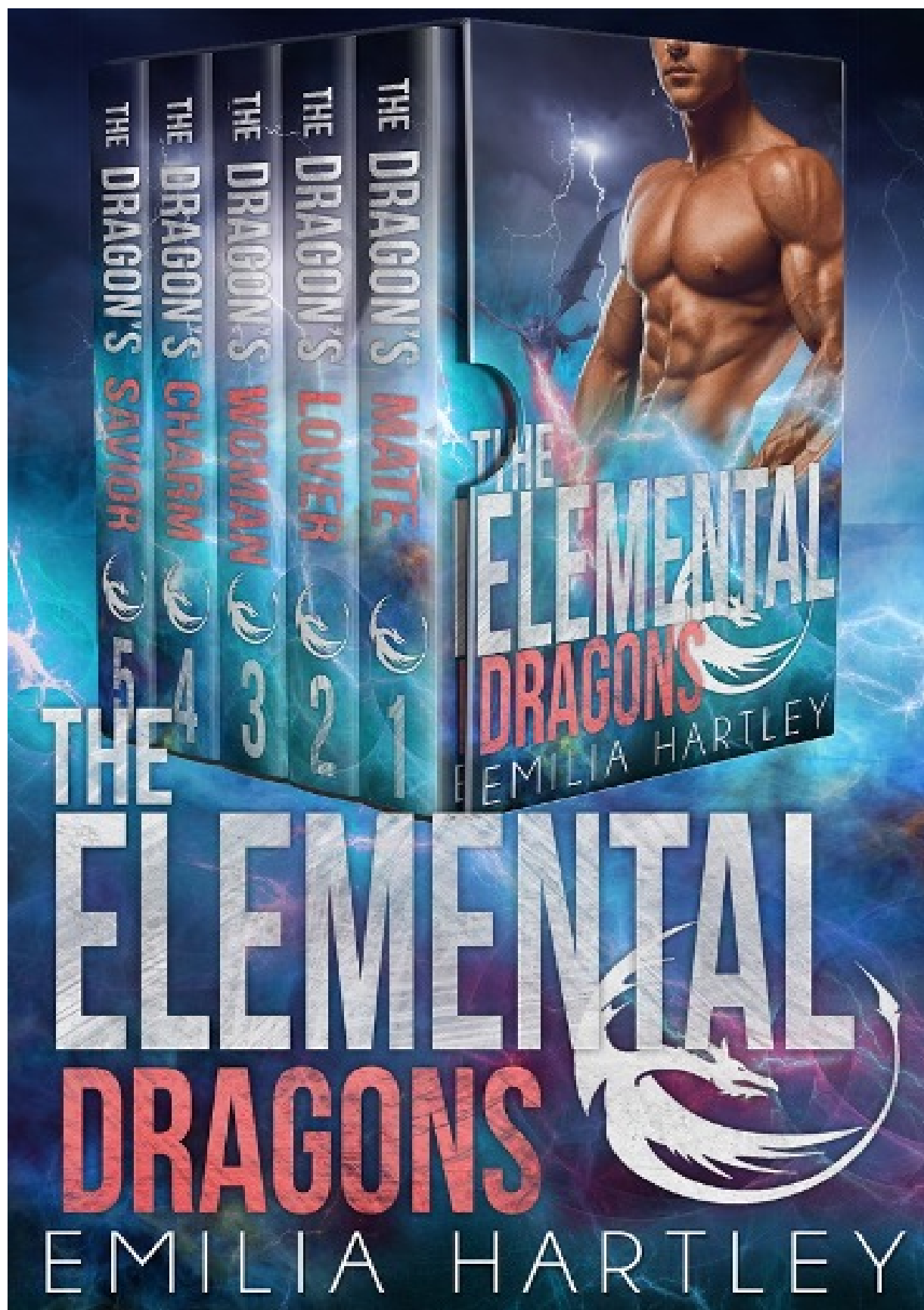
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THE SHIFTER'S MATCHMAKER
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THE DRAGON'S CHARM



