

EMILIA HARTLEY



A WICKED RITUAL

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 3

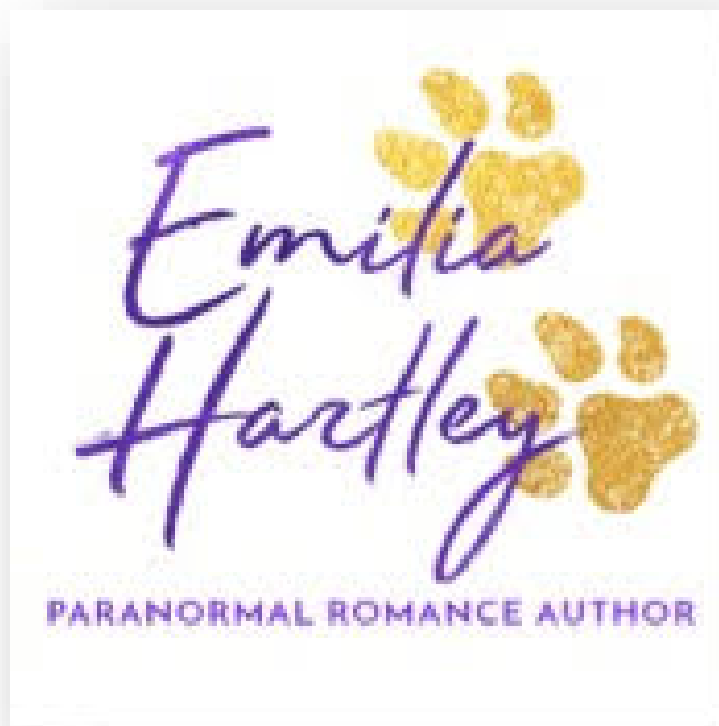
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THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES

EMILIA HARTLEY

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N^{ess} How much longer did I have left? When would the ritual be complete?

Alvin placed candles in five corners around me. He cursed when the lighter wouldn't produce a flame. I peered at the nearby window and wondered if it would be worth jumping out. I had no idea how far off the ground we were. The glass looked old. It might go right through me.

I'd died before, according to Alvin. Would I come back from a wound like that?

I didn't really want to find out.

My hound wasn't here to save me. Alvin had bound me with silver strips, tying my wrists together and keeping my hound from being able to leave my body. I'd already shifted twice today. I doubted I had the energy to shift again, even if I could feel my hound.

Harvey's death seemed like it'd happened days ago. How much had happened in the past twenty-four hours? How much more could I endure?

Killing Harvey had left me with a touch of death, an icy barrier wrapped around my heart. It was still there, but now it felt more like a shield than an ill omen. I wrapped myself around it and hoped it might stop this ritual from taking effect. The ice remained unmoving, but I hadn't really expected a response from it.

Arcana started filling the room like a cat sensing a tasty meal. It slithered up my nose and filled my throat until I coughed. It gagged me more than the rag in my mouth right now.

What had the witch given Alvin?

Ryder

ONE THOUGHT CONSUMED MY MIND. Electricity emanated from the dragon within me while I frantically searched the city for my mate. That frantic sensation should have overwhelmed everything else, but past that I could feel another presence.

Vanessa.

I could feel Ness's hands on my back, pushing me along. It was as if she were here with me, guiding me. A turn came up, and I felt the subtle pressure on my shoulder, directing me to go left. Maybe I was imagining it. Maybe this wasn't real.

I didn't have time to think about it right now. Ness had given herself up to save her pack. Alvin's former hostage, Janessa, was back with the pack. They were taking care of the female shifter while Ness suffered alone.

The pack had circled around me, asking questions about what they should do next. I'd barely been able to focus. Their words had turned into a mounting storm, assaulting my ears, until Bri quieted them.

Bri, my oldest friend. She'd come all this way from Thunder Pass to warn me about my brother. I hadn't meant to drag her into this fight, too. She didn't seem to care. Bri had smiled gently at me. With a subtle nod of her head, she'd told me all I'd needed to know.

Go. Find Ness. I've got everything here.

Though, just as I'd spun to leave, Bri called out one last time.

"Morgan will be here soon. When you get back, we have to talk about what you want to do with him."

Morgan could wait. He didn't seem as important as before. I'd been worried about my brother and the destruction he might cause when he found me, but that didn't matter so long as Ness was in danger.

I needed to find my mate. My beast growled in agreement. Her scent reached my nose. I came to a sudden halt and lifted my nose to the air. The scent pulled me towards a decrepit building.

No. Not that one, I decided when I stepped closer. I prowled towards the next building. Ness's scent grew stronger and stronger. I was close, but not quite there. Soon, I would find her.

I would snap Alvin Combs's neck and be done with him once and for all.

My beast snarled, but the sound became choked. I turned my attention inward, to the beast, but I was shaken before I could even ask what happened. The bond between Ness and me shattered. I rocked on my heels before dropping to one knee.

Pressure sat on my chest and kept me from filling my lungs. I fumbled for that bond, the one that I'd wanted to break a week ago. There was no light from the mark that had been on my hand. My beast thrashed, preventing me from finding even a thread of the bond.

I pressed my eyes closed and sucked in a breath despite the pressure on my chest. My lungs burned. I ignored the pain and stood. The world wavered at the edges, darkness pressing in from all sides.

Every step became a challenge, but it wasn't one that I would lose. I refused to give up. Ness's scent still hung in the air. Ness was within reach. All I had to do was find her. Once I found her, then we could fix this.

I refused to consider what the broken bond might mean. My beast growled low. I could feel my control slipping. The beast's anger filled me until I was more violence than man.

Find her.

Find her.

Find her.

The beast's words echoed through the inside of my skull. I lurched forward with one mission on my mind and a single prayer on my lips.

"Don't let me be too late."

N_{ess}

CANDLES SPUTTERED, casting flickering empty-faced shades across the walls in this empty room. The peeling paint seemed to writhe like my skin. Arcana filled the air and tried to delve its way into me. I whimpered and pushed at it, but I didn't have much energy left. My own arcana failed me over and over, crumbling like a sand wall under a wave.

Alvin, my former pack Alpha, held up a piece of mundane paper, but the words that left his lips were anything but mundane. His low, monotone chant gave the eerie arcana in the air more power. The arcana hammered at me. I gritted my teeth and tried to hold it off, but it was a losing fight.

Alvin had said that he wanted to tame me. Though I would rather die than face a fate like that, I'd learned that death was not permanent for me. When Alvin told me that he'd killed me once already, I knew what day he was talking about.

I'd always thought that I'd left with a concussion. I'd spoken up, for the first time. No one else had been present. I should have known better than to talk back to Alvin without the pack to back me up. Alvin hadn't liked it. He'd struck me.

How old had I been? Fifteen? Sixteen?

I couldn't remember. What I did remember was the impact of his fist against the side of my head and how the room had melted. The world had

gone black before I'd even hit the floor. When I woke, the room had been cold. I'd had bruises on my neck, but they'd healed by the time I left Alvin's house. The stiffness in my neck stayed, though.

I'd died. Alvin hadn't just choked me; he'd snapped my neck.

And I hadn't remembered a thing. I didn't remember dying or coming back. It was all a dark chasm in my memory. Would it happen again? I was afraid to find out. Now I knew why I'd survived so many horrible encounters with Alvin.

Every time he'd hit me, he'd known that there was a chance I would come back. He'd threatened to kill me—but held back—in an attempt to instill fear in me. That way he could control me. How else do you keep what you can't kill under your thumb?

The power in the room doubled. It pressed down on me, forcing me to the floor. The sensation prickled my skin like a million needles trying to pierce me all at once. I whimpered without thinking.

Ryder? Where are you?

My thoughts raced as the pressure bore down. Frantic, I tried to get ahold of myself. Every attempt was a weak fumble. My chest heaved, and my heart thundered inside my chest. I thought it might break my ribs from the inside.

If Ryder didn't show up, then I would have to save myself from this ritual. I didn't want to find out what it would do to me. Alvin mentioned wanting to tame me once and for all. That word terrified me. Even more now that I couldn't even escape him by dying.

That didn't seem like the right option right now. Instead, I had to look around. If I could find a way to escape the ritual, then it wouldn't be able to claim me. At least, that was the idea. Some of the arcana summoned by the ritual had already burrowed its way beneath my skin. I couldn't let it get any further.

I wriggled around for a better view. Alvin seemed consumed by the chant. Maybe it required his full attention. If I was lucky, he would be trapped in a trance.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd gotten lucky, though. I needed to be quick. Surveying my surroundings, I noticed the bag that the witch had left. There, in the bottom, was a glimmer of something metallic.

Inching closer, I could see a pair of wire cutters. There was no way of knowing if the witch had left them on purpose. If anything, I suspected it

was a lucky accident. Either way, I wanted to let out a sigh of relief. Maybe I could survive this after all.

The ritual stabbed at the back of my legs. What had felt like needles earlier now felt like knives pressing into my flesh. I hissed and pushed forward. My back foot hit a candle and sent it tumbling.

Alvin cursed. The candle rolled away, the flame flickering even though it didn't go out. While he chased the candle, I lunged for the wire cutters. The ritual's arcana delved deeper. Tears made my eyes burn. I'd experienced worse pain at Alvin's hands, but my rising fear threatened to overwhelm me.

What if I was too late?

There was nothing I could do to change it. I grabbed the wire cutters and positioned them, so I could snip the silver bindings. It took several attempts while my hands trembled, but the bindings soon fell away.

My beast rushed back to the surface like she'd been drowning. Her presence did little to mitigate the arcana now snaking beneath my skin. She recoiled from it as the arcana lashed out at her. I could do nothing to help. Instead, I got to my feet and tore at the gag in my mouth.

I reached the door when Alvin called out.

"Ness! Stop."

My whole body jerked. This wasn't like an Alpha's command. The ritual's arcana stopped moving and held me with it. Though I pressed on, the arcana trapped within me refused to budge. It sliced through me, sending sharp pain radiating in every direction when I fought it.

So, it was too late.

The ritual had taken hold.

Anger roiled inside me. It wasn't hot. My blood didn't boil. Instead, a wall of ice rose and surrounded my heart. I let out a breath as the world stilled and all my rage focused on Alvin. I wished I had more of my own arcana. If I could have brought the power to my words and told him to undo this, then I would have.

Instead, my anger filled the void where my arcana should have been. Exhausted and out of options, I waited for Alvin to issue another command.

He didn't. I heard him curse under his breath. There was a flurry of movement behind me, but I couldn't turn to see what Alvin was up to. He seemed panicked, which pleased me.

My heart leapt in excitement. If Alvin was panicked, that could only mean one thing.

“Ryder,” I breathed.

The door in front of me flew open. My favorite dragon shifter filled the doorway. His dark eyes smoldered like churning storm clouds. The air between us crackled with unspent electrical energy. It greeted me like an old lover as it rushed along my skin.

Ryder stepped into the room. His gaze slid past me, but the furrow of his brows told me a disappointing story. Ryder scanned the room. I sighed, frustrated.

The binding gave up. My shoulders collapsed. I sank to my knees. The impact should have jarred me, but I was too hollowed out at that point. There was nothing left in me to shake. Breath rushing out of me, I collapsed forward and just barely caught myself before my face hit the floor.

I had every intention of telling Ryder to chase after Alvin. We could have him cornered by now, but Ryder bent and lifted me from the floor instead. He cradled me close to his chest. I didn’t have the energy left to fight him as he carried me outside.

We weren’t in Lakesedge anymore. The landscape outside belonged to Syracuse, the human part of the city. I curled in on myself to hide the fact that I was naked beneath this coat. Hopefully, no one paid any attention to the beefcake of a man carrying a half-naked woman out of an abandoned building.

Ryder’s fingers dug into my flesh. He held on so tight that I thought we would become one. I wanted to ask where Alvin went or what the pack was doing, but my throat was hoarse, and my body was empty.

“Don’t worry,” Ryder said, his voice a whisper between just the two of us. “I’m taking you home.”

But the pack, I thought. They needed us. We had to go back and make sure they were all right. What had happened to Janessa? I hadn’t stayed long enough to see her return. I’d followed Alvin with the expectation that Janessa would find her way back so long as I kept Alvin distracted. It’d been a foolish mistake, and I wanted to make sure that Janessa was all right.

Cerri had been hurt. I still didn’t know what Alvin had done to my friend. He’d tried to make her pay for my transgressions. The last time I’d seen her, she’d been catatonic. Cerri had ignored me completely. Where was she now? Was my friend all right?

Would she...would she ever forgive me?
I didn't have any tears left in me.
"Take me home."



WITH THE DOORS locked behind us, Ryder finally set me back onto my own two feet. I swayed, slightly. The world wobbled, but I kept one hand on the wall as I walked down the hall. Even if that hadn't worked, Ryder remained one step behind me.

I could feel the energy radiating off him. It wasn't electric. This was a different kind of energy. I saw it in the way his fingers twitched. I could hear it in every hitch of his breath. He watched me like he was worried I might fall over at any moment.

He wasn't entirely wrong. The ice in my chest seemed fragile, like it might shatter and take my sanity with it. The frigid barrier kept me safe, but that strange arcana was still swirling just under my skin. If the binding arcana struck out at the ice inside me, then I would come crumbling down.

I bent and grabbed my bag from the floor near the bed. Heat from Ryder's body warmed my back. He stepped closer and slid his fingers into my hair. His fingertips grazed my scalp and drew a groan out of me.

He jerked back like he'd touched fire. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's come over me."

I could have told him that it was all right, that I wanted more, and that I wished he'd never let go. Ryder had a mate, though. I tried to think of Brigid, with her fiery hair and charming smile. My hound shut out all thoughts of the other dragon shifter. The hound wouldn't allow my mind to drift in that direction.

Bri wasn't here. It was only Ryder and me. Though I'd been hollow a moment ago, a rush of sensation filled me when Ryder's fingers found my shoulder. He tugged the jacket off me and let it fall to the floor. My back warmed as he stepped up, pressing his chest to my skin. His arm slid around my waist and held me tight to him.

Ryder buried his face in my shoulder and breathed deep. I should have said no and told him to remember Bri, but my words failed me. I couldn't speak her name. Hell, I could barely even think it while Ryder was so close.

“She’s safe. She’s safe...” Ryder whispered the words over and over, perhaps to himself.

Though I’d wanted to get dressed, I turned and fisted my hands in the front of Ryder’s shirt. He rested his forehead against mine, our breaths mingling. Here, I could feel him relax. I heard it in his soft sigh.

He continued touching me. His fingers slid over every soft, vulnerable crevice of my body as if searching for wounds. His touch trailed along my neck and down my arms. The gentle sound of his relieved sigh in my ear made my body clench tight.

He pushed, and we tumbled onto the bed, his body weighing me down in a way that made me feel safe. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as his hands roved up and down my body. His breath hitched. A soft growl rumbled inside him as his back arched.

I started to say that I was okay, to reassure his worried beast, but the words failed me. The binding arcana slithered under my skin and nearly drew a whimper out of me. I swallowed the sound down. Ryder didn’t need to worry about that right now.

He didn’t have to know that Alvin had done something to me...right? I didn’t want to make Ryder worry. If there was a way that I could fix this on my own, then everything would be fine.

I knew that I had to tell Ryder, but I wasn’t ready. A part of me, a large part, felt like a failure. I shouldn’t have let Alvin set the ritual up. If I’d put up more of a fight and made more of an effort to destroy the circle, then this wouldn’t have happened. It was my fault, so I had to figure this out on my own.

But I wasn’t alone anymore. That way of thinking had to die if I was going to work with Ryder or my pack again. If I couldn’t trust those around me, then I would never be able to help them in return.

“Ryder,” I sobbed into his chest.

His hand slid down my waist and over my hip. I arched into him without thinking. Pressed against him, I could feel the hard length of him filled with need. I rocked my hips and let the sensations clear my mind for me. Ryder’s body, the need his hands conveyed, shoved all other thoughts out.

I wanted to lose myself in him, but he rested his forehead on my clavicle. His breath came quick, a growl slipping through. He didn’t move,

though. He remained there and struggled against himself. His breaths deepened and slowed as he took control of himself.

I curled my hands into fists in his shirt again. He needed to keep going. The worry and guilt slipped back in, taking over my mind. There wasn't anything I could do to stop it. I needed Ryder to distract me. He did it a moment ago. If only he could keep going.

But I couldn't force him to do anything. He had a mate to think about. I couldn't get between them. That wouldn't be smart for anyone. Getting closer to Ryder would hurt me in the end. I'd already endured enough pain on my own.

"Ryder," I said again, my voice a little more under my control again.

He didn't lift his head, but he grunted in acknowledgement.

"I...Alvin..." I needed to tell Ryder about the ritual. I knew that down to my very bones, but I still didn't want to place that kind of burden on him right now. Instead, I said, "Alvin told me that he's killed me before. He killed me, and I got right back up."

Ryder rose and gave me a worried look. The way his gaze roved over me, as if searching for evidence that I was already dead, bothered me. I looked away from him as my stomach churned.

His grip on me tightened again. The growl of his beast, buried deep within him, rumbled through the room. "He clearly lied, Ness. You don't have to worry about the words of a madman. Beryl told me that he's losing his grip on reality. There's a curse on him that's eating away at his mind. Don't listen to him."

I shook my head. "No. I remember it now. He's right. Alvin killed me, and I came back. I'm not dead now, and I don't understand how that happened."

"If that's the case, then why has he been trying to kill you? The pack hunt, having Harvey chase you down all the time, none of that makes any sense if he knows you can't die." Ryder shook his head.

"Theatrics," I said. It was a simple explanation.

Alvin wanted to keep me under his control. If he knew that I would not truly die, then he would push me to my limits. He would use pain and fear to control me. I survived only because Alvin had no real desire to kill me, lest I find out that I can't die.

While that should have given me courage, I hated not knowing anything about myself. Did I have a limited number of lives, like a cat? Or was that a

one-time deal? I had no way of knowing. There was no one who could tell me what I was capable of.

“I’m sorry you’re stuck in the middle of this,” I said into Ryder’s chest.

He rolled onto his side and pulled me along with him so that I was still tight to his chest. With his chin on top of my head, he said:

“None of this is your fault.”

Those words broke the flood gates. The ice that I’d been holding onto all day finally shattered. Without it, I was weak and fragile. I cried against Ryder while he held me. He said nothing the whole time.

I would give up anything for him. My hound loved him with her whole heart. I didn’t know what I’d done to deserve him, this man who kept risking his life to save me. He was on the run from his own problems, but he kept setting them aside to help me.

He wasn’t mine, though. I couldn’t keep him. I had to settle for this and hope that it lasted. He would leave, eventually. Not just because of his own problems. Ryder had his own mate.

I hated thinking about her like that. As much as I liked Bri as a person, I hated what she’d stolen from me. My beast chose Ryder, but I would never be able to have him because of her.

A scream tried to claw its way out of my throat, but I swallowed it down and let sleep slowly rise to overcome me.

Ryder

NESS WAS SAFE.

The moment I closed that door behind us, earlier, I’d lost control. My beast filled me with a single thought, and I’d been incapable of fighting it.

Touch her.

With my hands on Ness, I could tell that she was real. She was whole.

I had no idea what had happened earlier. While searching for her, the bond between us had snapped. It’d recoiled like a rubber band stretched too tight. I’d had no time to process the recoil earlier, but now I could feel a soft ache near my heart that worried me.

While she slept, I kept one hand on her. My beast would not let me far from my mate. Now that I'd found her, I could not imagine losing her. Fate had given me one small gift, and I would cherish her for as long as I could.

What she'd said scared me. The thought of her dying at Alvin's hands roused my beast and made it snarl. Possessive, the beast dug its claws into me. My own fingers curled with need. I had to hold onto her. If she slipped through my fingers, then the sickness would take ahold of me.

I didn't want to succumb to Treasure Sickness the way my father had. Greed and paranoia had twisted my father's mind until he could not tell friend from foe. I feared that I would inherit it if I led this pack here in the heart of New York. My beast had already claimed the territory as his own. I came close to losing control earlier.

If I stayed here, then there was a chance that I could lose myself. Yet, the idea of leaving turned my stomach. My heart clenched with fear. I pulled Ness closer to my chest and listened to the soft murmur of her breath as she slept.

Leaving wasn't a choice anymore. That meant I needed to be vigilant. I would ask Ness to help me look out for the symptoms of the sickness, but she had enough on her plate already. I couldn't ask that of her when she was struggling with everything else.

She wriggled in my arms. The movement pulled me out of my thoughts. I watched her toss her head restlessly. Comforting whispers already on my lips, I reached to smooth her hair back. Ness jerked away from me, though.

I paused, confused. Ness went rigid in my arms. My heart stuttered as she lurched out of my embrace and landed on the floor.

"What are you doing?" I cried out, reaching for her.

She slithered the rest of the way off the bed and twisted to face me. Her lips curled, but her eyes remained half-lidded, as though she were still asleep. A feral snarl left her lips before she stepped onto the bed and walked across it. I rolled off the mattress and chased after her as she staggered through the apartment.

When Ness reached for the front door, I leapt ahead of her to block her path.

"You are naked," I warned her.

Ness had spent plenty of nights here. This was the first time we'd shared the same bed, so I'd figured I would discover new things about my

mate. I'd assumed I would find out that she snored. Maybe she might even fart in her sleep.

I never expected her to start sleepwalking. Wouldn't she have mentioned this? Hell, her father could have brought it up.

Ness lifted her chin and glared at me. That was when I noticed the ring of red light deep within her dark eyes. This wasn't natural.

I recalled the state of the room I'd found Ness in earlier. Alvin had sequestered her in an abandoned building. When I'd found her, there'd been a ring of candles around her. The sigils painted on the floor had been smudged by her body. There was still paint on the coat she'd been wearing.

I hadn't given it much thought then. I'd been more worried about Ness than what was going on around her. Now, I regretted not paying more attention.

I took Ness by the shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. Her lips curled back right before she struck. She raked her nails down my chest. Sharp claws tore through my shirt, narrowly missing my skin.

"Ness!" I ducked to the side, away from her.

She spun on me, claws still extended. The red ring in her irises flashed bright. Shaking her awake wouldn't do anything. I would have to hold her down until this passed.

My throat tightened. There was no way to know if this would pass. Alvin's ritual could have been permanent. I knew nothing; I could only make this up and hope for the best as I went along.

My beast roared to be let out. I couldn't let him out without destroying the house, and I couldn't afford that. Instead, I lunged for Ness. She lashed out with her claws, dragging them through my skin this time. Though I hissed in pain, I still wrapped my arms around her.

She slid out of my grasp, her knees hitting the floor with a heavy thud. I reached to help her up without thinking, but she sprang back to her feet and lunged for a nearby lamp. I snatched the lamp out of the air, but she was quick.

Ness grabbed a decorative vase off the side table and threw it right behind the lamp. It hit my shoulder and shattered, raining glass across the floor. Barefoot, I had to carefully step around the glass. If I didn't corner Ness, she might step into it, too.

Like an animal, she backed up. Instead of going around the side table, she stepped on top of it and backed onto the couch. The soft cushion threw

her off balance. I lunged and caught her so that her arms would be pinned to her side.

I fumbled between the couch and the coffee table. The furniture screeched against the hard floor when I kicked it out of the way so I could drop.

Ness thrashed wildly in my lap. The sounds she made were feral, almost inhuman. My heart threatened to shatter as I sank to my knees with her. She still bucked. Twice, she slammed her head against my collarbone. I had to cup the back of her head and hold her to my chest to keep her from hurting herself.

I could take a few blows. Cuts and scrapes, bruises and broken bones all meant nothing to me when Ness's safety was at risk. I ran my hand down her cheek and tried to hold back the quiver in my voice.

"Come back to me, Ness. I need you."

She struggled against my hold. What had Alvin done to her? It was as though my mate was nowhere to be found. The chill of fear sat within my gut, slowly creeping outward to consume me.

The reek of witchcraft hung in the air. It smelled of dead things and musty souls. The witch must have helped Alvin again. I would need to have a talk with her. If this was how she conducted her business, then I did not want her on my territory. My beast growled in agreement.

Ness made a guttural sound. I hushed her and rocked back and forth while praying that this would pass. I'd gotten her back only to lose her.

This wasn't right. It wasn't fair in the least. I didn't deserve to keep losing everything I held dear. First, it was my father. Then it was my clan and my home. Now, I'd lost my mate to this dark magic.

If Ness didn't return to me, then I would hunt the witch down and make her pay. My beast craved blood and violence. I swallowed the craving back down and let my fear eat at it. Letting my beast have what it wanted wouldn't help anyone right now; not when I had to be here for Ness.

She twisted her wrists. Her claws found my sides. She dug them into my flesh, making me grimace. I wouldn't let go, though. Instead, I tightened my grip. Ness couldn't do much damage from this angle. Everything would be fine.

It would be fine.

My beast wasn't convinced, but I repeated the words while we rocked back and forth until I could somewhat believe them. I loathed this useless

feeling. Though I wanted to do so much more for her, I was out of options. There wasn't anything else I could think of that would pull her back to me.

Even the bond that the witch had revealed was now dead and gone. Though I tried to find it and tug on it, there was nothing to grasp for. No light flashed on my skin. Nothing.

"Ness, where are you? Are you in there still? Can you hear me? I need you to snap out of it. You've never let anyone control you before. Don't start now."

I had no idea if what I said was true, but it felt true in the moment. Ness wasn't one to let others manipulate her. I knew that she would gladly sacrifice herself for others, but no one twisted her will to turn her into their plaything. She would never let that happen.

She growled. The sound turned into a scream as she thrashed in my arms. I swallowed my fear and held on tight. I had to believe that she was still in there somewhere. This animal wouldn't win.

"Hound?" I asked when a thought occurred to me. "Can you hear me? Pull Ness back from wherever she is."

N_{ess}

THE ROOM WAS dark and cold. I remembered being safe when I fell asleep, but adrenaline coursed through my body. It made my skin crawl.

No, that wasn't the adrenaline. That was the arcana. And it wasn't under my skin anymore. It held me tight in a vice-like grip. I struggled, a whimper leaving my lips. That was when I realized that I wasn't in a room. This wasn't even real.

The arcana had pulled my consciousness into a far corner of my mind and trapped me there. I struggled, scraping at the thick layer of magic holding me down. It shoved back. I thought I would shatter under the force of it, but I refused to let it destroy me.

I heard the soft rumbling thunder of my hound's footfalls as she ran for me. Even through the ritual's arcana, I could sense my hound. She leapt into the thick wall of magic. I thought it would trap her the way it trapped me.

Instead, my hound slid through it like water. She crashed into me. I gasped for air as we became one again.

My eyes snapped open. Light seared my vision and made me cringe. The smell of blood reached my nose first. Then I felt the wetness in my hands. My heart clenched. Regret tasted like bile in the back of my throat.

"What did I do?" My voice cracked.

Ryder sighed. He slumped against me. His hand on the back of my head loosened, nearly falling away completely.

I opened my eyes and peered up at him. His face was pale, his eyes turned toward the ceiling like he was thanking a higher power. When he looked down at me, his soft smile nearly broke my heart. I could see the pain pinching the corners of his eyes.

Leaning back, I didn't think Ryder would let go of me. Eventually, his arms fell away, and I could sit upright. The rest of the room came into focus. We were in the living room with the exit right behind Ryder.

I glanced down at my hands. Claws slowly turned back into human fingers, but that couldn't get rid of the blood on my hands. My stomach flipped.

Though I dug through my memories, I had no idea how I'd gotten out here. I couldn't remember going from the bedroom to the living room, let alone hurting Ryder. I had no idea what could have happened, and that was even more frightening.

Ryder put an arm under me and lifted me in one smooth motion. If he was in pain, he ignored it. I couldn't see even a hint of it in his expression anymore.

"Let's get you cleaned up," he said as he carried me down the hall again.

He brought me into the bathroom and set me on the edge of the counter. When he bent to get a clean towel, so he could run it under the water, I opened my mouth. Nothing would come out, though.

I wanted to ask what happened. I wanted to apologize. A hundred other things came to mind all at once and stuck in my throat. Quickly, I clamped my lips together.

Ryder rose with a damp towel and began wiping my hands clean. I groaned.

"What?" he asked without looking up at me.

"Shouldn't we focus on you? You're the one who was hurt."

Ryder said nothing. His silence pained me. Though he focused on my hands, his touch gentle and thorough, I knew he had to be hurting. There were bloodstains on his shirt. Had the wounds closed already? I doubted it, considering how much we'd endured in the past two days. Neither of us had a chance to eat properly.

"Ryder. You need to let me take care of you."

He stopped and threw the towel down. His eyes flashed with electrical light when he met my gaze. He braced his hands against the counter, on either side of me. My breath hitched when I jerked back. A soft heat crept over my cheeks.

Though I saw lightning in those eyes, I also watched them grow wet. He didn't cry, but I could see the unshed tears swimming in his eyes. He quickly blinked them away, his visage stoic once again.

"Ryder." I ran a knuckle along his tense jaw.

He shook his head and donned an unconvincing smile. "Don't worry about it."

I pressed my lips together. I could force him to talk, but that would be cruel. I would never use my arcana against Ryder again. While we'd been practicing, I'd tried to use it to make him tell me how he felt. He'd managed to overpower my command, in the end. I was grateful that he had, or else I might have heard something I didn't want to know.

"What happened?" I asked instead.

Ryder explained how I'd thrown myself off the bed and tried to leave. My heart broke when he told me that I'd attacked him. I ran my fingers through the tears in his shirt. Guilt churned in the pit of my stomach.

Exhaustion made every movement heavy. It had to be early in the night still, yet I was afraid to go back to sleep now. Alvin's ritual had done something, and it genuinely terrified me. While I doubted I could kill Ryder, I still didn't want to hurt him.

"Alvin needs to be stopped," I said.

Ryder nodded. "We'll find him, and when we do, we can exile him."

I sat back, surprised. "Exile? Are you really willing to let him go on to hurt others?"

Ryder's expression darkened. I remembered what he'd done before, how he'd been forced to kill his own father because no one else in his clan could step up to the task. I knew that I couldn't ask Ryder to kill again. That was too much of a burden to put on anyone.

Yet, Alvin could not be allowed to live. Could I be the one to take his life? I didn't know if I had it in me. I'd killed Harvey. Everything in me said that he couldn't be allowed to live, because he would keep hurting others, and I couldn't allow him to do that.

I wasn't sure if I wanted that stain on my soul again. Though I could feel the cool breath of death whispering in my ear, I didn't want to answer.

I'd been given the responsibility as judge, somehow. Death waited beside me, ready to take those who didn't deserve the air they breathed. How could I act as executioner, too?

I didn't want either responsibility. Not for the first time, I wished I could have been a wolf just like everyone else. I wished that when I'd completed my first shift, I'd opened my eyes to wolf paws on the ground instead of my black-furred hound paws.

"Ness?" Ryder asked softly.

I shook myself, but I couldn't escape the cold breath on the back of my neck. Death was waiting. Who would it take when it left?

Ryder? Myself? Or could I give it the soul that I wanted removed from this world once and for all?

"I know the witch can't be trusted, but I think we should pay her another visit. Maybe if we can get her to tell us what she did, then we can have Cerri undo it." Ryder lifted his brows hopefully.

I nodded, though I wasn't convinced. The ritual's arcana was still there, deep inside me. With every passing moment, it burrowed deeper and deeper. I could summon the icy arcana I'd discovered recently, but not even that was enough to hold the ritual's magic back.

If I slept again, would the ritual's magic overcome me? Would Cerri even be able to help?

Alvin had hurt her. He'd taken my best friend and punished her for what I'd done. I doubted she wanted to talk to me yet. The last time I saw her, she'd been catatonic. I owed her an apology, but she probably wasn't ready.

Without thinking, I grasped at Ryder's shirt and pulled him closer, so I could bury my face in his chest. His scent had returned, so much stronger now that he was no longer bound to Beryl. He'd told me how Beryl had tested his limits the last time she'd taken him.

Now that Ryder was no longer under the Unseelie Queen's control, I wondered if I could have him all to myself. How many times had Beryl whisked him away right as he'd been about to tell me something? I didn't have to worry about that anymore.

Maybe now, we could have an actual conversation.

"Let's go back to bed." Ryder lifted me from the counter.

Turning, he carried me back to the bedroom where he gently set me onto the bed. Ryder curled around me while my mind churned. By the time I managed to get my thoughts in order, Ryder snored beside me.

Maybe, in the morning, we could talk. Tonight, I settled in beside him and did my best to stave off sleep for as long as I could.



I BOLTED UPRIGHT WITH A GASP. The bed was empty. I frantically searched the room for any sign of Ryder. Cold sweat dried into a sticky mess on my skin while my heart raced. Though I tried to calm the panic making me shake, I could barely breathe.

Where was Ryder? The rumbled sheets weren't stained with blood. I counted that as a blessing after the night we'd had. The fact that I'd woken in the bed and not elsewhere was another good sign.

Those small details helped me get ahold of myself. I turned inward, searching for the ritual's arcana. It was still there, dormant beneath my skin. I could push and tug at it, but that magic wasn't going anywhere. The magic was stubborn, even more than me.

I buried my face in my hands and sighed. My spine prickled. Shooting upright, I scanned the room again. There was no one here with me, but the feeling of being watched never went away. The ritual arcana rippled in answer to something.

It felt like Alvin had put a leash on me, and I was afraid of the moment he tugged that leash. Swallowing, I threw my feet to the ground. If I put as much distance between myself and Ryder as possible, then maybe he would be safe. Alvin would stop at nothing to get control of the Lakesedge pack again, even if that meant killing Ryder.

I was a danger to everyone around me. In the kitchen, I stopped and sighed, my gaze fixed on the coffeemaker. Though the quiet morning seemed normal, I couldn't help but worry about all that loomed over my head.

Reaching for the coffeemaker, I paused.

Behind me, the door flew open. I flinched and spun. My hound prepared herself for an assault, but it was only Ryder in the doorway. He stood tall with two paper bags in his arms. He hooked his foot around the door and closed it behind him with gentle ease while he watched me cautiously.

I sighed. "I'm not going to attack you."

“That’s not what I was worried about. You’re on edge. Did something happen while I was gone?” He came over and set the bags down on the counter before reaching for me.

I covered his hand with my own. The thunderous rampage inside my ribcage steadily calmed.

“Nothing happened.” I inhaled, savoring the smell of bacon and butter coming from the paper bags. “You can’t blame me for being vigilant right now.”

“I can’t blame you, but I can take that burden from you. Let me keep an eye out today. You should eat something right now.” Ryder held up a finger then ran back outside.

When he returned, he had a coffee in each hand. The familiar aroma of chocolate and espresso reached my nose, making my stomach pinch. Before I knew what I was doing, I reached out for the iced coffee and plucked it from his hand. Ryder quickly snatched a straw from his pocket, tapped it against his thigh to break the wrapper, and handed me the open end, so I could pull it out of the paper.

That first sip of cold coffee made me groan happily. The nervous energy still prickling at my stomach slowly faded. I leaned back against the counter behind me and blinked up at Ryder as if I were a happy cat.

He chuckled under his breath and shook his head before emptying the paper bags. A stack of foil-wrapped breakfast sandwiches quickly appeared on the counter. My mouth watered at the sight of them. Small stickers labelled them as sausage or bacon. There was one that said Pancake.

I snatched the pancake one before Ryder could stop me and ran back to the bedroom where I jumped onto the bed.

“Get back here with that!” Ryder shouted. “I got that just for myself. Don’t you dare steal that from me now that I’m starting to taste food again.”

After placing my iced coffee on the nightstand, I quickly unwrapped the pancake breakfast sandwich and stole a big bite. The taste of maple syrup and savory peppered bacon spread across my tongue, nearly making me groan.

Ryder snatched his sandwich back and gave me a look of reproach. Before I could complain, he shoved another sandwich into my hands. This one was a croissant with a thick layer of peppered bacon that crunched with each bite.

I hadn't realized just how hungry I'd been. I'd become numb to it and forgotten to eat altogether, which in turn had put me on edge. My panic upon waking up made more sense now.

"You can taste food again?" I asked around a mouthful.

The enchanted fae food that Queen Beryl had been shoving in his face had stolen Ryder's ability to taste human food. He hadn't been certain his taste would ever come back. If the spell was breaking, then things were looking good.

"Are you ready for today?" Ryder asked.

We'd been spending more time together. Even now, he sat on the edge of the bed, his back pressed against my legs as if he couldn't bear to be so close without touching me. I wished I could read into this, but he had a mate.

Perhaps this was proof that Ryder was becoming pack. He'd sworn up and down that he wanted nothing to do with my pack, but my hound saw him as one of us now. Of course, my hound would want to be close to him. And, if he saw me as pack, his dragon would want to be as close to me as possible.

I wished I could change fate and bind us together. No one else in my life had ever done as much for me as Ryder had. I knew now that my parents had tried to help me, and I probably owed them my life. Yet, Ryder barely knew me. He wasn't a relative or an old friend, but a near-stranger who'd dropped everything to protect me.

I wished I could be happy for him and Bri. If I were a better person, I would have tried to help them reconnect. The jealous part of me that wanted to keep Ryder all to myself was perfectly content leaving their problems alone so that he would spend more time with me.

I shook myself out of my greedy thoughts. "What are we doing today?"

Oh, right. The witch.

We had to pay her a visit to figure out how to undo what Alvin had done to me. The ritual that she'd sold to Alvin bound me to him. I doubted Alvin had full control over me, or else he would have used that against Ryder by now. The ritual must have been interrupted when I kicked over that candle.

I'd escaped not long after, too. Though the ritual seemed to have taken root, it hadn't yet eclipsed my free will completely. I was thankful for that small fact, even if thoughts of the previous night filled me with guilt.

Ryder patiently waited for me to finish two sandwiches before I got up to shower. I couldn't recall the last time I'd showered. I must have smelled awful. The past few days had been nothing but stress.

Harvey, the Alpha's son, was dead. I'd killed him with a lightning strike that I'd pulled from the sky. The smell of burnt hair seared my nose all over again. I opened the bodywash and held it up to my nose with the hopes that it might drown out the scent of death still haunting me.

Up until recently, I'd had no arcana of my own. The only magic at my disposal had been my ability to take the form of a hound. Though a thunderstorm had followed in my wake whenever I shifted, I'd had no control over it until now.

I squeezed bodywash into my open palm and wondered if I would ever get these hands clean. How could I when the power to kill was still inside me?

I'd been through trial after trial, each one awakening something new and terrifying in me. The first awakening had been the vocal arcana. I still didn't have very good control over it. The arcana intertwined with my voice and allowed me to issue undeniable commands. My feeble attempts at using it had nearly gotten me killed.

In a panic, I'd told Ryder to stop hurting Harvey. After that, Ryder had been incapable of touching Harvey even to stop Harvey from attacking me. I needed to use the command wisely or else someone would get hurt. I didn't like having this kind of burden on my shoulders. There was already too much that I had to worry about.

To make matters worse, there was another arcana lurking inside me. It was different than my ability to shift or the vocal commands. This arcana wasn't one that I could control. It was like a sense.

This arcana filled my chest with cold ice, a chill that wouldn't subside even when I lifted my face to the hot spray of water. It warned me when death was near.

No, that wasn't quite right. My arcana didn't warn when death was near. It summoned death to claim the souls of those who were a danger to myself and those I cared about. It was a kind of...verdict.

That was another responsibility that I didn't care to carry on my own. What gave me the right to pass judgement on another? One could say that my hesitation to use this arcana was good, but I still wanted nothing to do with it.

If I could, I would have ignored it. However, the icy barrier in my chest kept the ritual's arcana at bay, though. It protected me, so I couldn't turn my back on it.

What was I becoming? Was this what a Barghest, or a Black Hound, really was? I'd been wondering what made me special ever since my first shift when Alvin paled at the sight of my hound. Did my arcana scare him? Or was it the prophecy that another witch had left behind that had triggered Alvin's anger?

The pages torn from the pack's records bothered me. I knew that specific record had details about Barghests and their arcana that would have helped me. Someone had taken the time to rip it out so that I wouldn't be able to find it.

The bathroom door opened, and Ryder stepped in. I nearly reached for him. Instead, I balled my hands into fists and let the water run over me. It didn't do much to cool down the need slowly taking over.

"I had your mother drop off some more clothes," he said.

"Oh, no. Is she still here?" I didn't want to talk to my mom right now.

The last thing I needed was for her to look at me and see all the ways I'd changed recently. I wanted to tuck these thoughts away and pretend that all was normal for a little while. Constantly dealing with my ever-changing arcana left me feeling hollowed out more often than not.

I wanted to empty my mind and lose myself in something else... someone else.

"Ugh," I groaned, completely forgetting that Ryder was still on the other side of the shower curtain.

He chuckled. "She didn't stick around. You don't have to be so mean to your mother. She's a nice woman."

"Oh, that wasn't...I didn't mean..." I didn't have a good excuse to hide what I'd really meant.

Ryder left, so I could get dressed, as if he hadn't already seen me naked a number of times. It wasn't like I could summon clothing each time I shifted back to my human form. Still, I appreciated the gesture.

Here, with him, I was safe. The feeling was still so new and novel to me. I wanted to sink into him and forget about the life I'd been handed. In his arms, I didn't have to worry about anything else.

The feeling was addicting. If he left, I would have to figure out how to stand on my own again. Ryder kept saying that he had to go, that his past

would catch up to him and that he would have to make sure that happened far away from here.

Still, he was here with me. He held my hand on our way out to his car and only let go after I opened my own door. Why was he here with me, though? Wasn't Bri still here?

As we pulled away from the curb and turned toward the supernatural neighborhood, I cast a wary glance in Ryder's direction. My mouth opened of its own accord and words slipped out before I could stop them.

"Why are you and Bri fighting?"

The car swerved before Ryder corrected himself. He gave me a strange sidelong glance.

I bit my lower lip and fidgeted in my seat while silence stretched between us. I wished he would say something, anything to break the constant churning thoughts trapped in my own head.

"I didn't mean to pry," I blurted out to cover my tracks.

"What? No. You're not prying." Ryder grasped the gearshift, his fingers tapping nervously against the handle. "Bri and I aren't fighting. That's why your question caught me off guard."

Confusion sent me reeling. I stared at Ryder for several heartbeats before realizing that my mouth was wide open. Quickly closing it, I shook myself and diverted my gaze.

The witch's house appeared outside the windshield. Ryder parked at the curb and spilled out of his seat, signaling that this conversation was over. When I followed him, his questioning gaze lingered on me, yet neither of us said anything.

Clearly, I'd misread something. If they were mates, then why was there so much tension between them? At first, I'd assumed that they were fighting about what happened between Ryder and his father. Now, I wasn't so sure.

I followed in Ryder's wake as he approached the witch's house. The sound of bones clacking against one another made a chill run down my spine. I glared up at the macabre wind chime hanging on the porch. Ryder leapt up the steps, closed his massive fist around the windchime, and yanked it from the porch roof without taking his attention off the door in front of him.

He tossed the bone chime to the floor and lifted his fist to pound on the door. I chewed on my lower lip and stepped to the side, so I could peer into

the nearby window. The curtains had been drawn, but this close I could peek through a gap between them. I cupped my hands around my face and leaned in close, fully expecting the witch to jump-scare me.

Nothing happened. All was still within the house. Barely even a mote of dust danced in the air. It was as if no one had been home in days.

I rocked back on my heels. The witch had helped Alvin just yesterday. I'd seen her with my own two eyes. Her witchcraft had been all over Alvin's estate, too. Alvin had hung her wards all over the place. She'd been there to inscribe sigils into his doorframes, too.

Ryder gripped the doorknob. I watched the tension build in his muscles. Realizing what he was about to do, I jumped to stop him. When I put my hand on his arm, he looked down at me with his brows gathered into a stern peak.

"Let's not get arrested for breaking and entering today." I pointedly glanced at the nearby houses, where others could be watching.

If the witch informed her neighbors that she might have unwanted visitors soon, then someone might be on the lookout. This wasn't worth a tango with the police.

"She's not here."

Ryder sniffed the air but didn't look convinced. We both knew that the witch could hide scents, but I didn't think she could manufacture this kind of stillness. She'd known that we would come looking for her. Those wire cutters had been left in the duffel bag on purpose. She'd given me the means to free myself and escape Alvin, so she'd known that I would want answers.

Apparently, that was as far as her generosity went. We wouldn't be able to find her here, much to my disappointment. I needed to figure out how to break this curse writhing beneath my skin. If I couldn't, then I would inevitably hurt someone.

I looked to Ryder, who was still glowering at the door. The damage that I'd caused had healed over by now, but that didn't erase the fact that I'd been under someone else's control. Alvin had the ability to puppet me from afar. It was only a matter of time until he figured out how to access my arcana.

Though I wanted to believe that my command was locked behind that barrier of ice in my core, I had no way of knowing for sure. Eventually, the

ritual's arcana would find its way past my barriers. It would take ahold of my command and turn that power against Ryder.

I shuddered to think of the commands Alvin might give to Ryder. I couldn't risk being around him while the ritual's arcana was still inside me. Ryder had been through enough already.

Ryder

I COULDN'T CATCH any scent on the air. I'd been hoping that tearing down the damned bone chime would break the ward over the witch's house, but I'd been wrong. The witch had been thorough in protecting her home.

"She's got to be here somewhere," I growled.

Ness made a small sound in her throat and backed away from me. I gave her a questioning glance, but I couldn't figure out the reason for her sudden wariness.

"The witch can't hurt us," I assured her.

That wasn't true. I'd watched the witch turn her wards against Ness before. The spells over this house were vicious and out for blood. Ness was right to be concerned, but that wasn't going to stop me.

Whatever Alvin had done to my mate was this witch's fault. The witch had given Alvin the tools to do this. I would make both of them pay.

Mate.

The idea still struck me. It stole my breath and left my heart racing. When I leapt over the porch railing to prowl around the back of the house, my beast warned me to go back to Ness. The dragon didn't like letting her out of my sight. While I'd learned that taking my eyes off her could be dangerous, I knew that I had to trust her to call out to me if she needed help.

If I let my beast have its way, nothing would ever get done. I had a mission to focus on. A monster needed to be stopped, or else we would never know peace. I couldn't let her live in danger and fear for the rest of her life.

What kind of mate would I be if I allowed that to happen?

Nothing had gone as planned since arriving in Syracuse. Lakesedge wasn't where I expected my journey to end. I'd come here to find the Black Hound who could help me escape my brother's wrath. A witch in Nevada had promised me that the Black Hound would have the answers to my problems, but I never expected that hound to be my mate.

Now we were trying to meet with another witch. This one wasn't so helpful. She would give us what we wanted, but it would come at a price. I had a feeling that we wouldn't be paying in cash today. This witch would want something else, and I was tired of bowing to others.

My beast growled, remembering how the witch had hurt Ness the last time we'd visited. I promised to do my best to protect my mate this time, but the witch made me wary. I didn't trust her not to give us over to Alvin.

He'd clearly been paying her pretty damn well. My beast was already on high alert as I prowled around the side of the house.

There was no scent here, not even the mossy smell of the earth between the pavers below. When I lifted my gaze, I glimpsed another sigil twisting in the air like an ornament.

I leapt up the steps leading to the witch's backdoor. More bone chimes made soft clacking noises nearby. Though it drew a tired sigh from me, I didn't yank this one down. Instead, I grabbed the doorknob and gave it a sharp twist.

The mechanism broke in my hands. The door swung open at my touch. I caught the smell of dust first. It had settled on everything, making me think Ness was right. The witch was on the run.

"Do you believe me now?" Ness asked behind me.

She had her arms wrapped around her middle. More than an arm's length of distance sat between us. I wanted to push deeper into the house to find the witch, but Ness's destitute expression drew me into her. I backtracked and pulled her into my arms.

"It's all right," I whispered. "We'll find her."

Ness shook her head and stepped out of my arms. She retreated out the back door before I could think of anything to say to stop her. I watched her

distance herself from me and wondered what I'd done wrong.

Though I had so much on my plate right now, all I wanted was to see her smile again. Ness bore the weight of Alvin's wrongdoings on her shoulders. If I could have taken that from her, I would have. Instead, she was alone with those horrors.

I'd been the one to bear that weight back home. As my father's mental health deteriorated and paranoia destroyed the man that I'd loved, I'd done my best to hide it from the others. That meant being the one to challenge him when he thought insurrection was near. I was the one who stood in the way of his anger, the one who bore the brunt of his violence.

I understood how Ness felt, to some degree. However, I would never understand how it felt to be trapped by the witch's magic. That was why I wanted to find this witch and have her undo the binding that trapped Ness in Alvin's grasp. That way, my mate could be free again—or, as free as she could be until Alvin was gone once and for all.

"What if we focus on finding Alvin?" I suggested as I followed Ness out.

Ness made a small sound that I couldn't understand. She pulled her shoulders up to her ears and looked out at our surroundings. Her eyes flitted across windows, as if searching for witnesses.

I gently touched her elbow. "We can leave now. The witch isn't here."

Was she still caught up on my friendship with Bri? Ness had asked me why Bri and I were fighting, which I didn't understand. I didn't think that Bri had any quarrel with me. At least, my friend hadn't mentioned any. Then why did Ness think that the two of us were upset with each other?

Though I wanted to ask about Ness's thought process, I left her alone. She was clearly distraught, and I didn't want to accidentally push her further away. I would not be able to live with myself if Ness walked away from me.

Mate, my dragon growled again.

Was this what the witch in Nevada had meant when she said the Black Hound would help me? Had the witch pointed me in this direction so that I would discover my mate? I didn't know how that would help. If anything, I felt stretched thin.

I couldn't protect Ness and Lakesedge, especially when I knew that my very presence was welcoming disaster at any moment. Bri had warned that my brother was no longer distracted. He'd set his sights on me once again.

Morgan would not rest until he'd gotten revenge for our father's death. Of course, my younger brother also wouldn't listen to reason. He believed that I'd killed our father for fun. I wouldn't have forgiven such an action, either.

If Morgan would listen, then maybe I could keep him from destroying my new home.

I ran a hand through my hair. There was too much on my plate. I didn't know what to focus on first. Of course, Alvin was the obvious answer. He needed to be dealt with, but I wouldn't be able to do that if Morgan arrived in the middle of a fight.

It would be just my luck that everything would go wrong all at once. I watched my mate, her back to me, and realized what was most important. If we couldn't break this hold Alvin had over her, then nothing else mattered. I knew that I shouldn't prioritize one person over an entire pack. That wasn't fair to them, but without Ness, I would be nothing.

Why I didn't tell her, I wasn't sure. I watched her retreat further and further away from me. No time seemed right. If I told her, then I couldn't stay? What then? I wanted to stick around. This pack needed me. My beast had claimed this territory. I would fight tooth and nail for what had become mine, but that didn't mean I would win.

Fury roiled inside me. Wild winds tore at my thoughts, sending them spiraling. I couldn't afford to worry right now, so I shoved them all back. I would tell Ness when there were no dangers looming over our heads. Maybe then, things would seem clearer.

Until then, I would wait for her. I would stay near so that she didn't have to do this alone.

That was probably the best I could offer until I got everything straightened out. Ness deserved better than a man struggling to juggle his new obligations. She deserved the man I could become, in time.

Then, once I'd filled those shoes, then I would tell her.

"I think it's time I called my first pack meeting," I said.

Ness's head lifted, her brows high and hopeful. My heart stuttered happily. I let out a breath that had turned stale in my lungs and sucked in a fresh breath as I took her in.

I SAT BACK, far away from the pack so that I could watch but not be seen. They gathered in my parents' backyard because Ryder didn't have an estate of his own yet. Having a pack meeting in human territory seemed like a stupid move, so my parents had offered their lawn.

Ryder stood by the house, his back to my childhood home. His attention slid past the pack. Our eyes met and an electrical zap raced through me. My heart flipped in my chest. I offered him a small yet genuine smile.

It warmed me to see a good man at the head of this pack, even if he seemed uncertain. My packmates looked up to him with mixed expressions, yet no one spoke. They waited for him to address them. I was proud of my pack for turning to a better leader.

There was always someone who had to speak up, though.

"Why are we letting a *dragon* take charge?"

I scanned the crowd. The voice belonged to Nester Frankland, an older shifter in the pack. His upper lip curled as he looked Ryder up and down. I wanted to leap off my perch and push Nester's face into the ground. My hound snarled within me. Thankfully only I could hear her fury.

Ryder shrugged, nonchalant in the face of unrest. Nester huffed and rolled his eyes at the gesture.

I clenched my hands in my lap. Ryder deserved better. Maybe he wasn't a wolf, but that didn't mean he couldn't lead. If anything, I thought the pack would feel safer with a stronger shifter at the head. Nester was turning his back on a good opportunity, and I didn't understand why.

"Ever since you arrived, Lakesedge has been in chaos," Nester said with venom in his voice. "It's been one thing after another. I can't help but think that maybe you're the culprit behind it all. You got chased out of your own pack and came here to stir trouble. That way, you can usurp the seat of power. I'm not trading one tyrant for another."

My breath hitched.

Ryder seemed unfazed. He stared Nester down with a blank expression carefully pulled over his features. Nester fidgeted, moving from one foot to the other. The air around us grew thick. Every hair on my body stood on end, reaching for the electricity gathering in the air.

My arcana swallowed up the blooming electricity. I felt it crackle under my skin before fading into magic.

That's new, I thought.

Over and over, my arcana found new ways to surprise me. Every new challenge woke another facet of my arcana that had been dormant. I wasn't sure what I would become in the end. I could only hope that I would have the strength to step into my own power.

My friends struggled with their own arcana. Vi had demon blood, and while it gave her power over fire, she struggled with the manic potential for destruction lurking deep within her. I'd watched Addie's arcana act of its own accord before. That had been one of the most frightening experiences of my life, and I'd already witnessed a lot of horrors.

We were all strange and suffering at the hands of our own arcana.

All save for Cerri.

I scanned the pack for my friend's familiar blond curls. It'd been a while since I'd seen her. I was afraid that she still blamed me for what had happened. Alvin had known that he couldn't punish me anymore, not in any way that would make me truly regret what I'd done. Instead, he'd taken my best friend.

Alvin had hurt Cerri. When I'd found her, she'd barely looked at me. Not a word had fallen from her lips. I wanted to apologize again, but that wouldn't erase the hurt she'd endured on my behalf. I wouldn't blame her if she felt betrayed.

Would I be able to fix what Alvin had broken, though? Not just my friendship with Cerri, but the pack? They were still scared. Nester's attitude proved that. I doubted he wanted to step up and lead the pack himself. Nester accused Ryder of causing trouble because we were all tired and hanging on by a thread.

We couldn't endure this much longer.

I found Cerri at the edge of the group. Dad stood beside her. He kept her in his peripheral vision as if she might fall apart at any moment. Cerri wasn't so fragile, though. She had her hair neatly tied back with a scarf. Her shoulders were perfectly squared. Maybe it was all a façade, but she'd still put in the effort to uphold it, nonetheless.

Cerri would survive. In time, her bruises and scrapes would heal. The wounds in her mind would fade, and she would lift her chin in defiance of what had happened.

At least, that was what I hoped. I knew firsthand that it wasn't as easy as it seemed. I could still smell Harvey's charred corpse. The smell of burnt

hair would never leave my nose. Somedays, I could still feel teeth in my calves, wolves trying to pull me away from safety as I tried to climb onto the back of Vi's Jeep.

I ran my hands over my face. The past few weeks had taken a toll on me. Just as Nester had said, there'd been chaos since Ryder arrived.

It wasn't his fault, though.

And it wasn't mine, either.

The only one we could blame was Alvin. Our tyrant of an Alpha had lost his mind. He could barely hold himself together anymore, and he was taking it out on us. It was a bit presumptuous of the pack to blame Ryder for all this.

The pack had been here all along. They'd had a front-row seat to Alvin's atrocities.

Ryder cleared his throat and raised his voice. "Listen, I won't stay if you don't want me."

My heart flipped inside my chest. I tightened my fists as my breath shuddered out of me. I wanted to beg him to stay, but I kept my lips sealed shut. I wouldn't embarrass myself, and I certainly wouldn't let my command arcana accidentally escape.

"But I'm going to stick around long enough to help you break free from Alvin. I didn't come here to cause harm. I never meant to get sucked into any of this, but now that I'm here, I'm going to help you all." Ryder took in the pack.

His eyes met mine and stayed there for several heartbeats. There was a promise in his eyes that I couldn't trust. I wanted to believe that he would stay, but so long as he had a mate, his priorities would always be elsewhere. I would never have the kind of hold over his heart that he had over mine.

Ryder

THIS DAMN PACK wanted to be defiant to the very end. I wished they had this kind of energy when Alvin stood in front of them, but I understood why they didn't speak up to him the way they did to me.