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THE DRAGON'S WOMAN



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THE DRAGON'S LOVER



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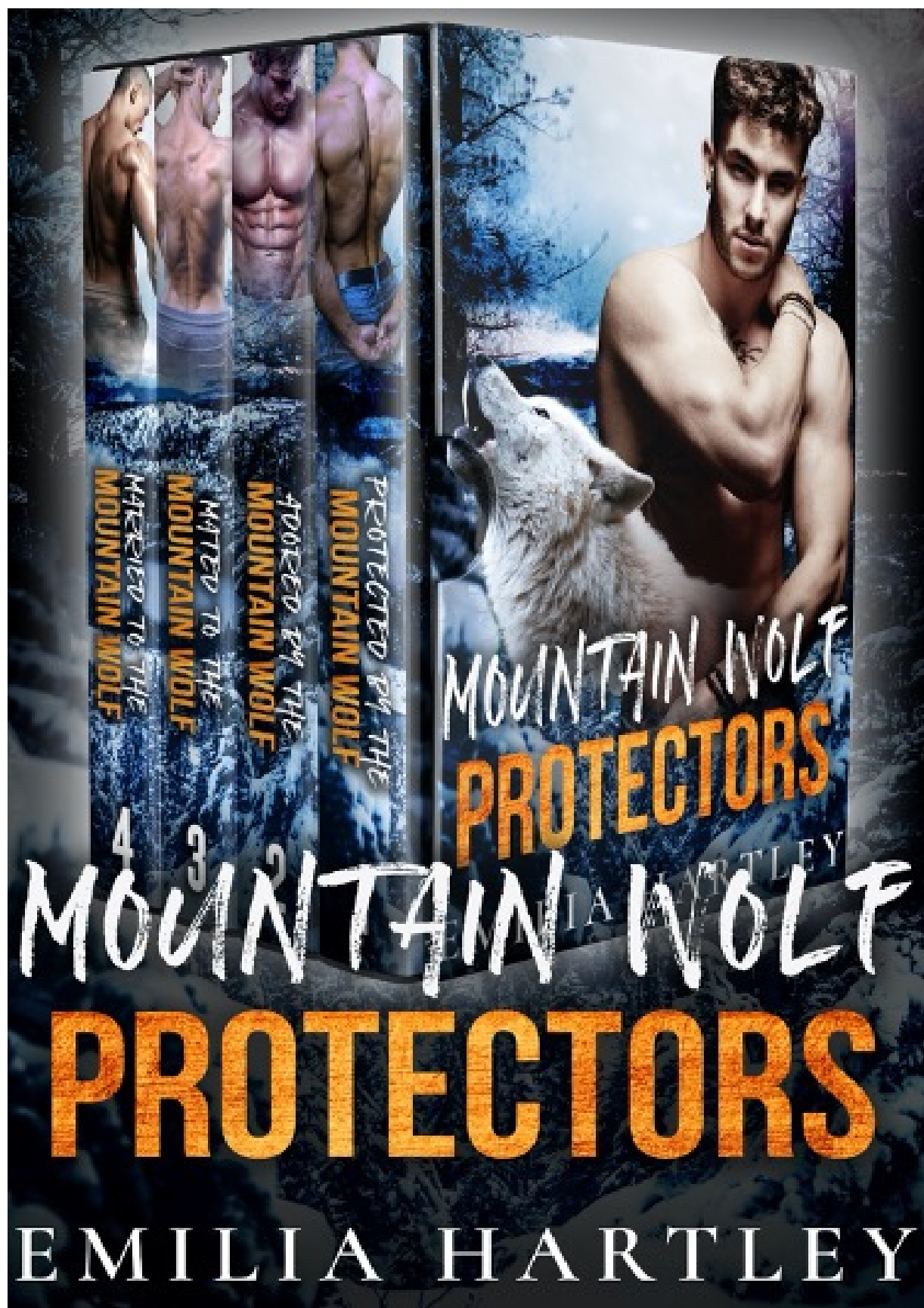
THE DRAGON'S MATE



5

THE
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THE
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