The elder shifter glared at me. He kept his arms over his chest and a scowl permanently fixed on his face. Both Ness and Cerri glared at him, but he didn't notice their ire. Their anger made me laugh. Not because the situation was particularly humorous, but out of relief.

They would be on my side, no matter what. Cerri lifted her gaze to meet mine and gave a curt nod. When she looked to her pack again, I could see the accusation in her eyes. I had a feeling that she blamed the pack for her injuries. There was still a dark circle around her left eye and a thick pink line on her throat from where Alvin had cut her.

Behind her, far away from the pack, Ness watched her friend. Cerri kept looking around, as if in search of Ness, but Ness had hidden herself away so that only I could see her.

This pack was a damn mess. There was too much to fix, too many broken bonds that I couldn't repair on my own. I didn't know if I had it in me to help them. Though I wanted to stay and take claim over this territory, doubt crept in and told me that I wasn't enough for this broken pack.

They needed someone stronger with gentler hands. I was a killer, someone with strength and a sense of practicality that helped me do what was needed. I didn't have the emotional touch that would help pull them back together.

I had the idea to bring in others, shifters that I could trust. I'd wanted to ask Bri to stay and become one of those shifters, but she'd become the leader of my old clan. Who else could I ask?

Connor stepped up beside me and gave the pack a challenging look. I sighed. He wasn't enough. I could never trust him after what he'd done to Ness. Connor had believed Alvin's lies. Anyone who could trust Alvin like that would never hold a position of power. I would protect Connor, as was my duty as their Alpha, but I couldn't trust him to have my back.

I wasn't going to ask Ness to protect me, either. Though I needed a strong group to keep the pack safe, I wasn't going to ask her to fight. She'd already endured enough. Besides, I did not want to see my mate in danger's way.

Once again, I found myself looking to her. She wouldn't meet my gaze, though.

Alone, I cleared my throat again. "Does anyone have any objections?"

The pack members glanced at one another, sharing unconvinced winces. My heart fell. I dragged it back up and did my best to place barriers around

it so that I wouldn't break when they denied me. I couldn't lead a pack that didn't trust me.

It hit me, just how badly I wanted their approval. I'd lost all respect back home, all for doing what needed to be done. It'd broken my heart to be turned away. The sense of family and home that I'd taken for granted had been ripped out from under me.

I wanted to feel at home again. I wanted to gather people around me and hear their bright laughter as they savored the sense of safety that I brought to them. It was a silly desire, but one that I couldn't deny either.

"We can't trust you," the elder shifter said.

Catriona, the pack historian, held up her hand to silence her packmate. Then her gaze slid to me, and I could see the hesitation on her face. "We can't trust you yet. Excuse us for being hesitant, but we want to make sure we're taking on the right person for the job. You haven't...you haven't proven yourself to us yet."

My dragon writhed. It gnashed its teeth. What did I have to do to show them that I could be what they needed? My beast was far more powerful than any of them on their own. Over and over, I'd shown that I could survive anything that Alvin could throw at me. I'd kept Ness alive on my own, without any of their help.

My fingers curled into fists. My entire body trembled as rage rolled through me. I sucked in a breath and yanked it back, but my mind would not stop reeling. My thoughts tumbled too fast, one over another.

The dragon wanted them. It owned them.

No.

My chest heaved, my breath coming too fast. The Treasure Sickness was trying to take hold of me again. I fought back the intrusive thoughts and the overwhelming paranoia trying to drown me. I would not become my father. This sickness wouldn't have me.

The pack needed me. They couldn't survive without my strength. If they could be a little more grateful, then they would know what kind of gift they'd been given. Did they even deserve me if they couldn't accept me as their Alpha?

I groaned and shoved the thoughts aside. They weren't me. Those thoughts belonged to a sickness of the mind. I would never say such things. I hated that those words filled the inside of my skull and squeezed my

lungs. They felt more like me than I wanted to admit. The way they filled me left little room for anything else.

It wasn't until a hand clasped around mine, and I heard Ness clear her throat, that my mind emptied.

"You all need to shut up and accept the fact that we need help right now. You've been putting your faith in a tyrannical serial killer. What kind of leap is it to trust Ryder?"

Her dark eyes flickered with lightning as she glared at her pack mates. I wanted to tug on her hand and tell her that she was being too harsh on them, but she knew better than me. Though I could have pointed out all the ways her pack had suffered, she'd been through worse. I couldn't quench the fire burning inside her when she addressed her pack.

"Is Ryder trying to subjugate you? Is he trying to frighten you so that you'll do as he says? No, he's giving you a choice. I don't understand why you choose to spit in his face."

Catriona scowled. "It's not that easy, Vanessa."

Ness said nothing. She released my hand and slowly lifted two middle fingers to the pack elder. Catriona's scowl twitched with what I thought might have been a cheeky smile that she quickly hid.

"I'm tired," Ness said. "I'm tired of having to watch my back all the time. If I can trust Ryder after all of this, when I should be afraid of absolutely everyone, then maybe you should take that into consideration."

I expected Nester to scoff, but his eyes seemed to go distant. I wondered if he was reliving the times when he had to stand by and watch a younger shifter suffer at Alvin's hand. As pack elders, both Nester and Catriona should have protected Ness.

They'd failed her, and she had the scars to prove it. My thoughts slid to Cerri, who stood at the edge of the pack. She wasn't a shifter, like her brethren. Cerri had no animal waiting inside her, but she'd found power in potion making. I had no doubt that she could easily brew a healing potion to speed up her recovery.

Yet, Cerri stood beside her pack with all her bruises out for everyone to see. Cerri chose to make a statement. She acted as a reminder of what the pack was trying to escape.

"I trust him," a female shifter said.

"Same here!" another female voice called.

Two young shifters stepped to the front of the pack. Haylee and Kelsey held each other's hands, their chins lifted as they locked eyes with me. I gave them a nod to show my thanks. Ness let out a sigh of relief beside me.

I reached for her hand again and gave it a squeeze. The sound she made in the back of her throat, so low that only I could hear, confused me. She shut her eyes, her chest lifting as she breathed deep.

This meeting had to come to an end. We weren't going to come to any decisions today, and I wanted to ask Ness what was wrong.

"Take your time to think this over," I said, even though my dragon growled in warning. "You don't have to decide tod—"

A scream split the air. A brown and gray blur tackled Haylee to the ground. Kelsey shouted and reached for the wolf on top of her friend. Before she could get ahold of the wolf, another slammed into her.

Chaos sent everyone in different directions. Janessa shrieked and buried her face in Catriona's shirt. Nester quickly put himself in front of them while others ran. Ness and I didn't wait to see if anyone would help the young shifters struggling against the wolves.

Ness didn't shift. Her hand curled, as if making a fist. I saw the flash of electricity crackling between her crooked fingers. Hesitation crossed her face an instant before she reached for the wolf atop Haylee.

I couldn't stop to help my mate. Kelsey howled in pain. I grabbed the wolf atop her by the scruff of his neck and pulled. The sound of flesh tearing made me pause. The wolf, Jackson, tightened his jaw as he stared me down mockingly. He dared me to pull again. Blood already dripped down Kelsey's skin.

Distantly, I heard Marcus's yelp of pain. These two worked for Alvin. While they were in this form, there was no way to tell if they'd come on Alvin's orders or if they'd attacked on their own. If they knew where Alvin was hiding or how to reach him, then I needed to know.

The sooner we could find him, the better. If I could dispose of Alvin now, then I could focus on other problems.

Bending, I jammed my fingers between Jackson's jaws and pried his muzzle open. He whimpered, then tried to hide the sound behind a growl. No wolf was a match for a dragon. Not unless they used underhanded tactics. I couldn't smell the reek of poison in Jackson's mouth, which told me that he hadn't thought that far ahead.

Perhaps they had come here of their own accord, then. Disappointed that these fools might not lead me to Alvin, I held Jackson's mouth open so Kelsey could wriggle out from under him. I hefted the wolf into the air by the scruff of his neck. He kicked and snarled but couldn't find purchase.

Behind me, Ness hissed in pain. I spun just in time to watch Marcus bite onto her arm. He jerked his head and dragged her onto her knees. Her eyes flashed angrily. I moved to help her, but she spoke faster than I could run.

"Lie down," she growled with the hum of her arcana threaded through her voice.

I shuddered, remembering how her arcana felt as it forced me to do her bidding. Marcus struggled against it, the same way I had. However, he was not half the shifter I was. His knees buckled and dropped his body to the ground.

"Let go." Ness's voice wavered, as if it might fall apart under the power of her arcana.

She could be terrifying someday. Her arcana transcended pack. It was more than an Alpha's power. Ness's voice allowed her to compel just about anyone, and the command stuck fast.

Marcus released her and dropped his head, proving that both commands still had ahold of him. Just as Ness breathed a sigh of relief, I noticed the flicker of discovery flash across Marcus's face. He leapt to his feet and darted past her. Ness reached out to grab ahold of him, but she was too slow.

What gave him the power to withstand her command so quickly? I'd fought off Ness's commands in the past, but I hadn't succeeded. Even when she'd asked me how I felt about her, I'd simply found another way to show it. Marcus seemed to shrug off Ness's words like they were nothing.

Something was wrong.

I rushed forward to grab Marcus, too. His teeth found purchase in Haylee's forearm. He yanked her between himself and me before I could reach him. Growling, he slowly backed away, dragging Haylee along like a shield. He looked between Ness and me warily.

"You slimy son of a bitch," Ness growled.

Blood dripped down her arm as she stood. When she wobbled on her feet, I put out a hand to steady her. Jackson snarled in my other hand. I gave him a shake to silence him. Marcus's attention snapped to his brother.

I watched Marcus make a decision. Jackson yelped, a call for help. Marcus ignored his brother. The ominous growl emanating from Marcus grew louder. He released Haylee. I thought he would run, but then he tensed. My heart flipped in my chest.

Without thinking, I dropped Jackson and lurched forward. Haylee whimpered and cradled her arm against her chest. He should have run. Marcus lunged for her throat.

Behind me, Ness shouted a command at Jackson. "Stay right there."

I dropped to my knees between Haylee and Marcus. I managed to throw up my arm at the last second. Marcus's teeth sank into my flesh and not Haylee's. Though pain seared my arm, I let out a breath.

Marcus, seeing his mistake, quickly released me. He spun and darted between the nearby houses. I got to my feet so I could give chase, but the cries and whimpers behind me drew me to a halt. The pack needed a leader.

What kind of leader would I be if I abandoned them for the thrill of the chase? They needed someone to tend to their wounds and make them feel safe. Ness and I had prevented most of the damage.

When I turned back to them, I wasn't expecting their gratitude. The way they looked at me had changed. I thought they would blame me for the attack, but hope seemed to fill the air now. Catriona gave me a gentle smile before kneeling to tend to Kelsey.

My own arm burned, but it was nothing compared to the poison those two wolves had used on me before. I ignored my own pain and went to help Ness off her knees. She'd fallen at some point. I wondered how much energy her arcana had used. Worried, I gently lifted her arm so I could inspect her bite wound.

"Don't worry about it," she whispered.

There was a tremor in her voice that made my dragon snarl with fury. I sucked in a ragged breath while trying to hold the beast back from hunting Marcus down. This had taken a lot out of her.

What made this any different than before? I'd watched Ness spend entire mornings practicing with her arcana. She'd used it a handful of times here, and it seemed to drain her. I cupped her cheek, and she gave me a wan smile that made my heart ache.

Tell her, I thought. Tell her how you feel so that she knows. That way, should anything happen, neither of us would die without knowing.

I wasn't going to allow anyone to die. That wasn't an option on the table right now. This would end with everyone alive and safe.

There was time still.

"All right, everyone," Ness's father called out. "Those who are uninjured, you should go home. Those who need first aid, come inside, so we can sort that out and get you something to eat."

Ness smiled at her father. She seemed to grow small as she leaned into my hand. With her voice barely a whisper between us, she said:

"I thought he died the other day. I'm..." She choked up. Wiping tears away, she said, "I'm so grateful he's still alive."

I knew she and her father had a tense relationship. A lot had happened since they'd discovered what she was. A witch had visited her pack years before her birth and left behind a prophecy that a Black Hound would be Alvin's downfall. When Ness learned that she was, in fact, a Black Hound, then her life took a turn for the worse.

Her father had tried to protect her, but his failure had turned him bitter. Only recently had he cast off that bitterness to give his daughter the support she deserved. I hoped that I could give them a sense of safety again, so they could repair their broken relationship.

Ness should have the opportunity that I couldn't have. My father would never forgive me. He would never lift a hand to protect me ever again. I'd made sure of that. I didn't want Ness to suffer the same future.

Behind us, Jackson whimpered. Ness's lips curled into a satisfied smile.

"What are we going to do with him?" she asked.

I bent and lifted the wolf by the scruff of his neck again. He struggled against my hold only to fall to the ground and immediately lay down again. Ness's command made him want to stay, even if I could see the glare of hatred that he cast in her direction.

"How much more can you take?" I asked Ness under my breath.

She sucked in a breath, as if considering her limits, while staring Jackson down. I opened my mouth, ready to tell her that she didn't have to do anything if she thought it might be too much.

"I think I have a few more commands in me," she said, finally.

I nodded, uncertain. We shouldn't do this, but Alvin left us few options. We needed to figure out where he was so that we could put a stop to this once and for all. If we stopped him, then whatever gave him power over her would come to an end, too.

At least, that was what I hoped.

N_{ess}

WE BROUGHT Jackson down into my parents' basement. It seemed an odd place to bring a prisoner. I'd been down here so many times as a kid. There were memories in every corner, battling with the image before me.

Ryder gave me a nod. I turned my attention to the wolf in front of us. Jackson kept trying to make a break for the door, but I didn't think he wanted to escape. My command still hummed inside his skull, telling him to go back to the spot on the lawn. If he got out of Ryder's grasp, we would find Jackson sulking outside.

We couldn't talk to him in this form, though. Jackson didn't acknowledge Ryder as an Alpha, which meant that I had to use my arcana again.

Just the thought of reaching for it filled me with dread. Though I'd grabbed ahold of it with ease earlier, using my arcana had taken more out of me than I'd expected. It shouldn't leave me this tired. I'd been through a lot in the past few days, but enough time had passed that I should be fine.

Why did this take so much effort? I tugged on my arcana and felt it unfurl. The ice in my chest, turning my blood cold like a winter wind, thickened. I had to tug and tug at my own arcana to get it through the layer of ice.

Beneath my skin, the ritual's arcana stirred. It seemed to lift its head like a curious cat on the hunt for prey. I hesitated. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. My own arcana slipped through my fingers and sank back beneath the ice.

"We need him to talk," Ryder reminded me.

Of course, I knew that. I knew the stakes more intimately than anyone else here. I couldn't explain what was happening, though. How did I describe this cold brush of death lurking inside my chest? Or how it protected me from all that I had to deal with?

This had to be done, my own safety be damned. I'd risked everything for this pack. If Ryder was to become the Alpha of my pack, then I had even more to protect. I didn't mind risking using my arcana a few more times today if it meant helping others.

"Shift back to your human form," I said with my arcana on the tip of my tongue.

Jackson's shift looked painful. He growled and whined as his body contorted against his will. By the end, he was left panting on the floor. He stared down at the concrete beneath him before lifting a glare in my direction.

I flinched. Swallowing, I rolled my shoulders back and tried to look like I had everything under control, even if I didn't. I couldn't tell if my act was convincing because it didn't seem like anyone was paying attention.

The moment Jackson caught his breath, he leapt to his feet. Without fur to hold, Ryder's fist closed around empty air. Jackson climbed the stairs two at a time before shouldering his way through the door.

I sighed. Ryder gave me a look like I'd lost my mind. I took him by the wrist and led him upstairs. We wound our way through the house, ignoring surprised expressions from packmates. Mom had Haylee and Kelsey at the kitchen table, a first aid kit and a stack of sandwiches between them.

Giving a quick wave to assure them that everything was okay, I then ducked out the back door. Ryder grumbled something, but his mumblings came to a halt when we saw Jackson face first on the ground outside.

Jackson looked as though he'd dropped to his knees then planted his face in the earth. His bare ass was up in the air for all to see. When we stepped closer, I could hear his frustrated string of curses.

"I'm sorry," I said. And I meant it.

I didn't like having to control people. These powers, given to me by my arcana, weren't meant to be used lightly. My voice could overpower anyone's free will. It was a gift that I hated using after Alvin had done his best to destroy my own free will.

Every time I had to use it, I worried that I would become like him. Maybe that wasn't as plausible as I thought, but the fear still lingered inside me. How could I tell someone what to do when I knew what it felt like to be helpless?

Jackson looked me in the eye. "I hope you choke on my dick, bitch."

"You don't have to make me feel better about doing this to you," I said grumpily. "You're the one in the position to be taking dick right now."

Jackson tried to lift himself, both of his palms planted firmly against the ground. Yet, no matter how he pushed, he couldn't lift his head. His shoulders fought him. His entire body trembled as it waged war with itself.

"I'm going to break your fucking jaw when I face fuck you." Jackson screamed this for all to hear.

My face warmed when I thought of my father inside. The air around us crackled with electricity, making the hair on my body stand on end. My curls lifted, nearly hiding my embarrassed flush. Before I could tell Jackson to be quiet, Ryder's boot connected with Jackson's jaw.

I reached out and put a hand on Ryder's arm to keep him from doing it again. The electricity bounding across his skin ran down my arm and settled inside me like a cat being welcomed home. I sucked in a breath and waited for my body to adjust to the energy.

"Just pick him up and take him back inside," I said to Ryder.

I didn't want to tie Jackson up, but he also couldn't live on the front lawn with his asshole on display for everyone. My mother would lose her mind if I left him out here. He made an awful garden gnome.

Ryder bent to grab Jackson by his arm. Jackson slumped suddenly. At first, I thought he'd passed out. Then I realized that Jackson was laughing. Perplexed, I stared down at him. I could barely shout out when Jackson got to his feet and started running.

Shock left me cold. I stared, mouth agape, at Jackson's backside as he ran away.

Wings burst from Ryder's back. They snapped open right before he threw himself forward. My hair shuddered in his wake. I had to pull ringlets

from my open mouth. That ought to teach me to leave my lips parted like that.

Ryder slammed into Jackson's back and sent the wolf shifter stumbling forward. Before Jackson could even hit the ground, Ryder scooped him up and tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of rice.

I swallowed hard. Once again, it seemed like my command broke almost immediately. Usually, my command stuck fast. When I'd used it on Ryder to stop him from hurting Harvey one time, he'd been unable to touch Harvey for days. How could Jackson, of all people, break through my command in a matter of minutes?

Ryder's jaw was tight when he passed me. It loosened only when he cast a weary glance in my direction. I started to apologize, but caught myself.

Instead of saying anything, I followed in Ryder's footsteps. I wish I could find the defiant confidence I'd felt earlier when I stepped up to stand beside Ryder. The moment my friends had cried out in pain, I'd lost it all. My confidence had wavered.

I blamed myself all over again.

I knew that Alvin was to blame for all this. He'd been the one to turn against his pack. He'd killed human women and taught others that the strong deserved to hurt the weak.

But I'd been at the heart of this for so long. My actions had been the cause of so many events that I couldn't always separate myself from Alvin. Would he haunt me for the rest of my life? Would I compare myself to him at every turn?

I didn't think that I deserved to treat myself that way, but that did little to stop the thoughts. Instead of dwelling on it, I rolled my shoulders back and went inside. In the kitchen, I swiped a sandwich from the counter and nibbled on it on my way down to the basement.

I had to be strong for my pack. They needed that. For now, I would keep my eyes on the goal. My doubts could be saved for later, after we'd won.

Ryder had Jackson hog-tied. It would have been a funny sight were the situation any different. The fact that Jackson was our prisoner because he'd attacked my packmates kind of ruined it.

Leaning away from him, I crossed my arms over my chest. Ryder moved to place himself between Jackson and me. I watched the dragon

shifter and wondered why he felt the need to protect me. Did he care about me the way I cared about him?

That was impossible. My hound had claimed him like a mate, but I knew Ryder had already found his mate. Even if he and Bri were upset with each other, that would never break their mate bond.

Ryder would never love me the way I'd grown to love him.

The thought gutted me. My breath rushed out of me. When Ryder glanced back at me, I gave him a tight, reassuring smile. I could hide my reaction behind stress right now. Considering the position we were in, it wasn't that difficult.

"Did Alvin order you to attack?" Ryder asked Jackson.

Jackson's answer was to spit on the floor at Ryder's feet. I gave an appreciative nod because Jackson could have easily spit *on* Ryder, but he chose not to. Maybe Jackson was saving that for the future. He would work up to it, because that was all he could do right now.

Ryder knelt and grabbed Jackson by the hair so he could jerk the wolf shifter's head back. "I asked you a question. You should answer it."

I held out a hand. "Calm down. You're in spitting range now."

Before I could even finish the sentence, Jackson spat in Ryder's face. Ryder blinked, a look of long suffering suddenly weighing down his features. I sighed, hating the fact that Jackson had proved me right.

Ryder wiped the spittle off his face and snarled at Jackson. I noticed the tremble in Ryder's arm, like he was fighting the urge to slam Jackson's face into the concrete below. I needed to step in before this got bloody.

Did I really want to, though? The image of my father's blood spraying through the air had been seared into my mind. Every time I looked at Jackson, I remembered that scene and how the life had drained out of me. Death had been close by, and I'd thought for sure that it would take my father before I had a chance to fix my relationship with him.

Jackson came close to taking my father from me. What did it matter if I let Ryder rough him up a bit?

If I let my taste for revenge overtake me, then I wouldn't be any better than Marcus and Jackson. I had to be better, if not for myself, then for my pack. We all deserved better. There was a moral high ground here, and I needed to stay on it.

Once again, I reached for my arcana and dragged it through the wall of ice inside me. My breath shuddered as I struggled. It seemed to take

forever. What might have been seconds felt more like hours while I pulled and pulled. Finally, my arcana reached my tongue. It felt feeble, like I'd lost much of it in the process.

"Answer Ryder's questions," I commanded.

Jackson visibly flinched, cringing away from me.

With the command given, I let go of my arcana and recoiled when it sling-shotted back into the pit of my gut. I didn't need to rely on anger or righteousness to pull on it anymore, but it seemed just as difficult to manage lately.

Was that how Jackson had been able to defy my command earlier? He should have stayed on the lawn. Instead, I'd watched him get to his feet and run away. How long did we have before this command wore off? I hoped we could get at least a few answers out of him.

Ryder asked his question again. Jackson growled, a low rumbling sound that permeated his voice when he answered. Alvin hadn't given them any orders. Instead, Jackson and Marcus had been acting on their own. They'd attacked with the hopes that they could make Alvin proud.

My stomach turned. I caught myself, mid-step, ready to run for the door. I couldn't let Ryder do this alone. I had to stay, even if it was only to show solidarity. Ryder could handle himself in combat. He didn't need my arcana to help him control Jackson. We'd already witnessed that.

I had to stay, if only to prove that I could take responsibility for my pack.

Ryder cast a look in my direction, though, as if he could tell that I was having second thoughts. He gave a curt nod. I knew what he was trying to say. It was okay if I wanted to leave.

But it wasn't okay. I couldn't leave him alone down here. Jackson and Marcus had nearly taken Ryder from me once. I'd sat in Ryder's lap and listened to his flagging heartbeat, failing as a poison attacked his body. If I left him down here with Jackson and something happened, I would never forgive myself.

It occurred to me that the real reason for my determination had surfaced rather quickly. Though I'd told myself that I was doing this for my pack, I knew that it was Ryder that compelled me to stay. I needed him in my life.

Without him...Oh, but there would come a day when he wasn't here. I wasn't even sure that he wanted to stay and become our new Alpha. Though

he'd addressed the pack as the next Alpha, I didn't know how much longer he would fill that role. At some point, he would want to run again.

I couldn't make him stay. The only person who could ask anything of Ryder was Bri, his mate.

The ever-churning thoughts filling my head seemed to spill out in every direction. I could barely contain myself as my fears and worries tumbled out of control. My hands shook, so I made sure to hide them when I crossed my arms once again. I couldn't hide the way my chest heaved, my lung too shallow to pull in a proper breath.

What was happening to me? It seemed as though someone had drained all the confidence from me and left me a hollow husk. Only when Ryder reached back and touched my elbow did the world stop spinning violently.

I sucked in a breath, forcing my chest to expand, and steadied myself. The spiral stopped, if only for a moment. I desperately wanted to retreat upstairs and hide in my old bedroom, where I didn't have to think about the world outside for a while.

Ryder didn't pause the interrogation, though. He understood that our time was limited. He pushed Jackson, who spat out reluctant answers. Jackson and Marcus hadn't heard from Alvin since the night Alvin took me. They had no idea where he was or what he was up to.

When Ryder asked about the witch, Jackson laughed. They had no interaction with the witch. That had been all Alvin's doing.

"Are you done with me now?" Jackson asked with venom in his voice.

"Are you done attacking your own packmates?" Ryder countered.

Jackson laughed. The keening manic sound chilled me to my bones. I clenched my jaw, my arcana suddenly filling my mouth. Where it had been hard to grasp earlier, it now flowed through me as it fed on my disgust.

"Let me go. I promise I'll be a good little mutt like your breeding bitch back there."

Ryder's fist connected with Jackson's face before I could even speak. Mouth open, I could only make an incomprehensible noise as Jackson's head snapped to the side. He laughed again and spit blood onto the concrete floor.

"Don't tell me you haven't tried to put a little dragon inside her yet. I see the way you're always up her ass. I assumed you were protecting your incubator." Jackson turned a bloody grin upon Ryder.

The growl filling the room warmed me. I realized that the basement was filling with electricity. Moisture beaded in the air. Could he summon a storm inside? I wasn't about to find out. I leapt forward and put a hand on Ryder's arm.

He barely acknowledged me. The corners of his eyes creased ever so slightly when I touched him, but that was about it.

"Don't listen to him," I said to Ryder.

His jaw loosened, but only barely. Ryder still had his glare trained on Jackson. Fists trembling at his sides, Ryder hovered over the bound man. This could end poorly if Jackson kept pushing Ryder.

I wondered why Jackson would test Ryder's limits. It was clearly a bad idea since Jackson was in a pretty vulnerable position. Then I realized that Jackson was waiting for Ryder to slip up. If Jackson could catch Ryder in the midst of a mistake and take advantage of it, then maybe he could escape.

Understanding what was happening, I put myself between the two men. Ryder and I had to work together. If he got upset with me for intervening, then we would never be able to lead this pack.

Wait, we?

Since when did I want to lead this pack? I'd never wanted that kind of responsibility until now. Why did I want to share it with Ryder all of a sudden?

I had too many questions and no way to answer them just yet. I needed to sleep so that I had the energy to straighten out my own thoughts. Everything was a twisted jumble like headphone cords in my pocket. I didn't have what it took to untangle them right this instant.

"I think we're done here," I said.

"Oh, did I remind you that you're late for your breeding session? Of course, you would want to get that done as soon as possible. I don't blame you for trying to bind the dragon to you by bearing his child. What else do you have to offer him?"

Before I could stop him, Ryder stepped around me. The sound of knuckles cracking through skull would forever haunt me. I cringed, but that couldn't erase the way it echoed in my ears.

I wanted the violence to stop. That cool acceptance of death that made ice in my chest didn't mean that I wanted to see more blood. I was fine with

ending the lives of those who were causing pain for others, but I didn't want to watch this happen anymore.

"Jackson," I said as I knelt beside him.

Behind me, Ryder's shoulders heaved like he was struggling to catch his breath. I ignored him so that he could quell his rage on his own.

I reached for the ties binding Jackson. My arcana didn't have the power that it'd packed a moment ago. Once again, it seemed feeble. Though I wanted to sigh in frustration, I swallowed the urge so that Jackson wouldn't be able to see my weakness right now.

Pushing the arcana into my voice, I said, "Leave this city."

He stiffened. He narrowed his eyes at me as his body fought against the bindings still holding him so that he could obey my command. I fumbled with the ties until they came free. Jackson immediately scrambled to his feet. He ran for the door and bolted upstairs once again.

A series of shouts came from above. I stayed where I was, on my knees in the blood that Ryder had spilled, while I listened for the sound of the door upstairs closing behind Jackson. Once I heard the distant slam, I finally let out the breath I'd been holding.

"I don't care what they call me," I said without looking at Ryder.

"Well, I *do*," he growled.

A soft smile found my lips. It warmed me that he cared so much, but he couldn't react like this every time someone mocked me. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was behaving like a mate.

The bonds between mates ran deep. They were unbreakable tethers made out of love. I'd always hoped to find my mate someday so I could bask in the unconditional love that I'd never known before. Instead, my hound had chosen to love someone who would never love me back.

That had been a kick in the guts, but I would learn to deal with it. My life had been a series of knockbacks. This wasn't unfamiliar to me, even if it hurt more than anything else I'd experienced.

More than the time Alvin had killed me.

Ryder helped me up off the floor. He spun me and tucked a bent knuckle under my chin so that I had to look up at him.

"Ness," he said softly.

He leaned in, his lips parting. A desperate, hungry growl slipped out of him as he towered over me. My own body reacted to the sound, clenching tight with need.

“You’re not a broodmare. No one should say things like that to someone. Reducing you to nothing but a receptacle...it infuriated me. You’re so much more than anyone here gives you credit for. I don’t want to hear anyone talk down to you like that.”

I closed my hand around his wrist with the intention of pulling his hand away, but I hesitated. His skin warmed me. I could feel his breath, so hot, on my skin.

Then stairs creaked. Dad cleared his throat.

My head snapped up. Dad wore a knowing smirk as he stood on the third step.

“I take it you let Jackson go since you’re not chasing him down.” Dad looked between the two of us, his smirk still growing. “I will say, it was pretty funny watching him run down the street with his ass hanging out for all to see.”

I snorted. “That’s what he deserves.”

A bit of embarrassment was better than the kind of punishment that Ryder had planned for Jackson. I snuck a peek at Ryder. He hadn’t yet taken his eyes off me. My cheeks warmed. The heat climbing my skin nearly melted the ice inside me.

I had to hold onto the ice, though. If it melted, then the ritual’s arcana would be able to reach deeper. Then it might take hold of my command arcana. I couldn’t risk letting that happen, which meant that I had to put distance between Ryder and myself.

If I got too close, and that ice melted...then we would all be in danger.

N_{ess}

“THE TWO OF you look worse for wear,” Dad said as he led us upstairs.

The others had left. Bloody bandages and half-eaten sandwiches were the only evidence that people had been here. I stared at the first-aid kit and realized that I hadn’t taken care of my own wounds. Blood had dried on my arm. The tacky mess cracked when I flexed my wrist.

“Are you eating properly?” Dad asked.

When I looked up, I found him addressing both Ryder and me. I swallowed, because I knew Dad wouldn’t like the answer. When did I have time to eat anything more than a quick meal purchased at a drive thru?

Dad narrowed his eyes at us and nodded. I expected him to chastise me for being lazy, but he turned and opened the fridge door.

“I used all the lunch meat making sandwiches for Haylee and Kelsey,” Mom said as she entered the room.

Mom lifted the trash bin and wiped her hand across the table to get rid of the waste left behind. She bent to get a spray bottle of bleach out from under the kitchen sink. When I moved to take it from her, she grabbed my wrist and stopped me.

“Sit down,” Dad ordered.

“We don’t have time,” I said.

“Ness is right. We should get back to work.” Ryder stepped up beside me, his shoulder against mine.

“I. Said. Sit.”

Dad didn’t have the power of command or even an Alpha’s voice, but I had no other choice than to listen when he spoke. I quickly dropped into a seat while Mom wiped down the table with bleach.

The chemical burned my nose until she opened the windows. A sense of nostalgia flooded me. I was a teenager all over again, and I didn’t know how to feel about that. Especially when Ryder sat across from me, and his toe nudged mine under the table.

Teenage Ness hadn’t been able to bring boys home. She’d never gotten the chance to get close to anyone. I’d thought, when I was younger, that Connor and I would get closer. I’d thought he would become my mate and that we would live happily ever after. Then Alvin had turned his sights on me, and everyone had pulled away.

Alvin’s hatred had made me feel alone among my own pack. His reach had stretched further into my life. Not only did I have to hide the fact that I was a shifter from my human friends, but I’d had to hide the bruises that healed too quickly. Everything Alvin had inflicted on me had made me retreat from the people I needed.

Now, here I was, in my parent’s kitchen with a man who’d nearly kissed me in the basement. It shouldn’t have brought a smile to my lips, but it did, nonetheless.

“Dad,” I said. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

He paused what he was doing to look back with eyes wide. Confusion flattened his brows before they lifted in realization.

“Ah, you’re talking about the wound. Of course, I’m okay. That isn’t going to kill an old dog like myself.” Dad turned with the frying pan in his hand.

Mom set four plates on the table, so Dad could stack pancakes on them. When he went back to pour the next batch into the pan, Mom returned with a bottle of local maple syrup. Ryder cracked the bottle open and sniffed it.

“That tastes nothing like the fake stuff they sell at most stores,” I told him, a bubble of excitement rising through me. “It’s so much better.”

He slathered his pancakes with the sticky syrup before shoving a hearty bite into his mouth. My heart did backflips as I watched his eyes roll back in his head. I suddenly wanted to see if I could make him do that for me.

I swallowed hard, shoving those thoughts back. Was this what it was like to be a horny teenager? I had no idea. Maybe it was the idea that I'd brought home a boyfriend to meet my parents. Maybe it was the moment we'd shared in the basement.

All I knew was that my heart couldn't handle this.

I poured syrup over my own pancakes and cut into them. Dad came back and dumped a pile of breakfast sausages onto my plate. It wasn't breakfast time, but this was Dad's specialty. I could tell that he was doing his best to take care of us.

Once again, the ice in my chest threatened to melt. I clenched my fist around the fork in my hand as I stared down at my plate. Ryder nudged my foot with the toe of his boot, but I didn't look up at him.

I needed to stay distant and detached, but those around me were showing the kindness that I'd always craved. My fork clattered onto the plate. I shoved my chair back and stood, abruptly. The room wavered. My stomach begged me to eat more, but I couldn't stay.

I gave Dad a tight-lipped apologetic smile before lurching out of the room. Pressing my hand to my chest, I tried to chill the ice inside me once more. The ritual arcana slithered under my skin. I hissed, alarmed. The ice stiffened, but I wasn't sure it was fast enough.

The ritual arcana darted toward my core. I tensed. Fear chilled my veins. Even my breath seemed to fog in the air.

That was when I felt it, the brush of death's fingers across my shoulders. Had death come to take me? Or was this a show of solidarity that I didn't quite understand? My connection to death was still so new and frightening. I did not have control over it the way that Addie did. Instead, I felt more like a herald.

Or a judge.

I'd sentenced a man to death. I'd delivered the verdict and acted as executioner that day. Harvey, Alvin's god-awful son, had been tormenting my pack for far too long. When he'd set his sights on me, I'd made the decision to remove him from this world.

Death wrapped around me, a cool wind that enveloped my entire body. The presence coddled me in a way that I did not like. It seemed to cradle my head, as if to reassure me. I wished I could push it away, but I was stuck with this invisible entity.

"Ness?" Ryder asked behind me.

He stepped around me. There was a plastic container in his hand and a jug of maple syrup hanging from his pinky. He looked down at me with open worry.

I tried to force a smile to my lips, but I spoke, instead. "I'm afraid."

His worry took on a grim cast as he sighed. He lifted his empty hand before letting it fall back down to his side. He didn't know what to do, either.

Ryder

NESS SLEPT on the edge of the bed. She'd curled in on herself, becoming as small as possible. Every so often, she would shudder like a cold chill had rippled over her.

I wanted to reach out and pull her into my chest, but she'd shied away from every attempt I made. Though Ness had endured a lot before I'd arrived, something had happened recently that'd shaken her to the core.

And I couldn't figure out how to comfort her. My useless hands could do nothing for my mate. I opened them and flexed my fingers, but that did nothing to release this nervous energy suffusing me. I could have gone to Lakesedge to shift so that my beast could use up some of this energy, but I didn't want to leave Ness's side.

So, I was stuck. Restless and churning with a desire to do *something*, I sat on the edge of the bed and buried my face in my hands.

I wondered where my brother was. Had Morgan begun his trek across the country to find me? Colorado was on the other side of the country, but that distance could be closed overnight if he chose to fly. What was he doing? Was he concocting plans? Rehearsing his monologue?

The longer my brother took to come find me, the more anxious I became. He was probably doing it on purpose. War tactics, he would call it.

He'd always been a cocky prick like that. When we played football, he enjoyed coming up with the game plans while I enjoyed the exhilaration of tackling someone. Stuck in his head, Morgan had always needed me to be the one to initiate. He needed my brute force and willpower to make his brainy plans come to fruition.

Was he still like that? I had no idea. I hadn't been gone long, a little under a year. That didn't seem like much, but a lot had happened. Morgan had been living with Dad's death that whole time, and without closure, I doubted Morgan had processed it yet.

Behind me, Ness mumbled something in her sleep. I half-twisted to peer back at her. She snuggled deeper into the blankets while clutching a pillow to her chest. Tense, I waited for disaster to strike. When she didn't get up or attack me, I let out a sigh.

Ness had been through enough. She didn't need my brother causing trouble on top of it.

Once again, I pulled out my phone and turned it on. I stared at the bright glow of my phone screen for several heartbeats before opening the phone app. My thumb hovered over Morgan's phone number. Did it still belong to him? Or would I find a stranger on the other end?

Before I could get lost in my indecision, I tapped the phone icon. The soft ring made the phone hum in my hand. I could barely feel it with my heart hammering inside my chest.

N_{ess}

GET UP, the voice commanded.

Knowing that I was still asleep, I burrowed deeper into my dream. The sun shone overhead, warming my skin with its brutal rays. An ice-cream cone melted in my hand. I brought it to my lips in a feeble attempt to salvage it before it became a puddle at my feet.

You are mine. Do my bidding and get up.

I shuddered, suddenly frigid. My breath fogged in the air before me. As I watched the small cloud evaporate, the world before me fell away. It shrank, as if I were falling backwards. I reached out, trying to grasp for something to hold onto. My hands were empty, even the ice-cream had disappeared.

Kill him, the voice said again.

My backside hit the ground. Pain reverberated up my spine, making me wince.

Upon opening my eyes, I saw red. Panic made my heart race until I realized I was in a red room. Processing where I was didn't really help me calm down any. I got to my feet and started toward a wall when the voice returned, so loud that it shook me down to my bones.

KILL RYDER.

My stomach hit the floor. I rocked on my feet before throwing myself forward in a run. There was nowhere to go, though. The red room didn't have any doors or windows. I slapped my hands against the walls, searching for a weak spot.

This wasn't real, though. There was no drywall that I could break through. This was a dream.

If that was the case, then I could wake up. I pinched my arm so hard that I cringed. Still, nothing happened. Pain stung my skin, and that was all. I opened my eyes and looked around. Sometimes, I would wake if I was about to die in a dream.

The ritual arcana swirled around my feet. I could feel it licking at my ankles and climbing my calves. I had no idea if I would die for real if I killed myself in this dream. It was a desperate thought, a last-ditch option so long as this unfamiliar arcana wrapped around me.

You're going to watch him die, Vanessa. You're going to watch the life leave him. After he's gone, you will be all alone. You will have no purpose other than to serve me. As it always should have been.

I knew that voice. Alvin spoke into my head, making my skull rattle. Just as recognition rocked through me, the ritual arcana shot up from the floor. Tendrils of magic wrapped around my wrists and dragged me to my knees. I fought back, but the magic was stronger. In this red room, I felt like I was made of paper. If I pulled too hard, I might tear in half.

Falling forward, my palms hit the floor. I lifted my head only for a window to appear before me. It zoomed closer and closer until it obscured my field of view. I blinked and found myself looking out of my own eyes.

The dark bedroom surrounded me instead of the red room. I couldn't feel the sheets on my skin, though. Instead, I still felt the cold ties of the ritual arcana on my wrists. While my other senses were trapped in the red room, my vision was here.

I kicked off the blankets and threw a pillow to the ground. Behind me, a dim source of light illuminated the wall before me. The soft blue glow lit the way when I stood and shuffled around the end of the bed.

Ryder's hunched form was backlit by the light in his hands. I realized, distantly, that he clutched a phone. I couldn't hear anything. If I was lucky, he would be on a call with Bri. If she heard what was going on, then she would be able to come help.

Alvin's laughter filled my head. I could almost envision him pointing down at me, mocking my weakness, as he laughed. I growled, but the sound didn't make it into the real world. My hound and I were trapped in the red room.

Ryder's head snapped up. His lips parted. If he spoke, I couldn't hear it. His hand lowered, the light from the phone dimming as it dipped. Ryder reached out with his free hand, but I came to a halt before him.

Kill. Use your command. Tell him to sit still. Kill him while he's helpless.

I whimpered, the cry turning into a snarl. Thrashing against the ritual arcana, I fought to break free. I managed to lift my fists from the floor and slam them against the window before me. My vision shook, but I was still trapped inside myself.

"No, no, no," I whispered. "Don't speak. Don't do it."

I clutched my hands to my chest and searched for the ice that should have been inside me. It wasn't there, though. I wasn't inhabiting my body. Instead, I was trapped somewhere within myself, far away from the ice that had been protecting me.

I had no way of knowing if the ice was still there. It couldn't have melted easily. I'd been protecting it, fostering the chill so that the arcana wouldn't be able to get inside me. There was no way that the ice was gone.

Speak, Alvin commanded.

Ryder had fought my command before. And, recently, my command had been weaker than usual. Maybe this time Ryder would be able to fight it off before I could do anything. I didn't know how many times I could use the command. I'd used so much of the arcana earlier, and I hadn't slept enough to replenish my energy.

Alvin didn't know that Jackson and Marcus had attacked us. He had no idea that I'd used my command on Jackson today, or else Alvin would have chosen another night to strike. This would work in my favor.

It had to.

I watched, helpless, as Ryder's lips formed my name. I could almost hear his voice. My own scream filled the red room. Clutching the sides of my head, I struggled against the tug of the ritual arcana.

This was to be my future if Alvin succeeded. I would spend the rest of my days in this red room, watching Alvin order me around like a puppet on a string. The possible future unfolded before me. Alvin no longer had an

heir. He would need a new one since I'd killed Harvey. I shuddered to think of how he might do that.

Alvin wanted power. Why not make more shifters like myself?

I screamed once again. This time, I heard it ring out distantly. My head snapped up just in time to watch confusion flicker across Ryder's face. Hope flared bright in my chest, lifting me up.

That scream had made its way out of my body. That meant I might be able to talk.

"Ryder?" I asked. "Ryder, can you hear me? I'm so sorry. I'm doing everything I can to stop him, but he has a hold over me."

Ryder's countenance didn't change. My stomach dropped again. The hope that had lifted me up flickered and died out.

I wasn't going to give up that easy, though. Alvin could not have possession of me. I wouldn't allow it. This was my body. My arcana might be new, but it belonged to me. I wouldn't sit idly by and let Alvin use any part of me.

Once again fighting the ritual arcana's pull, I staggered to my feet. The arcana tugged me down, making me shake with the effort it took to stay upright.

"Hey, Alvin! You can go fuck yourself."

I didn't know if he could hear me or if the communications were a one-way lane. Either way, it felt good to say.

I pushed with my thoughts, imagining my body expanding to fill the form that Alvin was controlling. I pressed outward, pushing against the red walls of this prison inside my mind. The ritual arcana writhed against my skin, but I shoved it out of the way. I pushed and pushed until the walls broke.

Sucking in a breath, I did a little dance of victory. That wasn't enough though, because my real body didn't move. However, I could feel things again. I felt the brush of my hair against my neck and the scrape of the rug against the soles of my feet when I shuffled forward.

"Ness?" Ryder asked.

I could hear!

"This isn't you," Ryder said. "Wake up. Come back to me."

The way his voice cracked nearly broke me. I shoved forward because I wanted to wrap my arms around him in reassurance. My body didn't respond, though. She kept shuffling toward him.

When her lips parted, I frantically searched for the ice that had been in my chest. It was still there, but a crack had split it open. Panicked, I quickly tried to push it closed. I tried to use my force of will to press in around it, but the ice wouldn't budge.

Hey, death? Are you there? Could you give me a little more power? I know I've been kind of shying away from you, but I could really use a hand right now. I'll do whatever you want. All you have to do is ask.

And, you know, give me a hand here.

There was no response. The chill presence of death didn't swoop in. I took that as a good sign, actually. That meant Ryder wouldn't die tonight.

Right?

If death never came, then Ryder would survive?

But my lips parted. I could feel the vibration of my voice, my own arcana mingled with it as Alvin pulled it out from beneath the ice like thread on a spool. I fumbled for it, trying to pull my arcana back. It was too late.

Muted, as if I were underwater, I heard myself speak. "Kneel."

Oh, you dumb bitch, I thought to myself. *You're going to regret this.*

Ryder's face twisted with frustration, his upper lip curling while he fought my compulsion. His knees buckled, though. He dropped to the ground with a loud thud that I could feel even trapped inside here.

Anger roiled inside me. It writhed like smoke on dry ice. I pushed harder and harder. The sounds of the world pulsed in my ears. There was a barrier between myself and my body that dulled everything. I slammed my fists against it and felt it shudder with each blow. Eventually, I would break through.

There wasn't anyone who could keep me from Ryder.

My body turned. Alvin seemed confident that Ryder would stay right where I'd put him. Out of the room, I padded into the kitchen and reached for the butcher block. A knife slid out with a soft whisper that I could barely hear.

Stomach clenched tight, I screamed and pounded again.

Slide the blade in between his vertebrae. That's the only way to kill a shifter like him.

I flinched. My body recoiled as well. In the hall, my body halted. My revulsion made me rock on my heels. The hall seemed to narrow, growing smaller and smaller as the walls closed in around me.

Good, I thought. Let the walls swallow me. So long as they could keep me from hurting Ryder, then I accepted my fate.

My thoughts steadied, but that helped my body, too. The hall snapped back to normal, and my body lurched forward.

Well, that fucking sucks, I thought.

I wondered if I could give myself a command as my body stepped back into the bedroom. A part of me had hoped that Ryder would be gone by the time I'd returned, just as Jackson had escaped my command earlier.

Ryder was right where I'd left him, though. He looked at me with wide, pleading eyes. I could see him and everything those eyes wanted to say, but I was helpless. I wanted to tell him that I heard him loud and clear. I wanted to apologize.

My hand trembled as I lifted the knife. I did my best to fight it. I tugged and tugged, trying to drag it back down to my side. Sensing that it was futile, I tried to pry my own fingers open. They refused to give in.

Alvin told me to step around Ryder. My old Alpha whispered instructions, telling me exactly where I needed to put the knife in order to get it between the vertebrae. My whole being rebelled at the very thought.

No. Don't do it. You love him. He means absolutely everything to you. Ryder is the only person who has ever protected you through thick and thin.

You can overcome this.

Don't let Alvin win.

Ryder's lips twisted in a growl. His body shook. I rocked back as he rose to his feet. He caught my wrist in his hand, rendering the knife useless.

I sank into my relief. It was momentary, though. I could already feel my lips parting. Alvin reached inside me again. His touch, even from a distance, was a violation that made my stomach turn. Bile soured the back of my mouth.

Alvin pulled on my arcana again. This time, it was thin and wispy. There was so little left in me. Would it hold Ryder for even a second? I hoped not. I hoped that this was the last of my arcana and that no one would ever have to fear me like this ever again.

Ryder didn't seem afraid of me. He watched me with more kindness on his face than I deserved. I wished I could tell him how I felt, that I loved him and no one else would ever mean as much to me as he did.

My lips were sealed, though.

Wait. I had control of my lips! I clenched my jaw tight so that no sound could leave my mouth. Ryder's brows lifted hopefully.

"Ness," he breathed. "Ness, come back to me."

A dirty joke flitted through my brain. I laughed and heard the sound echoed in reality.

"Alvin," Ryder growled.

Maybe he thought that my laugh hadn't been my own. Cautious, I unclenched my jaw and pushed out a shaky breath. When I breathed in, I smirked wryly.

"You want me to cum to you?" I asked, voice wobbling.

Ryder laughed, and it seemed to open a doorway. I surged through that doorway and found myself back in reality once more.

The knife clattered to the floor. I sucked in a deep breath as all the sounds of the outside world came rushing back. Sensations came back, too. My hand pulsated from how hard I'd been gripping the knife. My knees trembled, a warning barely an instant before they buckled altogether.

I collapsed into his arms. I expected him to push me away, but he pulled me in, and we both dropped to the floor together. He placed a hand on my cheek and turned my face towards him so I could see his eyes swimming with unshed tears.

Between one blink and the next, the tears vanished. Ryder gave me a shaky smile that made me sob. The sound escaped me before I could stop it. I gripped the front of his shirt and buried my face in his chest.

Ryder rocked back and forth, ever so gently, as he cradled me.

I could look back with regret for the decisions I'd made, but this wasn't my fault. Anger at Alvin surged through me, bringing cold fury with it. That chill helped fix the crack in my core. It wasn't just death that helped protect me, but my own indignation forged from the many ways Alvin had hurt me.

Knowing that, maybe I could protect myself better now. My power relied on that indignation. It helped me make the choices that would decide whether or not someone deserved to live. That wasn't a duty I'd ever asked for, but it was mine, nonetheless.

I had to lean into it. This was the fate I'd been given. Defying fate would get me nowhere. I had to follow it and see if it would lead me somewhere bright and safe.

Until then, I needed to get away from Ryder. I couldn't risk hurting him. My pack needed Ryder more than I did, and I needed him a lot. The pack

would crumble and fall apart without Ryder to lead them. I couldn't be the one to take that from them, or I would prove that I had been the problem all along.

"I'm not hurt," Ryder whispered into my hair.

I tightened my grip on his shirt. He could have been hurt. I'd come closer than I would have liked.

A dirty joke had helped me break Alvin's hold over me. I didn't understand why or how, but that moment of connection between Ryder and myself had given me the opportunity I'd needed. Now, I needed to figure out how to recreate that should Alvin make another attempt to control me.

An idea struck me. Ryder wouldn't like it, but it was all I could think of right now.

I sat back and looked up at him. "Next time Alvin controls me, I need you to kill me."

Cold flooded my body. I shivered with the force of it. Though I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I'd come back to life once, I had no idea if it would happen again. Would death keep sending me back? Or would I ask Ryder to do this only to find that it was a onetime offer?

Either way, it would keep Ryder safe.

Ryder snarled defiantly. His grip on me tightened, his fingers digging in so hard that they might bruise. "That's not going to happen. We'll find Alvin before it comes down to that."

I cupped his face in my hands and savored the feel of his growing beard against my palm. I tried to commit the sensation to memory, so that I could remember this moment when my last breaths came.

"Ness," he said, voice soft and low as if that might hide the pain behind it.

"If it comes down to me or you," I said. "Then I need you to live. My pack needs you."

Ryder shot up from the floor. He held me tight as we tumbled onto the bed together. I parted my legs so that he would fit against me like a puzzle piece I'd been missing my whole life. With his body over mine, I felt safe for once. Nothing could get past him. That thought allowed me to breathe for once.

I wound my arms around his neck and held him close. He bent his head and pressed his forehead to mine. This close, our breaths mingled. Need

curled inside my chest. It reached for him. I wanted to pull him closer and press my lips to his, but I waited.

He'd kissed me a couple of times before. I didn't know why. The one time, when I'd used my command to make him answer a question, he'd kissed me to buy time while he fought his command. At least, that's what I thought.

Ryder confused me. He had a mate. Bri was nearby, waiting for him to make the decision to return to her. Yet, here he was with me. We'd been sharing the same bed for a while now. He hovered around me like he couldn't bear to let me out of his sight.

I knew that was only because he wanted to keep me safe. Ryder didn't feel the same way about me that I did about him. My love would remain unrequited, and I had to be okay with that. I had to savor this closeness for now, because I might never get it again.

"Don't be stupid, Ness. I don't know what I would do without you. I think my beast would riot if you left me now."

"You mean, if I died. You wouldn't be a failure if I died, especially if you had to do it yourself. I asked you to, after all." I threaded my fingers through his thick hair.

Ryder lifted his chin and pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. "You don't understand at all."

I paused. What did I not understand? It hit me that I'd asked him to kill again. He'd been forced to kill his own father, a man he'd admired and loved, to save his clan. My request had the same kind of consequences.

N_{ess}

IT FELT like months since I'd last spoken to Cerri, but in reality, it'd only been a day or two. I stood outside her door, my fist hovering in the air as I debated turning around. Cerri had ignored me the other day. Even at the pack meeting, she'd done everything in her power to avoid looking at me.

My friend probably didn't want to see me on her doorstep.

This arcana trying to hijack my body was a growing problem, and Cerri was the only person I could trust to take care of it.

Fuck, I really hoped she had the power to handle this. If she didn't, then I was royally screwed.

I moved my iced hazelnut mocha from one hand to the other and wiped the condensation on my jeans. I knew I was buying time, but I didn't really care. Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, I slowly lifted my hand again.

This time, I didn't have to force myself to knock. The door flew open. My curls shuddered in the sudden wind. Cerri, looking both excited and apprehensive, appeared in the doorway. She leaned in, as if to hug me, then suddenly rocked back.

Cerri cleared her throat, nervously. Her bruises had faded since the last time I'd seen her. The mottled violet had paled to a sickly yellow, so fast that I assumed she'd finally used a potion.

Though Cerri had been born into the pack, she had no animal of her own. She couldn't shift at all. To make up for her perceived weakness, she'd dabbled in a number of crafts. She'd become a master potion crafter, mixing her arcana with brews that she could use in all sorts of situations.

I was proud of her for figuring herself out so quickly. Cerri had the kind of determination that I strived for. Maybe if I could borrow even an ounce of that iron will, then I would have my own arcana under control by now.

Instead, I fumbled around much like Addie and Vi. How Cerri could bear to deal with us, I would never know.

"I missed you," I blurted out.

A soft smile reached her lips, but she didn't say it back. "Do you need help with something?"

I hated to admit that was the reason I'd come. I could have told her that I just wanted to check in. If she found out that I was on her doorstep just because I wanted her to do something for me, then she might resent me even more.

"Oh, ah..." I trailed off because I couldn't find a good reason for being here.

Cerri's lips pursed as she nodded. She stepped back. I thought she would slam the door in my face. Instead, she stepped aside to let me through.

"It's not like that," I said.

There was no backpedaling from this. I needed Cerri's help, but I also needed her to know that I hadn't come just to use her. She was, first and foremost, my friend, and I was worried about her.

Cerri retreated to her potion table as soon as I was inside. I closed the door behind me and rocked on my heels, unsure if she wanted me to come any closer. Cerri kept her back to me, her head bent in submission.

Seeing her like this broke me. Alvin could inflict any kind of torment upon me, but the moment he laid a hand on someone else, I lost the resolve that allowed me to power through. If I couldn't be the one to carry this weight, then what use was I?

I couldn't say any of that out loud—to anyone. I knew everyone would try to argue with me. They would tell me that I didn't need to have a use and that I was putting too much pressure on myself. They were wrong, though.

I needed to do something. We were living in a time of war, and if I couldn't help, then I was a liability.

"Ness," Cerri snapped.

My head lifted, and my vision cleared, so I could see Cerri facing me with her hands on her hips. She gave me an unimpressed glare that made an electrical shock run through my body. I sucked in a breath and straightened my spine.

A regal aura surrounded Cerri. For a moment, she reminded me of Beryl. There was something fey and otherworldly about my best friend that I'd never noticed before. Her eyes glimmered—not with stars but with flickering color like a field of wildflowers dancing in the wind.

"Stop being self-deprecating," she commanded like a queen.

"I wasn't...I didn't...Shut up. You can't read my mind." I crossed my arms over my chest and pouted at her.

A small smile lifted the corner of her lips. "I can't read minds, but I can read your face like an open book. You're always blaming yourself for things outside of your control. You can't control everything that happens. Sometimes, things are completely out of your hands."

I growled, my hound joining in.

Cerri narrowed gleaming eyes at me in warning. Finally, I sighed in defeat.

Her lips broke into a wide grin. "Good doggy!"

I mockingly recoiled. "I never want to hear that out of your mouth ever again."

Cerri laughed and turned to start organizing her potion ingredients. I explained the situation to her and watched her busy hands go still as she listened. Cerri lifted her gaze, clearly aghast.

"We need to break that curse. ASAP."

I snorted. "No shit."

I hadn't told her that I'd almost killed Ryder. Sometimes, when no one was talking or when I was all alone, I could feel the knife in my hand. My mind tumbled backwards, into the darkness deep within me. Panic would hit and my heart would race, but I couldn't do anything about it.