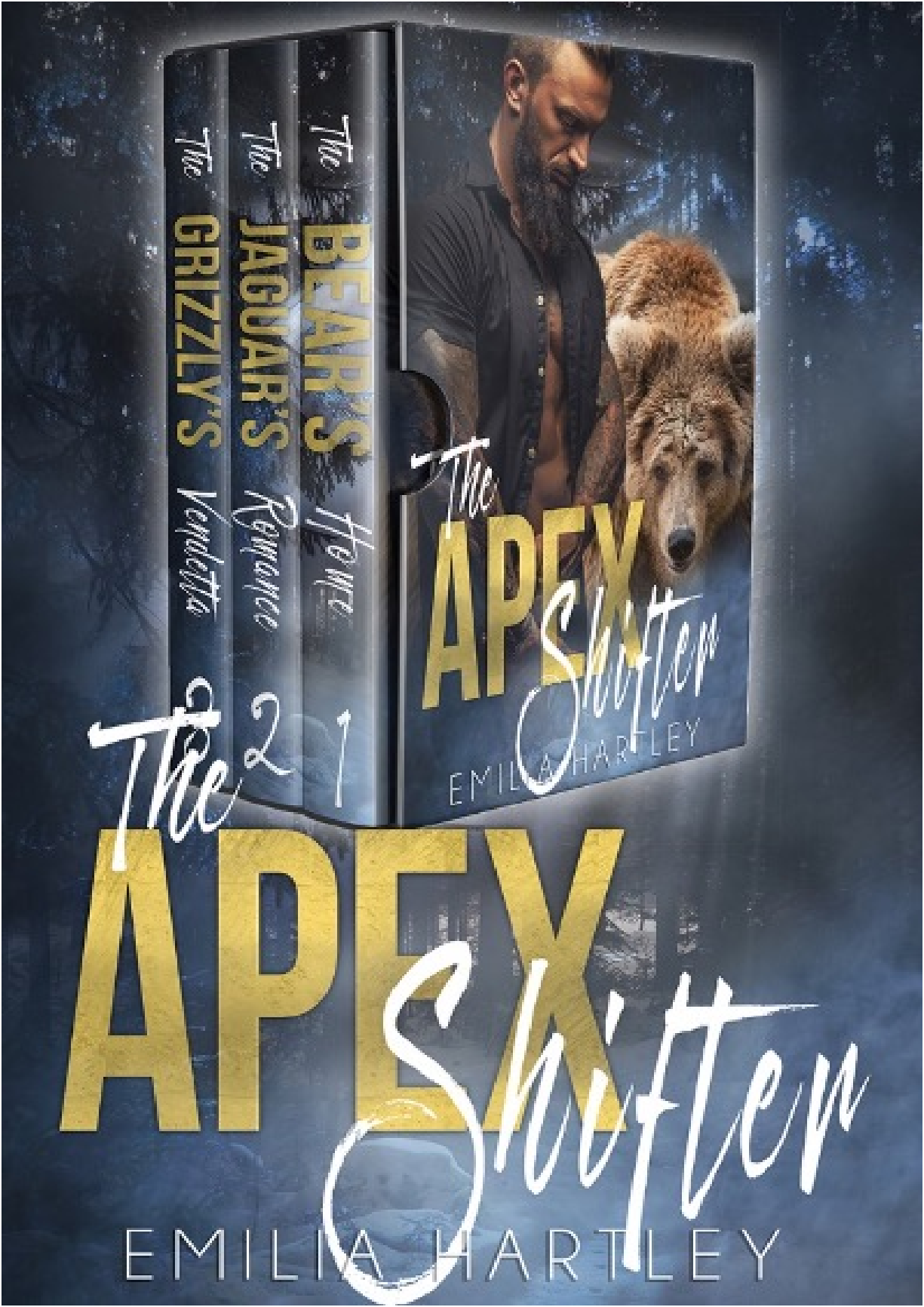
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MOUNTAIN WOLF PROTECTORS

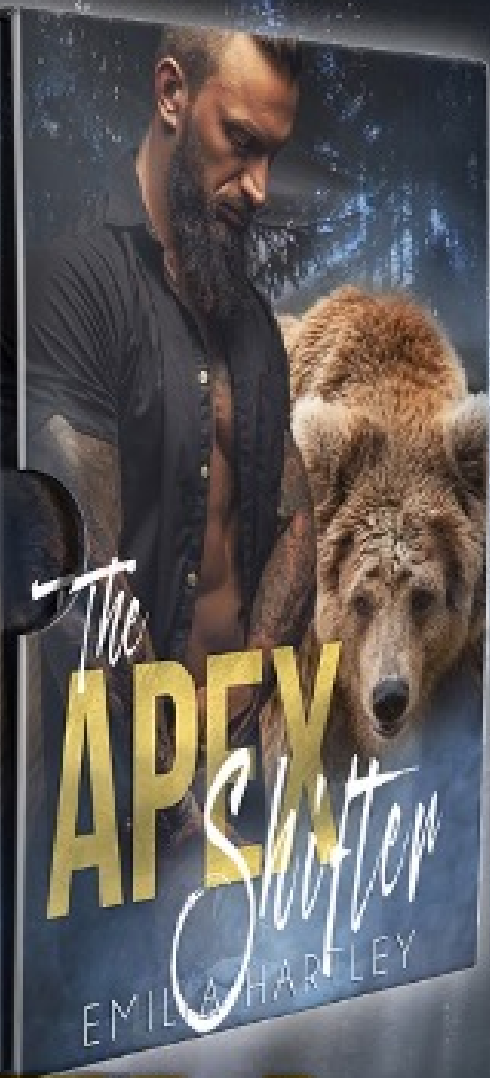
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