Alvin had taught me that I often had no control over what happened around me. Through all that, I'd had autonomy. I'd made every decision to take his punishments onto myself. Every bit of pain I'd endured had been an act of defiance on my own part.

Now, Alvin had control of my body, too. He didn't have full control yet, but the ritual arcana was still looking for ways to dig deeper. Soon, it would get past my walls and take up place in my core. There, it would be able to puppet every part of me, even my arcana.

I recalled the way it'd siphoned my command arcana. A hand rose to my throat. A fact settled into my mind. Though I tried to ignore it, I didn't have enough hope to hold onto.

At the end of the day, I had become too powerful to fall into the wrong hands. If Alvin had complete control over me and my arcana, then everyone would be in danger.

We couldn't let that happen.

"You're blaming yourself again," Cerri said, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Knock it off and tell me what the ritual components looked like. It will keep you from thinking about everything, and it might help me figure out what to do."

She lit the burner under her cauldron. The air around the black pot shimmered with more than just heat. Cerri's magic filled the room with a heady herbal aroma that comforted me. I let out a breath and described the ritual once again.

Oddly enough, going back to that moment didn't hurt as much as one might expect. The ritual itself wasn't what haunted me. It was the aftermath.

Ryder was working with the pack today. They were doing group exercises to become stronger together. Vi and Addie were there, watching over Ryder for me because Bri had gone back to Colorado.

Bri's goodbye had confused me. I kept expecting her to hate me. Ryder and I had been sleeping in the same bed for days while she'd been alone in her hotel room. But Bri had pulled me into a tight hug and whispered one last thing in my ear.

"I hope you get everything you're looking for," she'd said.

Of course, I'd been confused as hell at the time. I mean, I was still very confused. Bri had to know that I loved Ryder by now. The way she watched the two of us, she had to know. The smiles she'd given me while watching us spoke volumes. I only wished I understood the language those smile spoke.

Because I didn't have Bri to watch Ryder's back for me, Addie and Vi offered to be his bodyguards. Audra had closed the café for the week so that

we could all focus on what needed to be done. Though I was grateful for my boss's decision to close the café, I sorely missed my paycheck.

"Here's the first potion," Cerri said as she pushed a still-warm bottle into my hand. "I don't know if this will work, but I guarantee it won't give you an out-of-body experience like the last time."

I'd come to Cerri for help shortly after Ryder had entered my life. The witch, the one working for Alvin, had revealed a bond between Ryder and myself. At the time, I'd wanted the bond gone. Filled with guilt and regret, I'd asked Cerri to break the bond so that Ryder wouldn't have to be tied to me.

I rubbed the back of my hand. The bond I'd wanted to break was gone now, and I desperately wanted it back. The light that had glowed under my skin wouldn't even give me a flicker anymore. If I searched for it, I found a broken tether floating on an imaginary wind.

With a broken sigh, I threw back Cerri's potion. It seared my throat and landed in the pit of my stomach like a ball of fire. Cinnamon whiskey had nothing on this concoction. I grimaced, my stomach turning.

Silent, Cerri and I waited for several breaths. She watched me expectantly. When nothing happened, I gave her a shrug. Cerri groaned.

"This curse is going to be more stubborn than I expected." She leaned back against her potion table and chewed on the tip of her thumbnail as she stared me down.

I swallowed. "So, you think this is a curse?"

She tilted her hand back and forth. "It is only by classification. It hurts you, therefore it's a curse."

"Ah, so that means we can't break it the way that you and Addie broke the curse Harvey tried to put on my car?"

A while back, Ryder had caught Harvey trying to put a curse on my car. The little black stone had radiated evil, so much that it'd made us all sick just to look at it. Cerri had the brilliant idea to use Addie's arcana as a counterbalance.

While Cerri's bright arcana tugged at one end, Addie's darker power tugged at the other. Their arcanas had torn the curse in half, rending the stone nothing but a lump of earth.

Since I'd discovered that my own arcana was similar to Addie's, I'd hoped that perhaps we could do that again. I didn't have control over death, but I did have death on speed dial—in a weird way.

But Cerri shook her head. “It won’t be that easy. Besides, I’m not going to risk hurting you in the process.”

The memory of my own death hit me like a truck again. I realized that I hadn’t told my friends about that yet. I wanted to get them all together before I brought it up again, though. There was a chance that Addie might have answers. If not, then maybe the demon-born Vi could tell me something.

“God, what the hell is a Barghest? Am I a demon? A fae? A fucking anomaly?”

Cerri lifted a worried brow. “Okay. I’ll bite. Where did that even come from? Are you all right?”

I pulled my hair back and tugged. “No. I’m having an identity crisis.”

After taking a long drag on my iced coffee to quell the fire still burning in the pit of my stomach, I shook myself to cast off the funk looming over me. It didn’t really work, but I pretended like it did. Cerri gave me a dubious look. She knew better.

“A lot has happened in a short period of time. It’s okay to need some time to process it all.” She twisted her hands, her gaze now downcast. “I know I needed it.”

Shit. I felt bad again.

I could have protected Cerri. If I’d goaded Alvin a little more, he would have attacked me. We all knew that his ego was a fragile thing. I’d learned that so long ago that it’d become my go-to tactic when dealing with Alvin.

Cerri flicked the tip of my nose. Startled, I blinked and shook my head.

“It’s. Not. Your. Fault.” She stared me down.

I gave her a tight-lipped smile because I was unconvinced. I had to figure out how to do the right thing in the moment, rather than look back and suffer knowing I’d failed.

“I got too complacent,” Cerri said. Her gaze slid toward the window, though I knew she was searching within, not without. “I never thought Alvin would target me because I assumed I blended into the crowd. When Alvin took me, a part of me hoped that I would suddenly manifest shifter abilities, kind of the same way your arcana has been popping up.

“That didn’t happen, though. I couldn’t shift into a new form to escape Alvin. I couldn’t even heal from what he did to me. I’m practically human in a supernatural world, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

She turned and set about working. “This is the best I can do, and it can’t even help me if I’m not prepared. I can brew a selection of potions and craft a backpack that will allow me to carry them, but that’s cumbersome. All anyone would have to do is push me over, then all the bottles will shatter when I fall.”

I’d always thought of Cerri as the strongest of my friends. She’d taken her life into her own hands. When she didn’t become a shifter, like me, she’d found her arcana and mastered it. I never once thought that she might feel weak.

I stared down at my empty, useless hands and wondered what else I was missing.

Cerri shoved another potion into my hands. This one was cold to the touch. The way my fingers stuck to the icy exterior helped to ground me. It reminded me of the ice still wrapped around my ribcage. That touch of death protected me.

“What is in this?”

“You don’t want to know,” was all Cerri said.

I lifted the bottle in cheers and brought it to my lips. After a moment of hesitation, I lifted it. The icy liquid slid down my throat like liquid-needles. Ice scraped all the way down. I thought I would spit up blood after this, but there was no metallic taste in my mouth when I finished.

The ice slithered around my stomach like a snake searching for prey. I waited, weirded out by the sensation going on inside me. The snake kept moving. Its chill permeated my body, reaching further and further until I was frozen in place.

Wait, was this supposed to happen?

I tried to lift my gaze to Cerri’s, but I couldn’t even move my eyes. What the hell was going on? I expected to hear my hound’s whimper, but even she was silent. It was as if every atom of my being had been put on pause. I didn’t like this one bit. I half-expected Cerri to rip off a latex mask to reveal that she’d been Alvin all along.

The fear didn’t subside even when Cerri softly assured me that this was all according to plan. In her gentlest voice, she told me her plans. She explained that the ice potion was to stop everything, even my arcana.

I didn’t understand what that meant until I realized that meant the ritual’s arcana would be affected by the potion, too. Cerri meant to isolate it. Now, she just had to find it.

Cerri slapped a hand to my forehead. I would have reeled from the force of it if I could have moved. Instead, I bore the impact and waited for *something* to happen. When I felt a new presence moving inside myself, I panicked. I thought the ritual arcana had broken free of Cerri's potion, then I realized that it wasn't the ritual arcana that moved through me.

That was Cerri's arcana.

After saying that she felt like she wasn't powerful enough, Cerri revealed that she had a new ability. I'd never seen her use her arcana this way. It flowed like water under my skin. It rushed from my head to my toes until it blanketed me.

Cerri made a curious sound that I couldn't quite understand. She continued pushing with her arcana. As it wrapped tighter around me, it sank deeper. I realized that she'd cast a kind of net.

Unfortunately, a cold spark flashed inside me. It blazed bright like lightning, but burned so cold that my breath seemed to fog in the air. That cold spark grew, becoming the ice that surrounded my heart.

"Oh, what the hell?" Cerri asked under her breath.

I would have laughed, but I couldn't make a peep.

"I can't pull the ritual arcana out of you if you fight me, Ness."

Like this, I couldn't tell her that this wasn't on purpose. The icy barrier seemed to be a reflex. That did make me wonder if it might go away once I was safe. It melted around Ryder, where I felt the safest.

I'm not fighting you. I swear.

Not that she could hear me right now. I tried to pull the ice back, but I didn't have access to my own arcana. It worked on its own accord, which was honestly frustrating as hell right now. There was a chance that I could escape Alvin's curse once and for all, but my own arcana stood in the way.

Wonderful.

Finally, Cerri sighed pulled back. She threw her hands in the air and spun, heading back to the potion table once again.

I still couldn't move, though. Man, if I could speak, I would have had a few choice words for her. It took several minutes for the potion to wear off. My body trembled from holding that same, stiff pose for so long. Finally, I growled and dropped to my knees.

Cerri gave me a look, her lips pursed as she glared at me. Clearly, she was frustrated. I told her, though, that there was nothing I could do. The barriers had acted on their own. I couldn't control them.

Her expression faltered. Her brows shot skyward as her lips parted. “Is that so? That’s good to know. That means we have more time.”

“More time?” I croaked. “No. There isn’t more time. I came this close to killing Ryder. We can’t spend weeks trying to figure this out.”

Cerri waved me off. “I’ll tell him to lock you in the bedroom by yourself. Sleeping in close proximity is what’s going to get either of you hurt. He needs to learn to give you some space right now. I know that’s difficult, considering how attached to you he’s become.”

I cocked my head. “What does that even mean? Wait. No. I’m not getting trapped in a room by myself every night.”

It reminded me of the night I’d spent in Alvin’s basement, the hours stretching infinitely as I stared at the drab walls and wondered what would become of me. The bedroom at Ryder’s rental wasn’t anything like Alvin’s basement, but that meant nothing when panic made my mouth dry.

I licked my lips and tried to hide the rising panic inside me. Somehow, Cerri seemed to understand. Her own eyes glazed over, probably with memories of her own recent pain. Finally, she sighed.

“I know that’s not a fun option, but what else can we do?”

Before I could answer her, the door burst open. Vi stormed into the room. Heat wafted off her in waves. She took three steps inside before spinning on her heel. Addie, standing between Vi and Ryder, put out her hands to ward off Vi.

I gave Ryder a questioning look.

“You can’t just leave again!” Vi bellowed.

Ryder

I DIDN’T WANT Ness to know. Upon hearing Vi’s frustration, Ness’s eyes went wide. Those eyes quickly turned glassy with unshed tears. I sighed and ran a hand through my hair.

Today hadn’t gone exactly as planned. I’d told myself that was a trial run that I could learn from, even if my failure stung. The pack had been snapping at each other all day. It was clear they still had a wealth of

animosity towards one another. I had no idea how to clear the air. I could only hope that casting Alvin out would be a good start.

Then, maybe the pack could continue healing without me.

Vi stomped up to me and shoved a finger into my chest. Heat wafted off her. An acrid scent reached my nose as her heat began to singe my body hair.

“You’re a useless schmuck if you think you can change your mind like that. You can’t tell us that you’ll stay, then decide to leave the next day. No one will ever trust you if that’s how you’re going to behave.”

I grabbed Vi’s wrist and pried her finger out of my chest. I was certain there would be an indent where she’d shoved her fingernail in. She growled and pressed, fighting against my hold. The air around us grew hotter and hotter. A flash of red passed over her eyes.

Thankfully, Vi wasn’t pack. The demon-born spitfire wouldn’t be my responsibility. I wouldn’t have to deal with her on a daily basis. In time, Vi would drive me up a wall. I didn’t know how anyone could stand her for longer than an hour at a time.

Beyond her, Ness looked as though she might break down. Vi had charged into the room with her mouth running. She hadn’t given a thought to explaining why she was yelling at me. And so, Ness clenched her jaw tight and glared at me through her tears, breaking my heart in the process because she believed Vi.

I wouldn’t just leave. I thought Ness of all people would have known that by now.

“Vi, if you would shut your mouth for five minutes and listen, then you would understand!” Electricity sparked up and down my arms, dancing along my skin.

Beside us, Addie grumbled under her breath. She shook her head and retreated over to where Ness and Cerri stood. Addie must have realized that trying to intervene was futile right now.

I would gladly take this outside. The spitfire would put up a good fight. Maybe both of us would feel better after.

But before I could make the suggestion, Ness yanked her friend back and put herself between us. Ness gave me a dark glare, her lower lip trembling. My fury faded into a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I lowered my voice. “Vi jumped the gun. I’m not leaving forever.”

Ness's shoulders dropped, perhaps in relief, but that didn't quell any of the frustration still darkening her face. "Maybe you should have talked to me about this first."

A growl rumbled in the back of my throat. "I don't have to answer to anyone. I'm still a free man."

Everyone needed me. They told me what to do, as if I were a servant. I didn't belong to anyone here. They couldn't keep telling me what to do or how I should do it. If anyone had any complaints, they could shove it.

I backed away from Ness, and her jaw dropped. Gaping at me, her eyes flashed with lightning. I gave her a shrug and turned to leave.

I didn't have to stay and deal with this. Over and over, I kept getting caught in snares. Beryl made an attempt to force my hand. She'd bound me in a pact and tried to control me through an addiction to fae food. Before that, Ness had lied to me in an attempt to get me to kill her Alpha.

While I didn't blame Ness, I couldn't help but feel used over and over.

Ness caught up to me outside. She grabbed me by the back of my shirt and yanked. While her strength wasn't enough to stop me, her voice brought me to a halt.

"Don't run away from me," she cried out.

The way I stopped made me wonder if she'd used her command, but that wasn't it. There wasn't even a hint of arcana in her voice. Ness's plea made me want to stop and talk to her. I hated it. She had a power over me that I would never be able to escape.

I turned and lifted my hand with the intention of cupping her cheek, but she jerked away from me. Her fists vibrated at her sides.

"Just...just tell me next time." Her voice was strangely steady for how she trembled with her rage. "If you want to leave, I can't stop you. I wish you would talk to me first, though. I thought we were closer than that."

All the fight bled out of me. *We are close*, I wanted to say. Ness was my mate, after all.

I just couldn't find the right time to tell her. Maybe if I brought it up now, then she would understand that I had no intention of leaving *forever*. That's not what I wanted.

"If my brother finds me here, he's going to make a big scene. He's going to raze everything to the ground in an attempt to hurt me. Bri warned me that he's on his way. I...I had my phone on the other night when you

tried to kill me. By now, Morgan knows exactly where I am.” I ran a hand through my hair and tugged.

Time was running out. There was too much to do in too little time. How was I supposed to deal with the sins of my past when the horrors of the present were still very much a problem? Alvin had control of Ness, somehow. I knew I couldn’t leave her like this, but I also couldn’t stay and wait.

“You can come with me,” I suggested. “You can’t kill me. You don’t have it in you, so I’m not afraid to be alone with you. That way, I can keep you safe while we deal with my brother.”

Ness’s expression changed. Her brow lowered in confusion as she looked up at me.

I laughed. “What? You *can’t* kill me. We proved that last night.”

Aghast, she shook her head. “I can’t believe you. Are you serious? I came far too close to hurting you, possibly even killing you, and this is how you act?”

My stomach dropped. Somehow, I’d made all the wrong moves today. It seemed that no matter what I did, I couldn’t do the right thing. I’d failed the pack, pissed off Vi, and betrayed my mate.

Reaching out, I pulled her into my chest. “Ness, listen to me. I know without a shadow of a doubt that you would never hurt me.”

She put her hands between us but didn’t stop me from holding her flush against my body. Her eyes were wide as she looked up at me. I brushed a stray curl away from her face and let my fingers trail along her skin. The way she shuddered in my arms drew my dragon to the surface.

The beast told me to claim her. If I bit her now and showed all the world that she was mine, then everything would turn out all right. Though I didn’t understand my beast’s logic there, I couldn’t fight the desire making my heart race.

Ness grasped my face between her hands. “You’re a damn fool.”

I chuckled. She felt too good in my arms. Her warmth permeated my body and made me want to wrap more of myself around her. I lowered my head, her hands fell away, and I buried my face in the crook of her neck. She sighed, but the sound was not as sweet as I expected.

Ness stepped out of my embrace. She wrapped her arms around herself, seeming small. When she shook her head, my heart stuttered.

“I can’t leave my pack alone. Not right now.”

My beast snarled, but not at Ness's statement. The beast growled at me.
Stay. Defend your territory. Defend your mate.

Or will you prove that you're nothing more than a spineless lizard and run again?

I blinked, stunned. My dragon had shared a few choice words with me that I had not expected. The words fried my brain. I couldn't move.

You're better than this. Act like the Alpha you are.

But staying...that would put too many in harm's way. I couldn't let my brother ruin everything I was working to build here. There was still so much work ahead of me. If Morgan set me back, then I didn't know how I would pick up the pieces.

Ness's friends gathered against the side of the converted warehouse. They watched me with mixed expressions, some angry, some tired. Each and every one of them looked ready to fight.

Not me, but *for* me.

The strange mix of supernaturals weren't shifters, but they were pack, nonetheless. They put their power behind me. They promised to help keep their home safe.

I pressed my palms to my face. Ness laughed.

"Do you see now? I keep telling you. We are all stronger together." She touched my forearm. Her voice dropped to a soft plea. "I'm stronger with you."

I didn't believe her. Ness had a kind of strength that was all her own.

Ryder

NOTHING HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT, much to my relief. In my shallow sleep, I waited for Morgan to make an appearance. I held Ness tight in case Alvin thought to steal her in the dark again.

When I woke, my tired bones screamed for me to go back to bed. We had another task today, though. The night before, I made a suggestion that I knew I would come to regret.

“I need coffee,” Ness grumbled in the passenger seat of my car as she rubbed her temples.

“You have a caffeine addiction. Maybe you should think about cutting back.”

“You should think about keeping your opinions to yourself,” she snapped.

I laughed, knowing that she wasn’t really mad at me. The pain making her head throb had turned her tongue sharp. At least she hadn’t laced her arcana into those words.

Ness was nervous, too. We needed to know more about what she was. If the pack’s archives couldn’t give us a clue, then we would have to go to someone who had been around for a few centuries.

“Are you even sure you want to do this?” Ness asked. “Beryl has been an absolute nightmare in the past. I know you managed to break the pact

with her, but that doesn't mean she's going to want to talk to us."

"This territory belongs to her, too. Our domains overlap. If I need help, then so does she. Beryl won't want Alvin causing trouble on her doorstep, which means she's indebted to us, in a way."

Ness snorted. "That bitch will find a way out of it. We both know that. Besides, we haven't dealt with Alvin yet."

The inside of the car grew quiet. It seemed like we were doing a lot of running around, and not a lot of searching. Alvin was hiding somewhere. I figured he had to be close by in order to use the curse he'd placed on Ness. Since we hadn't found a way to break the curse, Alvin would still be within reach.

We had time, I told myself.

Even though I didn't believe it.

I parked outside Beryl's restaurant. The dark windows wrapping around the corner building reflected the bright morning sun. I swallowed hard, remembering all the times Beryl had swept me away just to toy with me. My mouth went dry, and a hunger pinched my stomach tight.

I'd only just begun to be able to taste human food again. Flavors were muted, but present. For a while, I'd feared that I would never be able to taste anything ever again. Much to my relief, it seemed that the enchanted addiction to fae food wore off in time.

I didn't want to go back to that again. Being back inside Beryl's court made my skin crawl. The golden food would be everywhere.

"Let's get this over with," Ness said.

She kicked her door open and got out so that she could face the building with her chin held high. I pulled myself together because I wouldn't be a good Alpha or a good mate if I let a bit of faery food scramble my brains.

Outside, Ness grabbed my hand and squeezed. She'd carried my ass out of this building once before. I'd been in the intoxicating throes of the faery food, but she'd put up with me long enough to get me sober again.

I adored how determined she could be. I squeezed her hand in return and led her through the double doors. Ness kept pace beside me.

The gaunt fae butler took one look at us and stepped aside, much to my surprise. He even bowed his head as we passed. My beast preened, proud because I'd been recognized as an Alpha.

Down the spiral staircase into Beryl's underground court, we held onto each other like lovers leading each other out of the afterlife. I kept my gaze

ahead, even when I caught sight of Beryl's wine-red hair across the earthen room.

Queen Beryl of the New York Unseelie Court had taken a piece of her fae home and embedded it into the earth beneath Lakesedge. The cavernous underground room sat at the edge of the lake. A large section of the ground had been hewn away to reveal the shimmering blue waters of Onondaga Lake. No glass sat between the water and the air, only fae magic.

Beryl didn't rise to greet us. She lounged on her velvet couch while lazily scrolling on a tablet. I raised a brow at the website glowing on the screen. She grinned and gave me a wink.

"OnlyFans? Really?" I asked.

Ness snorted before clapping her hand over her mouth.

Beryl's demure grin spread wider. "Worry not. I wasn't browsing for entertainment. I was simply checking in on some of my courtesans. The internet is a wonderful place, with all sorts of platforms for my beauties to share their prowess."

Beside me, Ness blushed. I gave her hand a squeeze to remind her why we were here. It wasn't to talk about fae sexwork.

Ness cleared her throat. "My mother has fae ancestry—"

"Do you really think that little droplet of fae blood was enough to make you into what you've become, darling?" Beryl gave a slow shake of her head. "No. That's not what brought you into existence. It was Alvin's own doing that summoned you."

Ness's nails dug into my skin. For a moment, the sting was so sharp that I thought she'd partially shifted. No, her grip was just that tight as Beryl spoke.

"Alvin is a monster. He hurt human women, hunting them for sport as you found out not too long ago. As if that wasn't bad enough, he'd been tormenting your pack for decades—long before you were even born, darling." Beryl stood and glided over to Ness.

I instinctively tugged Ness away from the fae queen. Beryl slid an amused smirk at me. For a moment, I thought she would transport me elsewhere. I waited for that red veil to wrap around me and dump me far away.

Instead, Ness stepped forward before Beryl could play any games. "What does Alvin have to do with any of this?"

Though I wanted to pull Ness away from the trickster queen, I had to let Ness do this. Ness needed answers. It wouldn't be right of me to stop her. My dragon rose to the surface like a shark in shallow water. The beast kept an eye on Beryl.

Ness

MY HEART THUNDERED against my sternum. I knew what Beryl was hinting at, but I didn't want to believe it. The idea that Alvin was responsible for my very existence bothered me more than any other truth I'd ever come across.

"That sniveling excuse of a man is not the reason that I exist," I said through clenched teeth.

Beryl put her hands up, palms out. "Oh, certainly not. You have your parents' libido to blame for that."

I tried not to gag. That wasn't something I wanted to think about either.

"What I'm saying," Beryl continued, "is that your Alpha committed so many atrocities that fate sent someone to deal with him. That witch who visited your pack didn't leave a prophecy behind. She delivered an omen after seeing what kind of man Alvin was."

"Me? I'm the person fate sent to take care of Alvin? That's not fair, not at all."

Beryl rolled her eyes. "Fate and fair can never be used in conjunction with one another. The two are barely even acquaintances. However, fair and Barghest are almost synonymous, if that makes sense.

"You see, fate made you to deliver judgement. Everything that you have witnessed, everything you've endured, it's nothing more than evidence for you to use to make your decision—which I'm sure you've already done."

I swallowed.

"I did my research, darling. You were nothing more than a puppy with a dark cloud over her head not long ago. That dark cloud has become a storm that no one can protect against. It is all at once terrifying and beautiful. I had to make sure that I was on the right side of fate, of course."

"Are you?" I asked. "Are you on the right side of fate?"

She smiled, her secrets safe behind her lips. I wasn't going to get any answers out of her, and to be frank, I didn't want to deal with her. Saving my pack from Alvin was hard enough. I doubted the fae court wanted to dispose of Beryl, even if she was a cruel queen.

This was an Unseelie court, after all.

"I came to ask another question. Since you did your research, can you tell me why I..." I struggled to find the right words.

I didn't want to put myself in debt to her. That smile told me that she might have a use for me.

Was it so bad, though? If Beryl wanted the best for her court and the territory that came with it, then that would be good for the pack, too. Working for Beryl wouldn't be the worst thing to happen to me.

My breath shuddered as I made a decision. However, Beryl's attention had already moved on to Ryder. I stiffened, my hound crashing into the surface like a wild beast breaching water with teeth already gnashing. The impact inside me sent me reeling.

"If you want more from me," Beryl purred, "then I have a deal for you. I know that you're preparing yourself to become the next Alpha of the Lakesedge pack. That means you and I would be equals, Ryder."

He growled. The sound was a mild threat, just enough to warn her that she was getting on his nerves. I pressed close to his side. Beryl's syrupy sweet voice was cloying. I could tell from Ryder's stiffness that he could tell she was up to something, too.

Beryl snapped her fingers and a piece of paper materialized in her hand. She set it on the nearby table and pushed it towards Ryder with her fingertip.

He immediately shook his head. "I will do everything in my power to keep Lakesedge safe. You don't need me to sign a contract to know that."

"Oh? I don't need your promise? I didn't get one from Alvin Combs and look what happened there. He dedicated his life to horrors that put everyone in Lakesedge at risk. His little hunting hobby could have ruined everything."

I gaped at her. "Do you really think Ryder is going to hunt humans for sport?"

Beryl laughed. "Not in the least, darling. But it would be nice to have it in writing. I cannot give up anything without a promise in return. That's the

way of the fae. Did you come in here thinking that I wouldn't ask either of you to give up something?"

No, we didn't. We knew what we were getting into when we came here. There was no one we could turn to who didn't slap a price on information or assistance. We'd tried to visit the witch, but she'd made a break for it while we'd been distracted.

That left us with Beryl.

I stepped forward. A pen had appeared beside the contract at some point. When I picked it up, Ryder grabbed my wrist. I gave him a sharp look that I hoped conveyed everything I felt in that moment.

His expression pleaded softly with me, but his fingers finally fell away from my wrist. His touch trailed along my skin reassuringly. He wasn't far. He was right beside me, his presence a promise that he would support me if this was the decision I wanted to make.

It wasn't, but we needed help. I marched over to Beryl's lounge chair and dragged it closer to the table before plopping into it so I could read the terms of her contract. She raised both brows, her lips pursed in obvious annoyance.

I flashed her a cheeky, tight-lipped smile, then turned my attention to the contract. It was relatively normal. If anything, the terms laid out were all rules that both parties should have already been abiding by. This contract revealed just how turbulent Lakesedge had been with Alvin in control.

All Beryl wanted was a sense of normalcy for her court again.

Signing this contract was the easiest thing I'd done in a long time. With a real smile, I handed it up to the towering queen. Her hand darted out like she might snatch it from me, but her movement slowed and became gentler as she watched me.

Honestly, I think I surprised her.

Ryder tried to catch my eye. When I turned to him, I gave him a reassuring nod. We'd made the right decision.

"If you need to contact the pack," I said, "you go through me. Our Alpha has a lot of work on his hands. I'll be your emissary from now on."

I knew she wanted a direct connection to Ryder because he was more powerful than me. Beryl would have to settle for me, which didn't seem like the biggest problem to her. Beryl knew what I was now, and I had a feeling she saw some value in me because of it.

“Back to my question,” I said as I placed my elbows on the table and tented my fingers together. “I died. Alvin Combs broke my neck.”

Across from me, Ryder stiffened. I could see the light of his beast in his eyes. Ryder’s control amazed me. The storm seemed to rage on inside him, but he barely let it reach his face. Only his eyes betrayed the battle between his control and his beast.

There was nothing Ryder could do about it now, though. It’d happened in the past. I was here, alive and well, now.

Beryl dipped her head in recognition. “That is a slippery aspect of your being that I haven’t yet figured out. I apologize.”

Brow flat, I gave Beryl the most unimpressed glare ever. I hoped she could feel the weight of my ever-growing animosity. If I was lucky, it might smother her.

I wasn’t so lucky, though. Beryl was an immortal. While I had come back from death, I wasn’t like her. She was a force of nature while I was just a freak of nature.

“However,” Beryl added. “I will endeavor to find out more about your situation. Clearly, you weren’t meant to die then. You have something you need to do here, since you are fate’s tool, after all. Perhaps you cannot die until you have served your purpose. It keeps fate from having to send more like you.”

“She’s not a tool,” Ryder growled.

I stood, pushing the lounge chair back so that it made an awful screech against the stone floor. Beryl’s grimace gave me a shallow sort of satisfaction. I shouldn’t be petty, but sometimes I just couldn’t help it.

“It’s cute the way you two have latched onto each other,” Beryl crooned.

Her voice sent a shiver up my spine. I paused and narrowed my eyes at the unseelie queen. She grinned, but the way her gaze pierced through me left me unsettled. Could she see the ritual arcana writhing inside me?

Or was it something else that she’d noticed?

“Every time I dismiss shifters, your kind finds a new way to impress me. Your bond is broken, and yet it’s as if nothing has changed between either of you. How sweet.”

I opened my mouth to ask what Beryl was talking about, but Ryder took me by the arm and tugged me towards the staircase at the far end of the

court. I turned and hissed at him because I had questions. Ryder didn't seem to care.

"She's just going to ask more of you," Ryder said. "Do you want to become her lapdog?"

"Beryl might be manipulative, but that's not what she wants."

Ryder didn't stop until we were outside, and the moist heat of the summer air snaked beneath our clothes. I struggled to drag in a breath as I adjusted to the new environment.

What did Beryl mean about our broken connection? I lifted my hand and stared down at it. The bond that had flashed with magical light under my skin was gone. Was that what Beryl had been talking about?

I'd sent a desperate plea down that connection when Alvin had taken me. I'd hoped that Ryder would be able to follow it to me, but the connection had been lost when Alvin started his ritual.

I missed that bond now. Inside, there was a hollow space where the connection had been. When I looked up to Ryder, he wasn't paying attention to me. His gaze moved across the sky.

"Morgan?" I asked.

Ryder's lips twisted to the side before he shook his head.

There was too much on our plate right now. I hoped I hadn't made the wrong decision in there. Beryl might want the best for her court and the territory that it sat upon, but that didn't mean she wanted the best for me.

Had I been too trusting? I hated how I second guessed myself now. If this hollow space inside me weren't aching, then maybe I would be able to think clearly.

"How about lunch?" Ryder asked with a smile.

The smile was forced, of course. We were both still tense from Beryl's ominous words. Ryder might have been a little riled up from what I'd said earlier, too. Though he knew that I'd died, hearing how Alvin had killed me might have triggered something animal in him.

"Yeah, lunch sounds good right about now."

Ryder took my hand and threaded his fingers through mine, making my heart flutter excitedly. I tried not to look at him, but my gaze kept sliding in his direction as he led me down the street.

We could have gone back inside Beryl's restaurant for food, but Ryder found a deli sandwich shop that smelled of fresh bread and sliced meats. My stomach grumbled in happy anticipation.

In one moment, I saw Ryder's hand press flat against the glass door. The next moment, I saw nothing but sky. Pain flared hot across my scalp. I yelped rather pathetically and reached for my hair to see what the problem was. When I touched skin, my heart flipped.

Ryder

NESS'S TOUCH DISAPPEARED. My beast snarled and told me to turn. I caught sight of Jackson's vicious smile right before he yanked Ness back onto her feet. She grimaced and swung for him. Jackson yanked her off balance before her blow could land.

I lunged forward, but Jackson swung Ness between us. Her eyes widened, but pain pinched them at the corners. I reached for her with one hand while my hands sharpened into claws. She would need a haircut later, but it would be worth it.

Before I could touch her, Marcus slammed into my side. I swung around with my now-clawed hand and raked it across Marcus's chest. I tore through his shirt and skin, but while I fought him, Jackson was getting away with Ness.

Jackson slipped away into an alley. Ness cried out, and I followed the sound of her voice. Marcus tried grabbing at me, but I ducked his grasp and darted toward the alley. By the time I got there, they were gone.

When I turned, Marcus had also vanished. Distantly, I heard Ness's voice. She cried out with her arcana, a command woven into it.

"Let me go!"

I breathed a sigh of relief, the fight washing out of me. But when I didn't see Ness running back to me, my fear came creeping back in.

They weren't following her commands. How could that be? She'd done it the other day. There was no way her arcana had lost its power. We knew little about it, but people didn't get immunity to arcana like that. Not from being exposed a couple of times.

NESS

THESE ASSHOLES WERE WEARING ear plugs!

I lunged to yank one from Jackson's ear, but he used his handhold on my hair to throw me off balance again. I caught nothing but air before he began pulling me along again.

Marcus caught up and grabbed my other arm. Together, they nearly lifted me off my feet. Around and around, they led me from alley to building to alley. Here and there, I caught sight of the street through a window or at the end of an alley.

They were keeping me out of sight, I realized. With the earplugs in, they were immune to my command. So long as they ducked from building to building, they were covered from any outside threat.

Are they really that stupid, I thought? Ryder would still be able to track my scent. Shifters, even dragon shifters, had excellent senses. We were leaving a scent trail behind that Ryder would be able to pick up and follow.

"You stupid sons of bitches," I grumbled. "Well, more like *sons of a bitch*, since you're brothers."

They paid me no attention. Those earplugs were top notch. I kept cussing the brothers out while they kicked open doors and shoved me forward. I called them all sorts of names and told them that their dicks were too small to be seen with a magnifying glass. I wasn't one to body-shame, but these fools deserved it.

A cocky smile reached the corner of my mouth when I spun to face them. Marcus nearly rolled his eyes. He squared his shoulders and slapped me across the face. My head snapped to the side. Stinging pain washed over my cheek.

That pain brought my hound to the surface. She snarled furiously and demanded that I let her take over. I straightened and lifted my chin. The

brothers had let go of me. In this narrow alley, I could shift and make a break for it.

Stay, a voice rang through my skull.

It hit harder than Marcus's slap, and from the inside. Every bone in my body vibrated from the voice's impact.

Go, go, go! I thought to myself. I tried to throw myself forward, but my body refused to budge. My muscles had locked in place. Though my hound tried to leap out of me so that she could take over, she hit an invisible wall that rippled like jelly.

Alvin laughed inside my head before fading away.

"Daft bitch," Jackson said before palming my face.

He pushed me through another doorway before releasing me. Darkness swallowed us as the door closed behind them. Head reeling and heart pounding, I pulled myself up and pressed my back to the hallway wall.

"Ryder is going to find my scent," I said in warning.

They watched my lips move. My words were simple enough that they likely understood even with the earplugs in. Marcus snorted. Jackson reached beneath the collar of his shirt and yanked out a cord with a small wood medallion hanging from it. Another sigil had been burned into the wood.

The air around me had been filled with other scents, like the dumpster at the end of the last alley we'd walked through. I hadn't thought to check to see if the brothers had a scent. For a moment, I thought that I might have left a scent trail. Then I realized that I couldn't even smell myself.

The sigil covered more than just one person at a time. That explained why they were keeping me so close. If they kept me in the spell's aura, then my scent would be masked, too.

With Alvin in my head and the witch's spells working against me out here, I knew I was in trouble. I refused to give in, even if my heart thundered uncertainly. I had to be smart, that was all.

When I pushed off the wall, I hissed as if in pain. I wasn't in pain, but the brothers didn't know that. I let my feet tangle beneath me so that I stumbled away from them. The hallway twisted around me. I tried to focus on one thing so that I could catch myself when I fell.

Wouldn't it be nice to find a fire alarm that I could pull? I wasn't so lucky, though. Instead, I caught myself on a metal railing that led up the

nearby staircase. There was a chance that I could use these stairs to make a break for it, but that wasn't the reason for my performance.

Before Marcus or Jackson could grab me, I propelled myself away from the railing and back towards the brothers. Maybe I should have tried to escape, but this way, the spell's aura didn't pass over the railing. Now, my scent was on that metal railing, and there was a chance that Ryder might be able to find it.

Marcus grabbed me by the back of the neck and jerked me close. "What is your problem?"

His breath reeked. I cringed away from it and fought the urge to gag. Okay, so I didn't fight it that hard. My stomach clenched tight, and a bit of bile climbed up to the back of my throat.

"Drama queen," Marcus muttered.

He shoved at the back of my neck, forcing me to bend. My back screamed at the horrid angle. Marcus turned me away from the stairs and led me back down the hall like a scolded dog.

I nearly laughed at Marcus's stupidity. With Jackson ahead of us, scouting their exit, Marcus and I were alone. Here was my chance. I had to take it.

Marcus's grasp left my throat exposed. I took advantage of that gap by falling forward. Marcus didn't even have time to react as I slipped out of his hand and hit the floor. I laughed, exhilaration fluttering through me.

I rolled away from Marcus before he could grab me again. Out of range, I got to my feet and stumbled towards the stairs. If I ran up the stairs, the brothers might follow, and the aura of their spell would erase the scent marker I'd left. So, I ran past the stairs and into the front lobby of the building.

A pair of glass double-doors glowed with the light of the midday sun. My heart leapt as I rushed forward. A dark silhouette across the street drew me to a halt. I jerked and rocked back. Dread hit my gut like an avalanche of cold. I fumbled back.

I didn't have time to process who was outside. I knew. My body reacted almost against my will. Though I'd done my best to never show fear in the face of that man, I still couldn't help but turn and run. Especially after what happened last time.

I couldn't let Alvin have me. If he finished the ritual, he would own me body and soul.

Behind me, Marcus cursed. He tried to call out to his brother, but they were wearing ear plugs. I didn't think Jackson could hear him right now. So, while Marcus decided whether he should get his brother or run after me, I put some distance between us.

In the lobby, I noticed an elevator. It was old and looked like it might drop me into the basement before it even considered lifting me to an upper floor, but I ducked into it anyway. Inside the decrepit elevator, I slapped the button for the top floor.

What would I do up there?

Who fucking knew? All I wanted was a bit of time to catch my breath. When the doors closed and the elevator lurched upwards, my heart settled a little. I breathed out and fell back against the wall. For a heartbeat, time seemed to stop as I waited for Alvin to take hold of my body again.

Nothing happened. My hound and I each shook ourselves and prepared for what was to come. If he was this close, then I needed to make sure that I didn't run right into his hands. I had to find my way back to Ryder. Together, we would escape.

Alone, I was afraid that I wouldn't have the strength to hold out against Alvin. Not when he was so deeply entrenched in my mind.

I just hoped that the brothers hadn't figured out where I was yet. They weren't the smartest, but they also weren't completely stupid. Sooner or later, they would retrace my steps. They would take the stairs or find another elevator. Either way, that should slow them down. I only hoped that I didn't run into them up there.

The elevator would buy me time. So long as I could stay away from the brothers, I should be able to find my way back down while they were preoccupied with finding their way up.

I watched the light move across the numbers over the doors until it finally stopped at the top floor. My stomach churned uneasily. The elevator doors slid open, revealing two very unamused shifters glaring me down. I gaped at them.

"How the fuck did you two make it up here already?"

They couldn't hear me, though. They still had those damn earplugs in. I braced myself, already looking for my exit. Was Alvin watching somehow? Would he stun me again if I tried to make another break for it?

Jackson stepped into the elevator. He reached out for me as Marcus entered and hit the button for the ground floor. I dropped to my haunches

and launched myself under their arms. The gap was narrow. I heard the metallic creak of the elevator doors closing, tightening the gap.

There was no going back now. I lunged. The elevator door hit me in the side and showed no sign of slowing. When I tumbled onto the floor outside the elevator, I gave the ancient device a silent thanks. Since it was so old that it didn't have a doorway sensor, the doors kept closing behind me.

Marcus snarled and wedged himself through the closing gap in the door.

"That's unfair!" I said with a wave of my hand as he just barely made it through the gap. The door didn't even pinch the toe of his boot.

When he leveled a deadly stare at me, a shiver ran down my spine.

"Oh, shit." I spun on my heel and ran.

I didn't think about where I was going.

Ryder, where are you?

I grasped for that connection I'd felt when Alvin began setting up the ritual. Just like Beryl had said, it was broken. The tether that had once bound him to me now sagged. I tugged and tugged, but nothing happened. Not even my desperation could get it to come back to life again.

Well, shit.

Ryder

I SNIFFED THE AIR, searching for a scent. My dragon moved restlessly within me. It made my skin too tight. It made my muscles tremble with unspent energy. The taste of blood reached my tongue like a memory, or a craving.

Jackson and Marcus had made a coordinated kidnapping. They'd snuck up on us and grabbed Ness so quickly that I knew they'd come prepared. I couldn't catch their scent in the air, and Ness's scent had vanished altogether. That made me think they'd grabbed some of the sigils that had been hanging in the woods around Alvin's estate.

The sigils that Alvin had used to escape me were now in the hands of his two goons. Great. That was the last thing I needed.

I stalked down the alley they'd dragged Ness into, but I still couldn't find a trace of them. I'd been depending on my sense of smell for so long that I didn't know how to identify visual clues. Was that a footprint? Or a stain on the ground?

I cursed under my breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. Restless and irritated with the feeling of being useless, my dragon lashed its tail and threatened to take control. It warned that if I could not find our mate, that it would take to the skies to do so.

Even though I was still in Lakesedge, I couldn't just fly over the city. If I lost control of my beast, if the goons took Ness outside Lakesedge, then I could put everyone in the community at risk. I couldn't let that happen.

Bartering with the beast didn't help. Rage kept building within me. The beast set its foot down and thunder rolled overhead. I could feel the dragon pushing, trying to take over my body. I leashed the creature, but it didn't seem to care. My feeble grasp on it was not enough to stop it.

All the while, I kept moving. I went from building to building in search of my mate.

The beast won, but it stopped me in my tracks. I paused and took in my surroundings, wondering why the dragon chose to stop me here, of all places. Then I caught her scent.

Woodsy with a hint of wildflowers. Ness had been here. I stalked forward and surveyed my surroundings. Ness's scent was on a railing leading upstairs, but it didn't go any further. I looked up the stairs and tried to think of how her scent might have gotten here.

I didn't have to think long because the central air pushed her scent from another room. Backing up, I peered around the corner into a lobby that faced the front of the building. At the other end of the room was an old elevator. The scent was strong here, but I had no idea if she'd gone up or down, though.

Just then, the sensation of a wire going taught yanked at my core. I jerked forward. Electrical energy raced through my body, waking every muscle and turning every sense on high. My beast lifted its head. It set its sights up high. That's where I would find Ness.

The elevator would be too slow. I ran back to the staircase where I'd first found Ness's scent and climbed three stairs at a time. Higher and higher, I climbed. The connection pulled me forward. I couldn't stop until I'd found the other end, my other half.

On the top floor, I hesitated. I turned to search the floor, but the connection gave three sharp tugs in another direction. When I twisted, I caught sight of a door with a red *Exit* sign over it.

What are they doing on the roof?

Knowing time was counting down, I shoved through the door. The connection led me out into the open, where Marcus and Jackson faced Ness. The two male shifters had their backs to me. I paused to figure out how I would take them both down at once.

Ness's attention passed between Jackson and Marcus. When she locked eyes with me, the others realized that I was there. An ominous rumble rippled over the sky. The clouds hadn't yet darkened enough to become a storm, but they might soon.

Marcus faced me while Jackson moved behind him. I couldn't afford to spend too much time with Marcus or else Jackson would reach Ness. I didn't like the sheer drop behind Ness. She kept backing up; soon she would reach the edge of the building with nowhere to go but down.

The brothers wouldn't let her fall, though. Alvin wanted her, or else he wouldn't have gone through all the trouble to set up the ritual.

I underestimated the brothers, though. The two of them shared a look. Jackson nodded, as if understanding Marcus's unspoken command. The vicious glee on Jackson's face sent a chill down my spine. The sensation rose again, but white hot with fury.

The connection between Ness and myself suddenly vanished. Ness cried out and clutched the sides of her head. My heart stuttered. I lurched forward, without thinking. Marcus was there to intercept me.

"I don't want to!" Ness cried out in response to a voice I could not hear. "Don't make me come to you! Not like this."

Jackson laughed at her. Fury turned my fingertips into claws. Already, I could feel the skin along my back itching as my wings tried to force their way out. The dragon inside me pushed. I held it back, but Ness's sounds of pain and frustration broke my concentration.

I grabbed Marcus by his shirt and threw him behind me. He wasted no time in rebounding because he slammed into my back and sent me crashing to the ground. A growl on my lips, I bucked to throw him off. Marcus dug in his claws.

I stopped fighting my beast. Wings burst free from my back and sent Marcus flying.

Ness's alarmed shout grabbed my attention. Jackson had her by the wrists. He drove her back, towards the edge of the building. I could see the grin on his face as he leaned in and whispered something in Ness's ear.

My body moved before I could even think. My wings snapped out and caught air as I leapt. Ness tumbled backwards. The world seemed to slow, the seconds dragging by. I watched her fall in slow motion and wondered if I would be able to catch her in time.

Her mouth formed an O of shock. She reached forward, fingers grabbing at the empty air—empty air where I should have been.

Don't worry. I'm coming.

There was no time to say the words. I tried to send them down the connection that'd brought me back to her, but I had no way of knowing if it'd worked. Ness could see me. She knew that I was coming for her.

The brothers had other ideas, though. They leapt on my back. Time slowed even more with them holding me back. I snarled and lashed my tail, hitting one brother. He grunted as he hit the ground. The other brother wrapped his arm around my neck.

I paid him little attention and threw myself over the edge of the building. The shifter on my back—Jackson? Marcus? I didn't have time to tell which was which—let out a pathetic whimper when the world opened beneath us.

Ness's expression changed from panic to acceptance. She mouthed something, but the wind stole the words from me. Like hell was I going to let her hit the ground. That wasn't going to happen today.

I snapped my wings in tight. The extra weight on my back helped me plummet faster. The ground below rushed up to greet us. The way time slowed, it seemed as if I had nothing to worry about. I couldn't trust my perception.

The fourth-floor windows passed us. Then the third-floor windows. Right before we reached the second-floor windows, I caught Ness and threw my wings out. The air became solid beneath me. I cradled Ness close to my chest, twisted my body, and dumped the shifter on my back.

He let out a loud yelp, but the fall wasn't far now. Without him on my back, I rose into the air. Could Ness hear the frantic beat of my heart? Could she tell how I'd been afraid to lose her?

NESS

I BURIED my face in Ryder's chest. Inside, my hound was still scrambling in a panic. She howled in terror for several more moments before realizing that we were safe. When she paused, panting, I let out a sob.

For a moment back there, I'd been prepared to hit the ground. There was a slim chance that I could have walked away from it. Not because of my shifter healing. I was pretty sure that impact would have killed me.

The memory of Alvin snapping my neck made me wonder if I could have come back from that fall. How much of that could I have healed? Would death keep shoving me back into the world of the living until I'd finished my job here? Or did I only have one get-out-of-death-free card?

There were too many questions still up in the air. I'd accepted my fate way too easily. Though, there wasn't much I could have done to survive the fall. Once I lost my footing, I'd been helpless. Only the sight of Ryder leaping after me gave me any solace. With Ryder there, Alvin wouldn't be able to pick up my body and carry me away.

Thankfully, Ryder had my back. His wings were a wonderous thing to behold, stretching from his human shoulders. From a distance, his dragon features were dark. This close, I could see the subtle iridescence in his scales and the way the membrane of his wings shimmered in the pale daylight.

When I looked up at his face, I noticed scales climbing from the corners of his jaw to his temples. They, too, glittered in the light. He glanced down at me with worry. I didn't know what he was worried about anymore.

He'd caught me.

I was safe...for now.

Alvin had been in my head when I'd reached the edge of the roof. Alvin had told me to jump. I'd felt my body tense in preparation. It'd taken every ounce of willpower I could muster to keep myself from leaping over the edge.

When I wouldn't jump myself, Jackson had taken it upon himself to get the job done.

I missed the warm feeling in my parents' kitchen with Dad steadily making a stack of pancakes. I yearned for the sound of forks scraping plates as we all tried to get every last drop of maple syrup.

I'd already had enough excitement to last me the rest of my life. If I survived this, I would never go in search of any other kind of thrill ever again. Roller coasters? Hell no. Skydiving? Not me.

When Ryder banked around a corner and tilted his wings to create drag, I tensed. Not because I expected us to fall—if anything, the landing was smooth—but because I wasn't prepared to walk on my own two feet yet.

With Alvin in my head, I didn't know if I could trust my own body. Ryder seemed to understand that without me having to say it out loud. That, or he just wasn't ready to let go of me yet. Either way, I allowed him to adjust his hold on me and carry me out of Lakesedge. The evidence of his partial shift vanished, both wings and tail disappearing back into his body.

The walk was long, but I dozed in his arms. Every so often, I would wake and think of his car, parked in the heart of Lakesedge. I thought about mentioning this, but I kept falling back to sleep before I could open my mouth.

I woke on the bed in Ryder's rental apartment. This place had become my home in the past few days. With Ryder warming my back, I had little reason to move. He tightened his grip on me when I wriggled. His growl rumbled in my ear and sent chills down my spine.

Those chills turned into fireworks deep in my core. My breath shuddered out of me as need gripped me tight.

"I almost failed you again," Ryder growled.

I could feel his anger towards himself. Twisting in his arms, I was able to press my forehead to his. Before I could even say anything, he cupped my cheek and pressed his lips to mine. I melted against him. Without thinking, I parted my lips for him.

His tongue delved into my mouth. He explored me with an urgency he'd never shown before. His hand on my cheek slid back so that he could cup the base of my skull. I let him hold me because here, I was safe. With him, I would always be safe.

The ice around my heart began to melt again. I couldn't let it disappear. I had to hold onto it so that Alvin's binding ritual couldn't take hold of my arcana. He'd used it once, but the arcana had been a weak shadow of itself. If the ice melted, then he would have more.

I braced my hands against Ryder's chest and shoved myself away. He didn't try to hold me still. Ryder let me break the kiss, though I could see the hurt in his eyes as I did so. He reached for me again but curled his hand into a fist to stop himself.

I watched his eyes flash bright with electrical energy. A spark darted through me, like I was the lightning that he was calling. It drew me into him. I dragged in a ragged breath and held myself back.

If Ryder melted the ice inside me, then we would be screwed. I didn't want Alvin to use me as a weapon against the man I loved. If the ritual's

arcana got past the ice protecting me, then I wanted Ryder to leave town.

Hell, I would ask the whole pack to run, if I could.

“You’re still mad that I didn’t find you sooner,” Ryder said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

My head lifted. “Huh? What?”

He gave me a tight, apologetic smile, his brows vaulted in the center. “If I’d caught up to you faster, Jackson wouldn’t have been able to push you off the roof. I’m sorry that I was too slow.”

“No! That’s not...I’m not mad at you.” I bit my lip and weighed what I would say next. “There’s a chance that I could have survived that. I’ve come back from the dead before. Wow, that sounds funny when I say it out loud.”

He huffed, a facsimile of a laugh. Even though his lips lifted ever so slightly, I could tell that it was just for show. If anything, my words might have made things worse. And I couldn’t do anything to fix the situation. I had to hold myself at a distance so that he wouldn’t melt the ice protecting me from the ritual arcana.

If I told him why I kept myself at a distance, I might let my guard down. I had to hold fast, even if it hurt, because Ryder couldn’t protect me from what was already inside me. He could save me from being kidnapped and thrown off a rooftop, but he couldn’t reach inside me and prevent the ritual arcana from seizing control of me.

I placed my hand against his chest. There, I could feel the steady beat of his heart. If he felt anything, I couldn’t tell. I hadn’t quite realized what I was doing—that I’d wanted to feel the frantic beat of his heart—until disappointment sank like a stone in the pit of my stomach.

Maybe he didn’t care as much as I thought. Ryder was just doing a job. What a weird way to go about a job. Had he held me in my sleep just so that he would know if I was possessed again? I’d started to think that maybe he might love me in return, but I could tell now that Ryder just wanted to make sure I lived.

“Saving me won’t bring your father back,” I mumbled before crawling out of bed.

I didn’t wait for Ryder to say anything before I left the room. I padded into the living room, filled with the pale light of the setting sun. My stomach grumbled unhappily, but I couldn’t stand the thought of eating just yet.

Behind me, I heard the thunder of approaching footsteps.

“Do you really think I’m here because I want to fulfil some kind of cosmic balance?” Ryder bellowed.

Fists balled at my sides, I spun around and faced him. He glared down at me. His beast lit his eyes with a churning storm. I could feel the same storm crackling within me. It filled the air with the scent of ozone and lifted my curls.

“This isn’t about my father,” Ryder growled low.

I covered his heart with my hand. “Then what is this about? Because I can tell that you don’t...”

His heart thundered now. It slammed against my hand.

He was angry with me. His heart hadn’t responded out of love or fear for me, but in anger. I snatched my hand back and tightened it into a fist once more. Biting my lip, I lifted my gaze to meet his.

“No.” With a growl, he snatched my hand back and slapped it over his heart.

I tried to pull back, but Ryder held me in place. When I narrowed my eyes at him and growled back, he didn’t budge. He stared me down while his heart thumped against my palm. With my hand against him, I could even feel the subtle tremble of his chest.

He let go of my wrist. I thought I would be able to escape, but he captured my face. His lips crashed into mine. I groaned and opened without thinking about the consequences. Hunger pinched my core tight. I gripped his shirt for dear life as a wave of emotions threatened to drown me.

I broke away and sucked down air. Ryder barely gave me a moment to breathe before he pushed me back onto the couch. I fell and bounced, but the weight of his body soon pinned me down. His hands travelled down my sides. One stayed on my hip while the other slid back up my body, leaving a trail of searing hot fire behind.

I arched into him. A needy whimper escaped my mouth. I wound my arms around the back of his neck so that he couldn’t escape.

Even though thoughts of Bri strayed through my mind, I quickly swatted them away. Greedily, I shoved my tongue into Ryder’s mouth. The sound of his groan drove my hound wild. She rolled over in delight.

Mate, she cried. Mate!

Ryder thrust. I could feel the evidence of his need, rock hard against my groin. It pulled another needy whimper out of me. I dragged my claws

along his back in an effort to get closer to him, even though there was already no space left between us.

Only clothing.

Take it off. Take him.

My hound whispered to me. She goaded me, telling me what to do and how to do it.

I broke away, gasping. Ryder shuddered, a look flashing across his face before he buried it in my shoulder. His hand on my thigh tightened. He trembled once again. I got the sense that he was fighting his dragon the same way I fought my hound.

We couldn't do this.

I had no idea why we reacted to each other this way, but he already had a mate. A shifter couldn't have two mates. My hound had latched onto him because he made me feel safe, not because he truly was my mate.

If Bri wasn't his mate, he would have told me by now. He wouldn't have dodged my question earlier. Whatever was happening between them, I couldn't get in the middle of it.

"Ness," Ryder moaned.

Electric excitement shot through my core at the sound of my own name on his lips. I arched into him again before I could stop myself. He growled and yanked me tight to his body. His cock still pressed between my legs. It throbbed in time with my own need, a feeling so exquisite I could have cried.

I was actually going to cry if I had to fight this any longer. If I didn't get away from Ryder, I would make a mistake that would hurt my friend. Bri didn't deserve this. She seemed like a good woman.

The ice...

I shoved Ryder back in a panic. Hands to my own chest, I searched for the icy barrier that had been protecting me.

It was still there, but not as strong as before. The ice had melted, and now there were cracks running through it. I scrambled off the couch and lurched out the door. When it slammed behind me, I lifted my face to the sky.

New clouds opened and rained soft droplets upon my face. The chill air and rivulets of water on my skin cooled the heat pulsing in my core. I couldn't give in. There were so many reasons why I couldn't have what I wanted.

My tears mixed with the rain. When Ryder stepped outside and joined me on the porch, he couldn't see my tears. He pushed a beer into my hand and sat down beside my legs. We stayed like that, wordless, for a long while.

Finally, when we were soaked through, we shared a look.

Do we go back inside? We certainly weren't going to pick up where we'd left off. There was a hurt on his face that he couldn't quite hide. He did his best by not looking me in the eye. He kept his face turned away from me for the most part.

But Bri, I wanted to say.

I didn't understand what they were to one another. I'd assumed they were mates with a hefty amount of baggage between them. Now, I wasn't sure. I had no idea what to think.