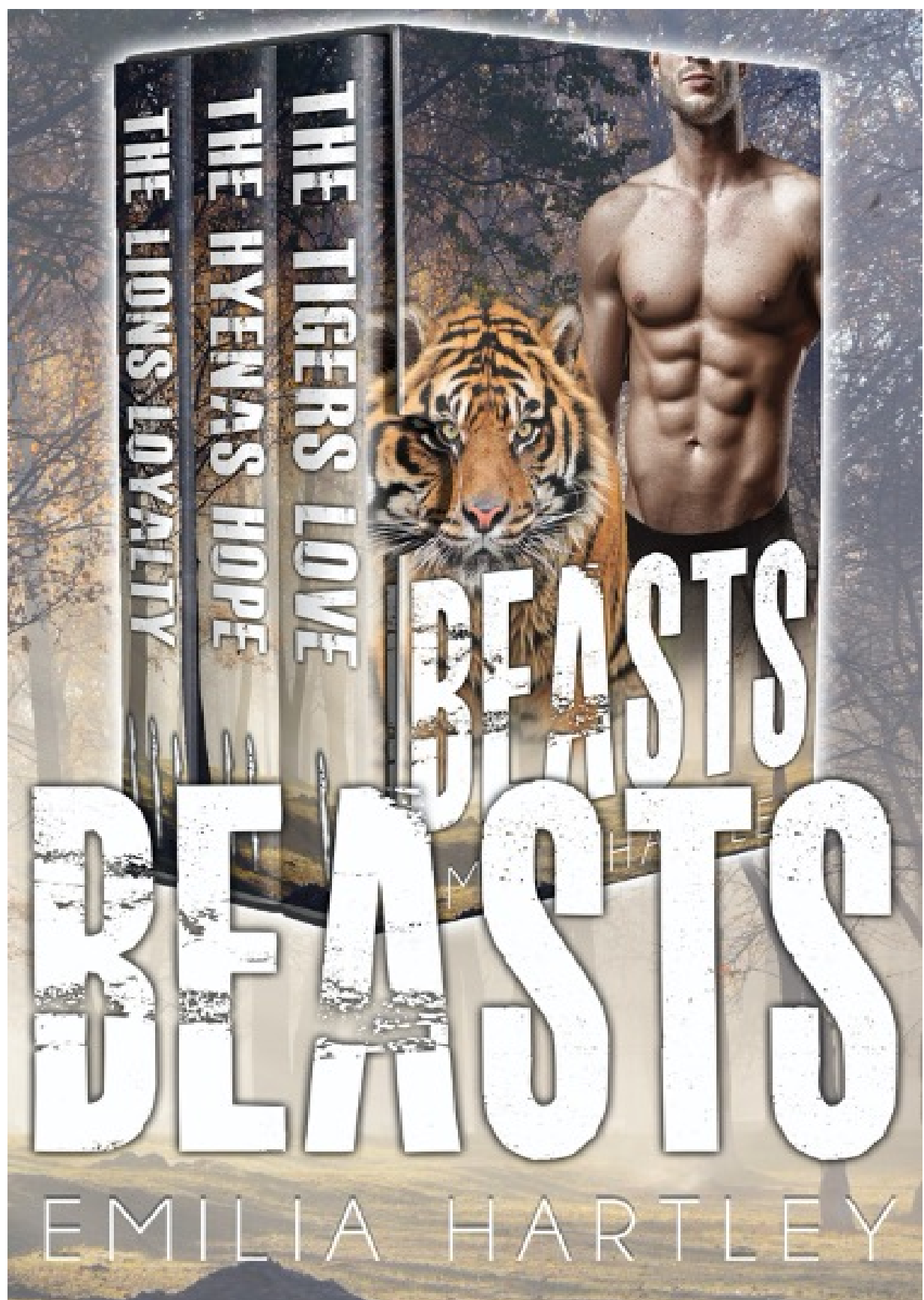
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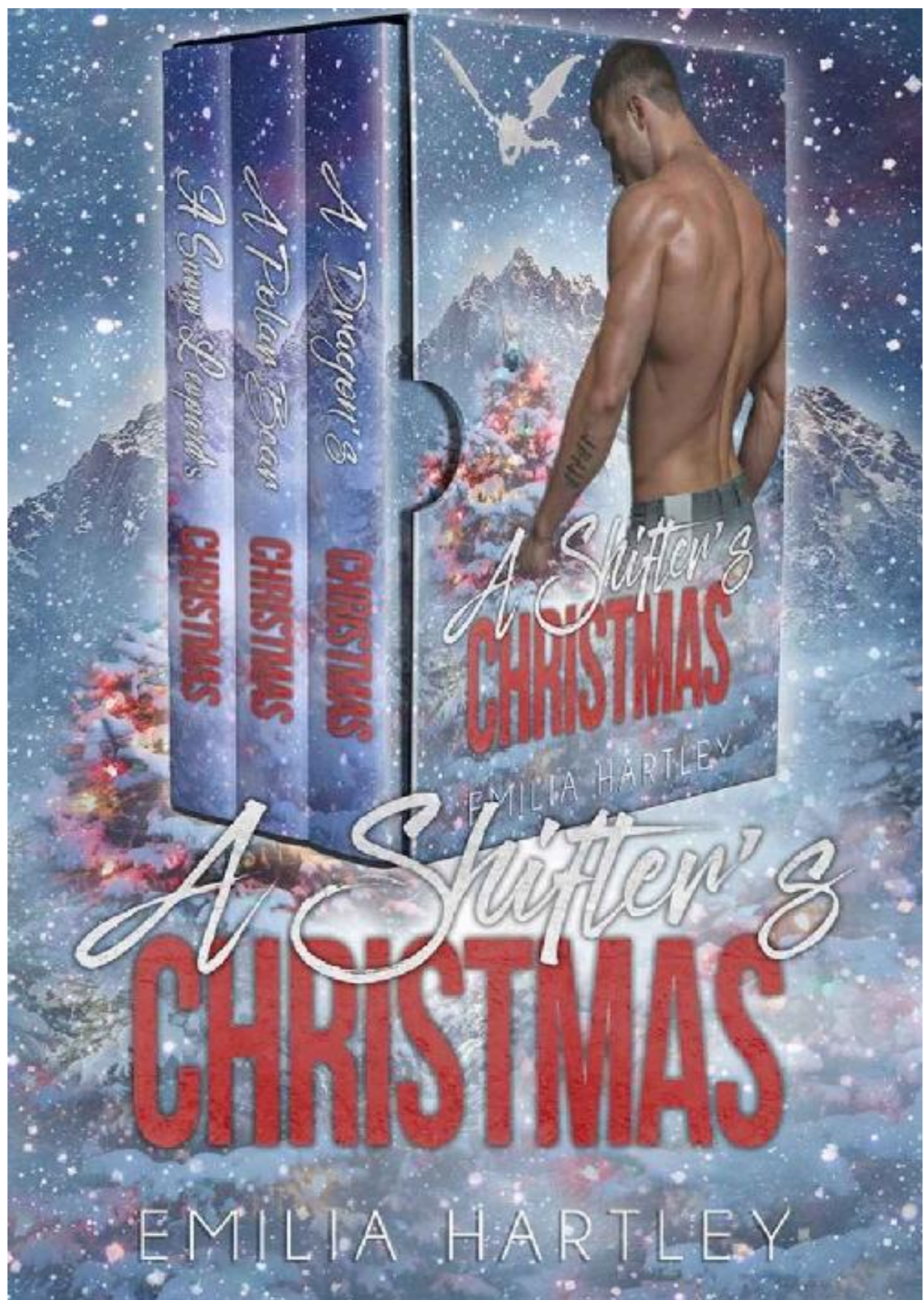
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