Even if they weren't mates, and I could have Ryder all to myself just the way I wanted...I still couldn't risk letting him past the ice in my chest. That barrier death had left in my chest kept me safe. If Ryder's affection melted it, then we would both be in trouble.

So, in the end, it didn't matter what we were to one another. I couldn't let him get close.

The thought made me want to scream. I cursed fate for everything it had done to me. If I could weave my arcana into my voice and tell fate to fuck off, I would have. Somehow, I doubted fate was listening. It'd never answered me before. Why start now?

"I'm going on a manhunt tomorrow," Ryder said.

I nodded. "We're going on a manhunt."

Ryder looked like he wanted to argue with me, but he pursed his lips, looked away, and gave a nod. The rain had plastered his dark hair to his forehead. When he slicked his hair back, I got a good look at his eyes. His beast was still close to the surface.

"When is the last time you fully shifted?" I asked.

Ryder gave a shrug.

I rolled my eyes. "You should take a day to shift. Your beast needs to get out and stretch its legs. You can't keep a beast that large cooped up forever."

"There's too much that needs to be done." He stood and shook his head. "Don't worry about me. Think about yourself."

I recoiled from the last words. Guilt slapped me across the face. I opened my mouth to tell him that I wasn't just thinking of myself, then I realized that's not what he meant.

Ryder reached for me then hesitated. He settled for putting a hand on my shoulder. I wanted to pull him into me, but I swallowed the overwhelming urge and kept my hands to myself. He gave a nod and went back inside.

I didn't deserve him.

N_{ess}

THE NEXT DAY was just as dreary. My body ached and begged me to slow down, but there was no time. Alvin was still a threat to everyone in the Lakesedge Pack, me most of all. If we wasted even a day, we might lose whatever advantage we had.

I wrapped my arms around myself as I looked up at the abandoned building that Alvin had taken me to barely a handful of days ago. The air here was cold, but maybe that was the stormfront heading our way. I shivered and followed Ryder inside.

He claimed that we could look for clues here, but I doubted that we would find anything useful. If anything, I thought I was about to find my way into an anxiety attack—a whole lot of good that would do anyone.

Still, I followed Ryder. He sniffed the air, his chin lifting ever so slightly with each inhale. I did the same and found nothing out of the ordinary. The building smelled of dust, burnt candles, and me. I followed the scent of candles into the room where Alvin had set up the ritual.

The duffle bag was still there. I kicked aside the silver bindings that I'd left behind and tried to ignore the shiver trying to climb my spine again. I hated this. I didn't want to be here. It was just a reminder of a battle I still hadn't won.

Looking over my shoulder, I watched Ryder prowl from empty room to empty room as though he might find something useful. There wasn't a trail here. I couldn't smell Alvin or the witch. Both had hidden their scents behind magic.

Perhaps I could call Cerri and ask for a potion that might undo the witch's spell work, but I didn't know if there would be a scent left behind. How did it work? Did the spell mask a scent? Or did it keep someone from even leaving a scent behind? I wasn't about to waste time to uncover something that might not even be there.

Then Ryder called out. I followed the sound of my name and found him standing in the exit. Ryder crouched and picked something up from the ground just outside the exit. A small wood medallion hung from his fingertips.

I lifted both brows. My heart pattered excitedly at the sight of the spelled sigil in Ryder's hands. Curious, I sniffed the air.

Immediately, my stomach churned at the scent of rot in the air. I gagged.

"Beryl mentioned that Alvin has a curse on him. She isn't sure where it came from, but it's been eating away at him." Ryder looked out into the alley behind the building.

There was a narrow strip of pavement that ran along the back of the building, an iron fence parallel to it. On the other side of the iron fence was a small park with an overflowing trashcan at the center.

As I stared at the trashcan, my mind turned over recent events. A while back, Alvin had kidnapped my father and tried to use him against me. As Ryder had been carrying me away from the scene, I'd felt my arcana move for the first time that day. I just hadn't recognized it at the time when I'd said:

"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."

Maybe I was the one who'd cursed him. I hadn't meant to. The words didn't seem like enough to explain what was going on. I brought my hand to my throat, my fingertips grazing my skin.

What kind of power did I have? It was just another reason I couldn't let Alvin take control of me.

Just another reason I had to keep my distance from Ryder.

Man, this shit sucked bug fat balls, and I was fucking tired of it. I really hoped that curse took effect sooner rather than later.

I pushed past Ryder and followed Alvin's rotten scent to the iron fence. The tyrant Alpha had hopped the fence. A small scrap of fabric clinging to the top radiated Alvin's horrid aroma. I slapped my hand over my mouth and nose before stumbling back.

Glancing up and down the fenced-in alley, I searched for an exit. When I didn't see one nearby, I knew we had to hop the fence, too. Ryder knelt near it and cupped his hands together so he could give me a boost up and over.

"Are you sure you want my muddy boots in your hands?" I asked teasingly.

Ryder sighed and rolled his eyes. While I wanted to stay here and poke at him some more, I knew we had a job to do. When would we get a break, though? I still wanted to go back to my parents' kitchen and the smell of fresh-cooked bacon.

That sounded so much better than tracking a three-day-old scent trail toward the monster who'd been tormenting me for half of my life.

Ryder

NESS WAS PRICKLY TODAY. I wanted to pry and figure out what was bothering her, but she'd made it clear that she didn't want me. My dragon growled hungrily whenever I thought of my mate, but I had to remind the beast that we couldn't make her do anything.

Our mate had made a decision. Though I didn't know why, I had to respect it...

I had to try, at the very least.

My beast growled stubbornly. I could feel its rising ire twisting. The beast's thoughts were becoming tangled and wrong. I swallowed them back, but that didn't stop the creature's corruption.

I lifted Ness over the fence and watched her move further away from me. My beast snarled and lashed out. It sent me rocking forward. I had to catch myself on the fence. Ness didn't notice. The sound of her boots hitting the ground swallowed my moment of weakness.

Shoving the beast back, I promised I would deal with its greed later. I would address the Treasure Sickness slowly creeping in.

“Fuck,” I muttered as I ran a hand over my face.

Ness half-turned and gave me a look of concern. “Are you all right? I can go on without you if you need me to.”

My beast gnashed its teeth. Like hell would it let her go on ahead without me. I jumped the fence in one motion. Ness called me a showoff under her breath. The sound of her voice eased my beast’s twisting thoughts for a heartbeat.

I wanted to reach out and touch her, pull her into me, taste her lips again. The desire nearly got the better of me. My hand was already reaching out towards her before I caught myself and pulled back.

Mine. Mine. Mine, the beast muttered inside my skull. The endless repetition invaded my thoughts until I couldn’t think straight.

Being this close to Ness while she refused me would be the death of me. I didn’t know how much longer I could take this. Perhaps surrounding myself with pack would change things. The sense of family and home might ease my beast’s racing thoughts for a little while. It would do good for my beast to remember that there was more to life than one person.

What is life without her, though?

I swallowed and tried not to think of the answer to my beast’s question. Ness had nearly died again. Every damn time I turned my back, she came close to leaving this world. While she believed that she would be able to come back from anything, I didn’t want to watch her hurt over and over again.

I wasn’t going to let it come to that. Though I said nothing, I made her a silent promise that I wouldn’t let her die again.

Ness led me toward the overflowing trashcan in the center of the small park. She picked at the trash, much to my confusion. When she lifted a ripped shirt, she scowled dubiously and threw it back into the bin.

I scanned the park. “He shifted somewhere near here, then.”

She nodded.

I mean, there was a chance that Alvin had walked around shirtless, but that wasn’t likely. Being topless in the city would have attracted too much attention. He must have found a corner of the park that would hide him as he shifted.

With the protection sigil left outside the building, I could track Alvin's scent now. The sourness of it wasn't enough to distract my beast from Ness, though. A part of my mind stayed on her as I traced Alvin's footsteps. Though I should have pulled my beast away from her, I figured I might have an early warning system should anything happen.

Marcus and Jackson had managed to sneak up on us last time. I didn't need that happening again.

We followed the scent to a trail through the woods. Though the trail was littered with human debris like crushed beer cans, I figured it wasn't just a hangout spot. This trail likely led somewhere, perhaps a couple of blocks away, depending on how far the park stretched.

"How...how are we going to kill him?" Ness asked.

I did a double take. Her gaze remained ahead, on the trail that Alvin had likely taken. There was a shadow over her features, though.

I stepped in front of her. "We're not killing anyone. We're going to exile him. That's it."

She looked up at me, aghast. "Seriously? After everything he's done, you're going to let him get away?"

I thought she'd changed her mind. She'd told me that she wouldn't ask me to kill anyone, yet here she was. She looked at me as if I had sentenced the rest of the world to death.

Ness lowered her voice. "Alvin is a murderer. If we let him go, we're risking the lives of others. Can you sleep with that on your conscience? Because I can't."

"Can you sleep with murder on your hands?" I snapped without thinking.

Ness lifted her chin even though her eyes darkened dangerously. "Not well, but I can so long as I know that I did it for the right reason."

As of now, both Ness and I had killed out of necessity. While I'd put down a good man who'd been taken by a sickness of the mind, Ness had killed a bad man to save herself. The two situations were so different yet ended the same way:

With guilt that intrinsically changed who we were.

I sighed and shook my head. "I won't do it again."

Ness twisted her hands. "I can't do it on my own."

"Then it looks like it's not going to happen," I said with a shrug.

When I turned and stormed down the wooded path, Ness chased after me. She grabbed my shoulder and tried to spin me around, but I shrugged her off.

“You can’t be Alpha unless you challenge Alvin and win. How do you think that’s going to happen? Do you think Alvin is going to concede and let you have the pack?”

While Ness had a point, that wasn’t always how power exchanges happened. Most of the Lakesedge Pack had already welcomed me. For the rest, I was working on a trial period. They didn’t trust me to return after I’d taken care of my brother.

If I didn’t come back, it wasn’t because I didn’t want to.

“I’m not...” Ness paused, her voice tight. The way she shivered, it was as if something cold had suddenly wrapped itself around her. “I don’t want to force your hand, but I don’t think we’ll be safe until he’s dead and in the ground. That might be my only purpose in life. Why else would I be here?”

Beryl’s information had clouded Ness’s mind. “You’re not a tool with one purpose. You’re a shifter, a person. Don’t let anyone convince you that you have no use unless you do something for them.”

She gave me a weak half-smile, her eyes still shadowed with thoughts that she wasn’t sharing. I sighed, near defeated. If she would let me, I would pull her into my body to show her that fate had given her more than she expected.

Ness didn’t want me, though. My beast snarled at the thought. The creature inside me would have its mate, eventually. She would give in and learn how to love me at some point.

I shoved the beast down and told it to behave. Those were not the thoughts of a good man, but of a corrupted beast. There was no way that I could force Ness to do anything. I wouldn’t let the Treasure Sickness ruin her life, too.

I diverted the subject to distract my beast. In the past couple of days, I’d done a lot of thinking. There were changes that needed to be made. The pack had a lot of weak spots, and I’d figured out how to patch them for the most part.

Unfortunately, I hadn’t discussed them with Ness yet. This was her pack. I needed her approval, even if she wasn’t an Alpha. I would be taking over as Alpha, so I had the power to make any changes I wanted. However, I needed Ness to be happy and safe here.

“The pack will be safe after I bring in some new recruits.” I pressed forward down the trail. “I’ve been talking to Thor from the sanctuary in Tennessee. He says he has a few shifters who are ready for new lives outside of the sanctuary. Our pack could use some new muscle.”

NESS

RYDER WANTED TO...BRING in new people? The thought stunned me and left me stuck. Ryder moved on ahead, leaving me a few paces behind while I processed what he’d said.

New people? New shifters in the pack?

But this was the only pack I’d ever known. If we changed the pack, would it still be the same pack that I’d sacrificed so much for? I didn’t like this idea of change. I knew what to expect from my old pack.

I didn’t want to put my trust in new people only to have them let me down later. Oddly enough, I was more comfortable with the cold looks from my old packmates. At least I knew where they stood.

Fuck, this was confusing.

I followed Ryder down the path. The smell of rot grew stronger and stronger, as if Alvin had been here moments ago instead of days ago. That should have been enough to pull me out of my thoughts, but I got trapped in the whirling torrent inside my head.

These new people were going to have to earn my trust. If Ryder expected them to fill positions of power within the pack, I would be on guard twenty-four/seven again. They were strangers; any one of them would be capable of doing horrible things.

Thor could vouch for them, and his word would go a little ways. Still, I knew from experience that bad people could hide in plain sight for a long time. Alvin had gotten away with it for years...

No. He hadn’t. Most of the pack had known, in one way or another. They’d gotten glimpses of Alvin’s dangerous side. Catriona had felt the sting firsthand when her sister was chased out of the pack.

Chased.

I had a creeping suspicion that Catriona's sister was six-feet-under, but I wasn't about to bring that up any time soon.

Chest tight with apprehension, I opened my mouth to tell Ryder that I would think about it. Before I could utter even a syllable, he threw his hand out to stop me. I ran into his arm, earning a quick glare from him. He held his finger to his lips, and I gave a quick nod.

Ahead, the park trail split. There was a well-worn path to the right and a break in the undergrowth to the left that seemed new. The smell of rot wafted from the left. It was so strong that I had to hold my hand over my face. Still, that barely protected me from the oppressing smell.

A soft crackle, like branches breaking, came from the left. Ryder stiffened. When I scented the air, I tried to sniff out whoever might have been hiding out of sight, but the smell of death was too strong in the air. How could Alvin have left behind such a strong scent?

For a moment, I had a hopeful thought, that we would push through the undergrowth and find Alvin dead in a small grove. Alvin had used the ritual arcana against me several times since he'd come through this way, though. He had to be alive, still. I shuddered to think that he could control me from beyond the grave.

"Stay here," Ryder whispered before taking the first step forward.

Like hell would I let him do this alone. I quietly picked my way through the brush, careful to be silent. No twigs snapped under my feet. I barely even made a rustle. Still, Ryder knew what I was up to. He glanced back, giving me a dirty look.

I wasn't going to fall back now, though. I motioned for him to keep going. He rolled his eyes and put one hand back. Without thinking, I took his hand.

Butterflies danced in my stomach. I shouldn't have touched him. I was trying to put distance between us, but his presence pulled me in. Around him, I didn't have to think. My body moved on its own.

That wasn't good when I needed to keep this ice in place. Right now, I could feel death so close that its chill permeated my entire being. I didn't think the ice would melt if I held Ryder's hand.

That deathly chill in the air should have been the first warning of what was ahead. No, that smell of rot should have given it away. I'd assumed that smell had belonged to Alvin. I hadn't even considered that there would be something actually rotting on this path.

Ryder pushed a branch aside, revealing a small, dark grove within the woods. I blinked, my eyes adjusting to the dim light. When my vision sharpened, I let out a yelp. From a rope dangled what had been an animal. The branch decided to snap right then and there.

The dead animal hit the ground with a sickening splat. I grimaced and hid my face behind Ryder. He stood still, his attention still fixed on the dead animal on the ground. I dared another peek to see what the animal had been.

The creature had become indistinguishable in death. Not only was it bloated and rotting, but someone had spilled its guts onto the ground, creating a mess of insides and outsides that my brain did not want to process.

“Who would have done something like this?” Ryder asked.

Considering the fact that we’d been tracking Alvin’s scent down this path, I figured there was only one answer to that question. However, I did wonder if we’d been wrong. If we’d been tracking the smell of rot and not Alvin’s actual scent, we could have wandered down the wrong path.

Then I noticed the red candle sitting nearby. In the dim light here, everything seemed different shades of gray. I almost didn’t see it at first. The candle was the same as the ones Alvin had set up for the ritual.

I swallowed the lump growing in my throat. It was difficult not to blame myself for the scene before us. My lower lip trembled as I tried to form words. My brain played on a loop, though.

Your fault. Your fault. Your fault.

My hound gnashed her teeth. The sound broke through the droning inside my skull. I shook myself and sucked in a deep, yet shaky breath. The hound reminded me that I was not to blame for Alvin’s machinations.

Still, I mourned the poor creature’s life. It hadn’t deserved to die this way.

Ryder knelt near what I could only call a crime scene. He sniffed, cringed, and tightened his jaw like he was fighting the urge to vomit and didn’t want to show it. He didn’t have to put on that much bravado around me, but I couldn’t find my voice to tell him.

That night, after Ryder helped me escape Alvin’s ritual, I’d lost control of my body in my sleep. This scene was so close to the building where Alvin had kept me that there was no other explanation that made sense.

Alvin needed to sacrifice an animal in order to control me.

He'd done it twice now. I wondered if those small commands required sacrifice, too. How many animals had Alvin killed just to give me a command? I shuddered to think of what he was willing to do to keep me as a tool.

"This isn't your fault," Ryder said even though the smell in the area must have choked him.

I gave a weak nod because I clearly didn't believe him. Had fate not put me here, then maybe things would have been easier. Instead, Alvin saw me as a weapon that he could use against his pack. Now that I had power, Alvin would do anything to have it for himself.

"This is why I want to put an end to this rat bastard once and for all." I backpedaled out of the grove.

Once I was back on the path, I sucked down more air. Though it wasn't completely free of the stench of rot, it was far better than being right on top of the dead creature.

Alvin would have me as his weapon. If I lost control of the ice keeping my arcana safe, then all bets were off. I sank into a crouch, my head on my knees while I fought back tears. Ryder didn't follow, leaving me alone to consider the weight of my accursed existence.

If I'd listened to my father and left with Thor a while back, then this wouldn't have happened. Alvin wouldn't have used me against my pack, or against Ryder. Ryder thought he was safe with me, but I'd come so close to hurting him. I hated the thought that it would happen again.

So long as Alvin was alive, he would keep sacrificing animals to make me hurt those I loved.

I would find the strength to kill him myself if that was what it took. I didn't care what Ryder thought anymore. Maybe he wouldn't be the one to kill Alvin, but it needed to be done. I needed to learn how to do things myself.

A shiver of worry rippled through me. If Alvin sacrificed an animal, he would be able to stop me from hurting him. I found myself in Ryder's position. I'd commanded Ryder to leave Harvey alone, which had rendered Ryder incapable of stopping Harvey when I'd needed him the most.

Worst of all, every night that passed put us in danger again. While Alvin was away, he could do whatever he wanted. He could take control of me in the middle of the night and force me to hurt Ryder. If Ryder wanted to bring in reinforcements, then maybe that wasn't such a bad idea.

They could help keep him safe.

Safe from me.

Well, this sucked. But that wasn't anything new.

N_{ess}

RYDER TOOK his time burying the dead animal while I waited back on the path. Eventually, I sat down and buried my head in my hands. While my mind tumbled one thought into another in the silence, I tried to push my attention in another direction.

The pack would change soon. We wouldn't look like the same huddling mass of terrified animals that we'd been. We were under new leadership. Ryder wanted to stay. He even had plans for the future.

I got the sense that he was worried about his brother, but we would deal with that when it came time. I wasn't going to let his brother hurt him. So long as I had access to my arcana, I would make sure of it. I would stay by Ryder's side and keep using my command until my voice dried up.

Anything to make sure Ryder stayed safe.

He quietly exited the grove and touched my elbow to tell me to get up. I jerked, suddenly on alert. Heart hammering in my throat, I looked up at Ryder with wild eyes. He didn't say anything. By now, I was sure he understood.

Shit, I hated this. I just wanted to feel safe.

We were fighting to be safe. There was a future ahead of us that promised happiness if only we could get through this part first. As wary as I was of new shifters, I knew that Ryder had the right idea. We couldn't rely

on the pack as it was. We had to strengthen our numbers with shifters who wouldn't panic like I just had.

The thought that I wasn't fighting just for myself, but for what the pack could become was what got me back on my feet. I squeezed Ryder's hand before letting go. If I held onto him for too long, then I would never want to let go.

Someday, I might be able to hold onto him longer. Maybe...Maybe I could share him with Bri?

My hound growled. No, she didn't want that. She wanted Ryder all to herself. She wouldn't allow anyone else to touch him. If they tried, they would lose a finger...then a hand if they tried again.

My hound had become possessive of this man. She'd claimed him, heart and soul.

Stupid dog, I thought. *Why couldn't you have found someone else? Someone who wasn't already claimed?*

Ryder would bring new shifters into the pack, soon. There was a chance I could have found a lover among them. Instead, my hound had latched onto an unavailable man.

And, he'd done the same to me. Which I did not understand in the least. He kept reaching for me, touching me, looking at me like he had something he wanted to say. There were words trapped behind his lips, a thought behind those beautiful eyes, that I wanted to know. I wanted to hear what he wasn't saying.

"I have to speak with Thor and Bri," Ryder said. "You should visit your parents while I'm gone."

I lifted a brow. "Thor *and* Bri? Don't you want to have a private conversation with Bri? Or, do you mean you're going to speak to them one at a time?"

Ryder gave me an odd look, his head tilted as he studied me quizzically. I opened my mouth and shut it when I couldn't think of anything else to say. Honestly, I was really confused, myself.

"Go," Ryder said. "Spend time with your family."

Well, that didn't answer any of my questions. Apparently, he and Bri still hadn't kissed and made up yet? As much as I wanted to pry, it wasn't my business.

Back at my parents' house, I marveled at how much had changed. Not only had I basically moved out in the past couple of weeks, but it seemed as

though others had moved in. The house was buzzing with activity when I arrived.

The kitchen was alive with bodies, dancing around one another as they prepared meals. I dared a quick peek into the kitchen before moving on. I wasn't about to mess up their careful choreography.

In the hall, Haylee passed me on my left. Kelsey softly apologized and quickly darted after her. Stunned, I stopped and watched the two climb the stairs to the second floor. Then, the back door opened, and I heard someone start to kick off their boots.

The sound was so familiar that I knew who it was without looking. I went to the mudroom door and leaned against the frame as Dad kicked his boots into the corner, even though there was a tray for them nearby.

Dad smiled and pulled me into a tight hug. The affection caught me off guard. I still wasn't used to seeing kindness from him. He'd always been so surly, so angry about what I'd become. Now that things were changing, and he could see hope ahead, maybe he'd finally cast off that anger once and for all.

Awkwardly, I stepped back. "What's going on today?"

"What do you mean?"

I gestured to the full house. Someone passed behind me right at that time, proving my point.

The corner of Dad's mouth lifted. "People need somewhere to go. Everyone used to convene at Alvin's estate. We lost that after your first shift."

I bit my lower lip to keep from saying something that might divert the conversation in a dangerous direction. I didn't like being blamed for this over and over. No one asked me if I wanted to be a damned Barghest.

Dad put a hand on my shoulder. "I told everyone that they could come here. It's not the same, but the pack seems happier now."

That was nice, but I realized that Dad hadn't fully forgiven me for what I couldn't control. I pulled away from his touch and wrapped my arms around my middle. Before he could question what was wrong, Mom called from the kitchen.

I gave Dad a tight smile and backed away so I could answer Mom. The kitchen had emptied, everyone else heading to separate corners of the house. I was grateful for the alone time with her. Tugging a chair away from the table, I sank into it and sighed.

Mom wrinkled her nose as she brought a mug over to me. While I caught the smell of chocolate and hazelnut, Mom must have smelled the dead creature on me. She waved her hand in front of her nose in the universal signal for *stinky*.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She laughed. “Maybe you should take a shower before your boyfriend gets back.”

I sputtered into my coffee. “Boyfriend?”

“Yeah. The dragon shifter. Ryder. I assumed that the two of you were seeing each other. The way he looks at you, I can tell that he’s more than interested. He could be waiting for the right time. If that’s the case, then I’ll tell you now that there’s no such thing as the right time. You should lock that down before something happens.”

“Mom!” I set my coffee down because there was no way I’d be able to sip it without spitting it out.

Mom shrugged. “I’m just saying. If you want a future with the new Alpha, then you should make sure he knows that. Playing hard to get won’t do you any favors, darling.”

“He’s already mated to someone else. Even if I wanted him—which I don’t—then it would never work.”

Mom gave me a smug look filled with obvious disbelief as she bent to open the oven. She pulled out a tray of cookies and set them on the stovetop to cool before she moved them to the cookie rack.

“All right,” Mom said while she worked. “If he’s mated to Bri, then why aren’t they together right now? Why is she back in Colorado while he’s here? I mean, I know the two of you have been sleeping in the same bed. Why would he do that if he’s mated to Brigid?”

“I don’t know! None of this makes any sense to me, either.” I shook my head. “Besides, now isn’t the right time.”

Mom threw her hands in the air. When she spun to face me, she threateningly pointed her spatula at me. “I already told you. There’s no such thing as the right time. You’re going to wait, and then it will be too late. Mates are hard to come by. Don’t wait for that mate bond to click into place. Tell him how you feel now.”

My cheeks warmed. I lifted my coffee mug up to cover half of my face. Mom smiled, smug as ever, before turning back to her cookies.

Before long, the kitchen filled with people again. Janessa swept in and came to a shuddering halt when she saw me. I lowered my gaze to the coffee mug in my hand. The creamy surface of my beverage didn't reveal any secrets, but I also wasn't a witch.

Janessa didn't hesitate long, though. She whispered a soft thanks and gave me a quick nod before she snatched a spatula from Mom and ran for the exit again. I gave Mom a questioning glance.

"What...what did she just thank me for?" I asked.

Mom rolled her eyes again. "You sure are thick. You get that from your father."

"Mom," I groaned.

"You helped Janessa the other day! She knows you traded yourself so she could get away from Alvin. Don't act surprised just because she showed a bit of gratitude."

I swallowed. No one had thanked me before. If anything, I'd always felt the weight of blame, as if I'd been the one to start every conflict. I didn't expect to hear gratitude, least of all from Janessa who'd publicly blamed me before.

The pack was changing. Here, in my parents' home, the pack was healing. There would be scars, obviously, but things were getting better every day. I could see how much happier my packmates were.

Connor appeared in the doorway. He leaned against the frame and crossed his arms over his chest. He wore a cocky smile that I immediately wanted to wipe off his face. What was he so happy about?

Then I realized he was proud of the pack, too. My feelings towards Connor had become tangled, bringing up a knee-jerk reaction whenever he was around. Ever since he'd handed me over to Alvin, I'd been wary of my old friend.

He wanted to prove his loyalty to me again, but I wasn't sure if I could ever trust him again. I mean, what he did could have gotten me killed again. With what I knew now, I realized that Alvin wouldn't have killed me—he already knew that was a futile task. While I'd been safe from the threat of death, I'd still suffered.

"So, you and Ryder aren't a thing?" Connor asked, probably thinking he was smooth.

Man, how long had he been eavesdropping outside the door?

I opened my mouth to say no when the air in the house changed.

The front door opened, and the breeze carried a familiar scent to my nose. My heart leapt in excited anticipation. I sat upright. Mom gave me another smug smile. I fought the urge to playfully flip her off. She wasn't right. I would never be able to have Ryder.

He had a mate already. Loving a man with a mate was to ask for heartbreak. I wouldn't do that to myself.

He trudged into the kitchen. Mom wasted no time putting a coffee mug and two cookies into his hands. She smiled up at him and gently patted his cheek. Ryder's grim countenance melted. For a moment, pain stretched his lips. He quickly hid it behind the coffee mug, but his eyes were still glassy.

Ryder had left his family behind in Colorado. Mom's affection must have reminded him of his own mother that he might never see again. When Ryder came over to stand beside me, I bumped my shoulder against his thigh and looked up at him.

He didn't look at me. Not because he didn't want to acknowledge me, but because he was still blinking away tears. Before anyone noticed, I jumped out of my seat and started blabbering about the first thing that came to mind.

I leaned over the sink and parted the curtains in the window. "Why is everyone here? Janessa just took a spatula outside?"

"Your father decided today was a good day to start up the grill. He called the pack and told them to bring over anything they wanted cooked outside. Catriona brought a box of frozen hamburgers. Your father threw them out then went to the market for fresh burgers."

A smile reached the corner of my mouth. Outside, Dad stood over his old grill. He wore a cheap apron that had said "Don't Kiss the Cook" before he'd melted the lettering off in a grilling accident.

Okay, so it hadn't been an accident. We'd used way too much starter fuel and might have set off a fireball. Dad had lost both the lettering on his apron and his eyebrows that day.

Family.

There'd been some good moments in my past. I let my scars dictate what I did and didn't remember. Dad said some awful things in the past, but he'd also tried to help. He'd done his best despite the pain that it had caused him, too.

I wasn't ready to forgive my father, but I was hopeful for the future.

Ryder ran his hand over his face and sighed. "I should go out there and greet everyone."

"You don't have to do anything just this minute," Mom said. She kicked the backs of his legs. While she couldn't knock him over, the gesture prompted him to fall into the chair I'd vacated. "Take your time, hun."

I met Ryder's gaze across the kitchen. He gave me an incredulous look as if to say *did I really just listen to a human?* I laughed at him.

His break didn't last long before he stood and gently placed his coffee mug in the sink. I followed him out of the room because my hound couldn't bear to let him do this alone. The past few days had taken its toll on both of us. I wanted to take his hand, but I didn't trust myself.

Though I was hot on Ryder's heels, once we were outside, the pack separated us. Haylee and Kelsey pulled me aside to ask how I was doing. When the wind pushed my hair into my face, Haylee offered me the scrunchie on her wrist.

The gesture floored me in a way I never expected. There was a kind of sisterhood in it that I never expected to share with my packmates.

I accepted the scrunchie and pulled my curls out of my face.

"I always wished I had curls like yours," Haylee said wistfully. "I'm so jealous of your hair."

Kelsey laughed. "I'm jealous of your hound's fur. It's so sleek compared to a wolf's coarse fur. I wish my wolf were half as pretty as your hound."

What was going on? Was this what it was like to be pack? I didn't know what to say. A part of me couldn't help but feel like they were lying. I knew that was because I wasn't used to this, but logic didn't make the intrusive voice go away.

Behind me, Ryder laughed. The sound broke a little at the end, like he couldn't keep up the façade. I glanced over my shoulder. His smile was tight at the edges. Once I tore my attention away from him, I soon realized why.

The pack had bowed their heads. Some were still lowering themselves for him. One by one, they bared their necks in a show of submissive reverence. My breath hitched. The display was one of respect, but I could tell that Ryder was overwhelmed.

With wide eyes, he took in each and every shifter present. His gaze dragged along Janessa and Catriona like he wished he could do more for them. I broke away from Haylee and Kelsey to go to Ryder.

His eyes frantically leapt from head to head until I took his face between my hands and forced him to look at me. Worry and shame seemed to darken the lines of his face. He pulled back, squared his shoulders, and cleared his throat.

I stayed near, just in case.

“Get up. You don’t have to bow to me.” Ryder clenched and unclenched his fists at his sides.

Cool. Keep your cool, Ness. You can’t let the ice melt.

Watching Ryder struggle with his overwhelming emotions in the face of the pack’s appreciation threatened to melt the cold ice protecting my arcana. I sucked in a breath and tried to steady myself. If I shoved my feelings aside, then I could pretend that there wasn’t a slow and steady warmth building in my stomach.

“You’ve earned it,” Dad said to Ryder.

Ryder shook his head. “I’m not... I never asked... Don’t bow to me.”

A murmur passed over the pack. I could hear the confusion in their mixed voices. They threw confused glances in Ryder’s direction.

This close to Ryder, I heard the soft choked sound in his throat. He sucked in a breath between clenched teeth and took a step back. Before he could break down in front of the pack, I grabbed his hand and excused him from the impromptu cookout. Back inside, I led Ryder up the stairs to my old bedroom. I shut the door behind us and put my back against it so that he would know that no one was going to interrupt us.

Ryder collapsed onto the edge of my old bed. He stared ahead blankly, his hands dangling between his knees.

When he lifted his gaze to meet mine, he said, “I’m not Alvin.”

Taken aback, I studied him for a heartbeat. “What does that mean? Okay, let me backtrack. I know for a fact that you’re nothing like Alvin, but also, what does that mean?”

He swallowed. His gaze remained on the floor. His face was colorless all the while. I wished I could reach into his mind and draw him out of wherever his thoughts had gone. Instead, I could do nothing more than wait.

“The people outside submitted to me like I was going to punish them. I know that’s what they expect from an Alpha, but I don’t want to be that person.”

“Oh. That’s not at all what happened.” I laughed, much to his irritation if his dirty look told me anything. “They were greeting you with respect. No

one in the pack has greeted Alvin like that since my first shift. Alvin forced them on their knees. They chose to bow their heads to you. There's a difference."

Ryder didn't seem convinced. He still stared into the nothing. It made me wonder if guilt and shame were chewing on his insides. That was a feeling I could relate to, but not one that I knew how to stop.

Out of nowhere, Ryder asked, "What if I fail them?"

My heart ached for him. I dropped to my knees between his legs and took his face in my hands again. "You won't. We're going to defeat Alvin."

Ryder covered the back of my hand with his own. "And after that? What then? What if I can't be the Alpha that they need? I've already failed one shifter family."

"You didn't fail your other family. You did what needed to be done, and there were painful consequences. I know firsthand that a lot of the right choices come with painful consequences. Trading myself for Janessa got me into a world of trouble, but it was worth it when she thanked me earlier."

Neither of us could predict the future, but I was confident that Ryder would be a good Alpha. He'd already done more for this pack than Alvin had in his entire life.

"The pack doesn't even know about why I had to leave my clan," Ryder said, his voice cracking.

"They'll understand. Of all the people in the world, this pack will understand. When this is all over, and they get to know you as well as I do, they're going to love you. I promise. You may think their faith is misplaced right now, but they can tell a good person from a bad person. The pack knows that you're a good person, Ryder."

He pressed his lips into a thin, unconvinced line.

I was about two seconds away from shaking some sense into him. Frustrated, I pulled his head close and pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. The warmth in my core flared hot and bright. I had to shove it back down so that it wouldn't melt the ice in my chest.

With Ryder in my hands, I stood on a precarious precipice. I desperately wanted to heed my mother's advice and give everything to Ryder. Two things stood in the way. Even if Alvin hadn't cursed me with the binding ritual, then Bri would still have Ryder's heart.

I mourned what I could not have. It fucking sucked. It really did, but there was nothing I could do to break them apart, even if I wanted to. Which, I didn't. I wasn't going to destroy what they had.

Ryder ducked his head and rested it on my shoulder. His back shuddered as he caught his breath. Warmth spilled from him and washed over me. I wanted nothing more than to sink into him, but I held myself upright.

I ran my hand along his back. "The pack will chill out once they get to know you. Right now, they're being respectful. Enjoy it while you can. Before long, they're going to be teasing you. They're going to ask you when you and Bri are going to have little baby dragons. The pack will treat you like family soon."

Ryder stiffened. He turned his head but didn't lift it.

It seemed like he had something he wanted to say, but a shriek outside pulled us to our feet. Ryder helped me up and out the door without question. He practically flew down the stairs while I leapt down them, three at a time. I landed on the floor with a heavy thud that drew Ryder's attention for a split second.

Once he saw that I was all right, he ran outside. There, we saw my father standing with his phone outstretched in his hand. Dad's face was white as a sheet. He met Ryder's gaze with worried eyes.

The phone crackled and a familiar voice greeted us.

"Hello traitors," Alvin growled. "Now that I have you all in one place, it's time that I announce my return. Did you really think that I would stay away forever?"

I stiffened. That voice, the same one that had been inside my head lately, left me chilled to the bone. The fire in my core banked and died completely. I wrapped my arms around my middle.

In the background, I could hear a screeching animal trying to break free. I swallowed nervously. Beside me, Ryder stiffened. If Alvin had an animal nearby, he might try to sacrifice it and activate the alien arcana hiding inside me.

If I didn't leave, Alvin would make me do something I would regret.

"You all have one last chance to redeem yourselves," Alvin announced while the creature screeched louder and louder. "You all think you're safe. You think you can escape me. I will show you what happens to traitors who won't kneel."

My stomach hit the ground. I lurched backwards, twisted, and launched into a sprint. Dad called out, clearly confused. The world around me blurred. I needed to put as much space between myself and the pack as possible.

Mom stumbled out the front door and cried my name. I didn't stop.

Man, this was some bullshit. My ankles screamed at me for running in cheap combat boots. The ritual arcana flickered like a monster coming to life. My own electricity flashed in answer. The ritual arcana reached out and grabbed ahold of it.

I cursed under my breath and tried to wrench the electrical energy away from the ritual arcana. The effort made my feet tangle beneath me. I stumbled and caught myself, the sidewalk scraping my palms.

Above, the skies let out an ominous rumble. I hoped that was Ryder's doing and not mine, but I could already feel the arcana within me moving. It reached into the sky and grabbed ahold of the lightning.

Run, I thought to myself. You can't strike who you can't see.

I doubted Alvin wanted to strike me. Why waste a sacrifice on someone who might not even die? Besides, I was useful so long as I was alive.

So, I ran. And I hoped that Ryder had things handled back at the house.

Ryder

MY DRAGON ROARED. It demanded that I run after Ness, but I knew that I had to stay here. She'd done the right thing. I had work to do here.

I grabbed the phone from Bruce and held it to my ear. "We're not playing games, Alvin."

Alvin laughed. In the background, the creature let out one last wet and weak bleat before falling silent. My dragon roared, so loud that I couldn't hear what Alvin said next.

Ness was in trouble. Alvin made the sacrifice. He would use the binding spell against my mate soon. A part of me screamed to go to her, but I held firm. I couldn't go running whenever she needed me. There were others who needed me now.

My beast heard Janessa's whimper. The sound fractured the beast. On one hand, the beast wanted to run to our mate. On the other hand, we both knew that the pack needed us more. Ness had survived so much up until now. She would keep finding her way through every obstacle in her path.

Ness would come back to us.

Electrical energy crackled across my tongue. It sparked in the air. Overhead, the clouds darkened. Beside me, Bruce lifted his gaze to the sky. His attention slid towards the direction Ness had run. He put a hand on my shoulder, told me to stay here, and then ran after Ness.

I reached out for the man, but he moved quickly. Bruce disappeared before I could keep him here. If I ran after them both, then the pack would be defenseless.

Connor gave me a nod, a slight lift of his chin, as if to say that he would stay behind and protect the pack, but I couldn't leave them in his hands. Even if he hadn't destroyed my trust in him once, he wouldn't be able to hold Alvin off alone. If Jackson and Marcus arrived while I was gone, they'd be screwed.

The air smelled of smoke, fresh meat, and ozone. However, I couldn't smell the unique scent of death. That meant Alvin wasn't here. He wasn't lurking just out of sight with a dead animal.

"I will have my pack, one way or another," Alvin said. "No one, not even a lizard, will usurp me. If you think that your position is secured, think again. I will put you on your knees, too. I'll make you do things that make your past look like a daydream."

My beast growled in challenge. I wasn't sure how Alvin thought he would trap me in his ritual, but I wasn't going to give him the chance to try.

"Come out of hiding. Face me like a real Alpha. Or, are you scared that I'll defeat you?" I kept my chin up and my attention ahead even though my beast thrashed inside me.

The pack needed to see me with a level head. If they could see how my beast fought against me so that I could rescue Ness, then they would never trust me. They would see me as a broken man, just like my father.

The need sliced through me. It nearly sawed me in half. Her name tumbled through my mind, over and over until all I could think of was her. Which was odd as the beast dug its claws into me as if it could reach down to the earth that was our territory.

As both Alpha and Mate, I had a desire to protect both. Only faith kept me in place.

"We're never going to escape," Janessa whined.

Haylee shook her head. "That's not true. Ryder is doing everything in his power to hunt Alvin down."

Beside her, Kelsey nodded in agreement. I noticed that they held hands, their white knuckles nearly hidden by their bodies. They trusted me to protect them, but they couldn't deny their fear, either.

The brothers had been hiding their scent with the witch's spells. I scanned the landscape around us for signs of movement. They wouldn't

surprise me this time.

“Inside, everyone.” I motioned for them to file back into the house.

They all shared looks. Connor touched my shoulder and started pushing people towards the house. If they were all inside, it would be easier to protect them. Walls allowed limited entry, narrowing down attack opportunities. I could keep an eye on windows and doors.

Ness’s mother wrung her hands in the doorway as shifters passed her. She looked in my direction, her gaze pleading for me to do something else. I couldn’t leave, though. My hands were tied, as much as I hated it.

Had I not stepped up to become this pack’s Alpha, then I would have been able to chase after my mate. I would be right by her side, protecting her from whatever Alvin had planned. I hoped that Ness’s mother could see how torn I was, as well.

“Alvin is spineless,” Ness’s mother said. “He isn’t going to show up. No one is. This is just another one of his attempts to strike fear into us. You can leave. Go get *her*.”

My breath trembled, shuddering out of me. I lifted my gaze, though. More than a dozen faces watched me expectantly. Though Ness’s mother was probably right, leaving now would make a statement. It would tell the pack that I valued Ness above all others.

You will fall without her. You cannot lead without her. Don’t sacrifice what makes you whole.

I hushed my beast. I had to walk a fine line right now. The pack had put their trust in me, and I had to live up to their expectations now.

Go. Go get her. Save yourself. Save your pack.

The beast’s words no longer made sense. It became a jumbled mix of directives that pulled me in both directions. I couldn’t go both ways.

Ness

“CAN YOU...HEAR ME...YOU COWARD?” I said between gasping breaths.

I doubted Alvin could hear me through this bond. He would never cast a spell over me that would let me talk back. I’d already done that enough. Alvin knew exactly how defiant I could be.

“I hate you more than anything in this world. When I bury you in the ground, I’ll tell the pack to take turns pissing on your grave. We’ll make it a yearly celebration. Everyone will take the day off so we can piss on your grave once a year. It will be less than you deserve at this point.”

I needed to calm down on the piss talk. It was getting kind of weird.

My hands were shaking. I balled them into fists as electrical energy rolled across my skin. The sky overhead let out a threatening roar again.

Can’t stop running. Can’t stop.

Another set of footfalls reached my ears. For a moment, my heart lurched nervously. I thought Ryder had caught up. Though, when I slowed to turn and face him, I saw my father instead.

My feet tangled and I stumbled again. This time, I didn’t fall. Still, the world seemed sideways.

“Go home, Dad! There’s nothing you can do.”

The sky tried to drown out my words. Clouds crashed together. The electricity under my skin swelled ominously.

“No, no, no no...” My gaze rolled skywards. “Don’t you dare.”

Could I summon lightning if I shifted? I was still in Lakesedge. No one would care if I shifted on the street. Though, when I turned and opened the way for my hound, my entire body stiffened.

Of course, Alvin had decided at that exact moment to take control of my body. He turned me against my will. I watched, helplessly, as my hand lifted towards the clouds above. My fingers curled as if I was grasping for something.

The sight brought back memories of Harvey dragging me out of the toolshed. Desperation had fueled me that day. It wasn’t enough today. Willpower had broken through the spell once before, but it’d taken a while. I didn’t have that kind of time on my hands.

Dad was catching up. He called out, but the words were muffled. Alvin pulled me away from my body again. I could feel myself falling through the void. I reached out to catch something, anything.

A growl vibrated my bones. My hound snapped her teeth and caught my arm. The pain of her bite lanced through me, making me wince. She stopped my fall, though. The dim glow of the red room illuminated the void below. My hound lifted me, bringing me away from the trap and back into my body.

Alvin's frustrated howl shook my skull. I paid him no attention as I opened the way for my hound. Leaping forward, I shifted. Paws touched down. I shook out my fur and felt the rush of electricity wash out of my body. The connection to the sky didn't fizzle and die like I thought it would, though.

That was my fault. The storm had always followed me like this. It appeared whenever I shifted. I didn't know why I thought it would vanish if I was in my hound form. My hound peered at the darkening clouds and wondered what she had to do with the storm. She was just an animal, after all.

Alvin's control wavered. It couldn't reach into the part of me that was an animal. She didn't understand binding. Nothing could own what was free. Here, I was safe. I let out a soft sigh and dropped to the ground.

Strange, how it was that I could find a bit of safety after all. I just had to trust in myself—or a part of myself.

Dad caught up, put his hands on his hips, and stared down at me. He huffed, clearly out of breath, which made me laugh.

I rose onto shaky feet. The world around me wobbled shakily. I hesitated, breath held. The ritual arcana still slithered within me. It searched for an entrance the same way it circled the ice that had been protecting my new arcana.

Dad asked me something. His words were garbled. I jumped back from him. This shouldn't be happening. I'd cast Alvin out. He couldn't control my hound. She was wild and free.

But Alvin already had ahold of my arcana. The sky flashed bright. Dad glanced up, his brows arched in confusion. I whimpered and barked to get his attention.

Run, I wanted to say. *Run!*

I had no words, though. Not in this form.

Alvin tugged, yanking arcana from me. I recoiled from the sudden pull. The sky darkened for an instant. Then, white-hot light came crashing down. I couldn't waste any time.

Without thinking, I jumped. My paws hit dad's chest. I shoved right as the lightning hit me. It sent me crashing back down to the ground where it could pulse through my body and into the ground.

If I thought I'd felt pain before, nothing had ever hurt like this. Electricity burned every inch of my body. It seared down to my soul. I

seized, my body clenching.

The world darkened. Dad's shouts became quieter and quieter, but they didn't disappear altogether. I didn't fall into the darkness like I had when Alvin killed me. My consciousness didn't waver. Instead, the world remained a dim blur as someone lifted me.

I let out a yelp. Every small touch radiated pain through my being. As Dad walked, every footfall sent another aching wave through me. How far had I run? It seemed to take forever, time slowed by the throb dominating my being.

Little by little, the pain faded. It might have taken seconds, or it might have been hours. I had no way of telling. The only thing I knew for sure was that Alvin couldn't take control of me while I was in that much pain. His connection had broken when the bolt had hit me.

For now, I was safe again.

Ryder

WE SPENT the night upstairs in Ness's old bedroom. She didn't wake when I carried her upstairs or when I set her on the bed and curled around her body. The acrid smell of burnt hair nearly covered the scent of ozone in her fur.

Even if Bruce hadn't explained what'd happened, I would have known. There was no denying that smell. It'd been the same when she'd hit Harvey with lightning. Somehow, she'd survived the same attack.

It was possible. Some people survived lightning strikes. Perhaps her own affinity for electricity had saved her.

A darker thought rolled through my mind. There was a possibility that she'd died. Ness hadn't survived at all. I had no way of knowing if she'd died and come back again. Worse, even, there was a chance that she'd died, and I hadn't been there.

These hands of mine were fucking useless. I'd stuck around to watch over the pack while Ness had suffered again. Alvin chipped away at my mate. How much of her would be left when we finally defeated Alvin?

If I wasn't careful, Alvin would break her while my back was turned. I knew I had a lot on my plate as the new Alpha, but I wouldn't have anything without her.

That witch in Nevada had said that the Barghest would be my salvation. I didn't think that'd meant I would find my mate. Was the witch's prediction right? Would I be able to keep Ness?

In my arms, her form changed. She didn't wake. Hell, she didn't even stir. Her body expanded, fur falling away and disappearing as the magic that'd created it disappeared, too. I tightened my grip on her. She snuggled into my chest and let out a soft snore.

My heart clenched.

I couldn't lose her.

My beast's warning growl rumbled in the back of my mind. I could already feel it's control wavering. The dragon clawed at me. It warned me that there would be hell to pay. A storm raged within the dragon, a storm that threatened to level everything. If she died, I would lose my grip on the creature. My mind would crumble, and I would become my father.

I would be a danger to all those I'd promised to protect.

N_{ess}

YOU KNOW WHAT HURTS?

Getting struck by lightning.

There was still a latticework of bruises crisscrossing my skin despite the fact that I'd shifted and eaten a hearty breakfast. The discoloration mesmerized me. Thin lines of blue, purple, and yellow ran up and down my arms like vines. They crawled over my shoulders and down my back.

When I moved, my body protested. Muscles threatened to lock up. A dull throb eclipsed my entire being like an aura I couldn't shake off.

Still, a single question bounced around my mind.

Had I died?

I couldn't remember losing consciousness, so I didn't think I'd died again.

How? I did not know. That hurt more than anything I'd ever experienced before. Every blow Alvin had landed, every time Harvey had cornered me, none of that compared to being hit by lightning.

I would curse Alvin all over again if he were near. The vicious fuel that fed my command arcana swirled deep within my gut. Had my arcana not been locked behind the wall of ice, I would have felt it on my tongue.

My arcana might have to come out from behind the ice wall, today. The sight of Alvin's house made my stomach churn. My lip curled. More venom

stirred in the pit of my gut. I remembered being dragged through that door. I remembered running in there to save Cerri.

This house had nothing but bad memories attached to it. If I never had to see it again, I would be happy. Since we couldn't pinpoint where Alvin was, we decided it might behoove us if we paid Alvin's wife a visit.

Candi had never been an approachable woman, in my opinion. She'd always given off the air of someone who'd rather not be bothered. Well, today we were about to bother the fuck out of her.

I glanced sidelong at Ryder. He gave me a reassuring smile and squeezed my hand. Damn, we seemed more and more like a couple every day.

It drove me mad.

Ryder was right there. I wanted him so desperately that he was the last person on my mind at the end of the day and the first person on my mind in the morning. My hound rolled over for him every time he touched me. She would never react to another the same way.

I was so screwed and not in a good way.

Rolling my shoulders back, I tore my mind off Ryder and prepared myself for what we had to do next. I stormed up to the front door and slammed on it with the side of my fist. Not even that was enough to expend some of this restless energy coursing through me.

Or was that the lightning still humming inside me?

I banged on the door again. It flew open, startling me. I blinked at Candi's unimpressed glare. A slow grin slipped over my lips. I shook my iced coffee like it was a rattlesnake tail. Candi rolled her eyes, but didn't step aside to invite us in.

"What do you want? To cause more trouble?" Candi asked, her voice flat.

I opened my mouth to tell her where she could shove it, but Ryder cut me off.

"We need to know where your husband is. That's all."

Candi wasn't going to rat Alvin out. I suspected Candi was either too devoted or too afraid of Alvin to give us any information. Though I'd spent my whole life in this pack, I couldn't tell how the Alpha pair felt about one another. Candi had always kept quiet unless her son was involved.

She narrowed her eyes at me. If looks could have killed, I would have been dead five times over. Her gaze sawed me in half. I had a feeling she

would have spit on my corpse, too.

Oh. Oh shit.

Without Harvey breathing down my neck, I'd momentarily forgotten about him and the fact that I'd killed him. Candi wouldn't forgive me for murdering her son, even if it had been in self-defense.

Wary of my predicament, I stealthily stepped back and put Ryder between Candi and myself. Still, Candi's glare didn't lose any of its intensity.

"I'm not going to talk to the likes of you," Candi said. "So, unless you plan on beating the answers out of me, you can get out of my hair."

Ryder sputtered. "I have no such intentions."

"That's what I thought." Candi moved to slam the door in our faces.

I darted around Ryder and put my foot out. The door slammed on my boot. It sent a wave of pain radiating up my body. I shuddered and let out a breath, but didn't drop my coffee, at least.

"Maybe Ryder won't cause any problems, but that's all I know how to do." I shouldered the door open, forcing Candi out of the way.

Marching inside, I tried to fight off the waves of memories trying to send me into a spiraling panic. Sitting in front of Alvin so he could approve my schedule. Bowing my head to him while he made me feel small.

I would never go back to those days. They were over. I had a new Alpha now.

In the dining room, I stopped and turned. Candi stood in the foyer. Her hand on the door shook as Ryder ducked inside, too. She slammed the door and stormed into the dining room in a huff.

"What do you want? You've already ruined my life, Vanessa."

Taken aback, I pointed at myself. "Me? *I* ruined *your* life?"

The venom swelled again. I could feel my arcana slamming against the inside of the ice wall. It wanted out. I had a few words that Candi needed to hear, but I swallowed them down.

If I coerced Candi into talking, then she might retaliate. She would have a direct connection to her husband. We needed to tread carefully. If we could convince her that we had her best intentions in mind, then there was less of a chance that she would bring Alvin into this.

Ryder put his hand on my shoulder and gently eased me away from Candi. I gave him a sharp look but didn't fight him.

“You appeared, and Alvin stopped trying. He stopped pretending to be a good husband. We had fifteen good years where he made an effort to be the kind of man that I might want. Then you had to go and turn into a Black Hound. I lost the man I married that day.” Candi stopped near a side table, her hand on the smooth surface as if she were wiping dust from it. “I did my best to keep everything under wraps. I cleaned up all my husband’s messes and tried to love my son better. So long as you were around, it didn’t matter what I did.”

I opened my mouth, but one look from Ryder cut me off. Though I stuck my tongue out at him, I kept quiet.

“Candi, no one asked Ness what she wanted. There was a lot thrust at her that was completely out of her control. I think you can relate.” Ryder slowly approached her. “Now isn’t the time to be angry with Ness. If you can help us, then we can find Alvin and make things right.”

Candi let out a bitter laugh. “Make things right? That bitch of yours already took my son from me. I won’t say that he was a good man, either, but I gave birth to him. He was all I had in this world. There isn’t a damn thing either of you can do to make things right, so you might as well stop trying.”

Guilt hit me, another stone plummeting in my stomach, gathering with the others. I never wanted to kill anyone. Harvey had forced my hand. It’d been him or me, and I chose to live that day.

Maybe, now that I knew there was a chance I could come back from the dead, I could have spared him. Others would still be in danger if I’d let him live, though. Haylee and Kelsey had been hurt by him. Had he walked away that day, he would have hurt them even more.

I could tell myself I’d done the right thing, but I’d still taken a life. One that Candi cared about.

With an apology ready on my lips, I stepped around Ryder again. Before I could get a word out, Candi rushed me. I caught the gleam of metal in her hands. Ryder shouted. I leapt back but ran into Ryder’s chest.

The blade slid past skin and into flesh. I hissed at the pain.

Man, why did everything have to hurt so damn much? This wasn’t fair.

Ryder stepped back. I tried to ease off the blade, but Candi kept coming. Her eyes burned with hatred and contempt. I fumbled back until the dining table met my rear. The whole thing shuddered, the decorative centerpiece rattling.

One hand around Candi's, I used the other to shove her. Relentless, she pushed forward. A dozen thoughts spilled through my mind. How long was this blade? Had it pierced anything important? Did I deserve this?

Ryder appeared behind Candi and grabbed her by the shoulders. He yanked her off me, but that also pulled the knife out of my stomach. I groaned. My knees tried to buckle, but I managed to yank a chair out from under the dining table and fall into it.

Hot and throbbing pain filled my stomach. I couldn't even feel the warmth of my blood soaking my shirt. Damn, that had been a good shirt. Even if I got the blood out, the knife-hole would remind me of this every time I pulled it out.

Well, shit.

Ryder held onto Candi, whose shoulders rose and fell with a violent fury as she stared me down. I gave her an upward nod before fumbling out of my seat and wandering into the kitchen where I could raid the fridge for some calories.

I kept one hand pressed to the bleeding wound in my stomach. Was it bad enough that I needed stitches? I had no idea. Shifters didn't normally need stitches, but this hurt like hell. Candi had lived with Alvin for over twenty years. It made sense that she might have picked up a few tricks from him, like where to stab a shifter for maximum effect.

No, I doubted she'd been able to think through the haze of rage. The look on her face, twisted and darkened, stuck in my mind. I knew I deserved this. I just had to wait for my body to heal on its own.

I found a tray with a store-bought cake and placed it on the counter. Prying the lid off with one hand was more difficult than it should have been, but once I got it off, I eagerly dug into the buttercream roses on the top. It shouldn't have been so satisfying to deface the cake, but I laughed to myself as the sugar entered my system.

Once I had my fill of the cake, I peeled my other hand away from my stomach and lifted the shirt. The warm presence of Ryder reached my back like the soft fingertips of a lover. I glanced back just as he reached to turn me around.

He took the shirt from my hand and lifted it. When he ran his thumb over the mess of blood on my stomach, I shivered. He let out a sigh that sounded very much like relief. When I looked down, I saw that the skin had healed over.

Ryder's fingers dug into my hip as he held me. I watched him unclench every muscle one by one until his shoulders finally fell away from his ears.

"Nervous much?" I asked teasingly even though my hands were beginning to shake.

"Ness." There was a tired note of warning in his voice that tried to tell me this wasn't a joke.

If I couldn't joke about being stabbed in the stomach, then what could I joke about? There certainly wasn't anything funny happening.

I wanted to wind my arm around the back of his neck and pull him tight, but I yanked my shirt from his hand and turned to wash my hands in the sink. When I glanced at the cake tin, I noticed that there was blood on the lid. Well, no one would want that now. I might as well take it home with me.

"Where's Candi? If no one is watching her, she might escape." I finished washing my hands and wiped them on a towel.

After thinking about it for a heartbeat, I shrugged and used it to wipe my stomach clean as well. I didn't hang it back up because that would have been rude. Instead, I threw it into the trash. Obviously, that was rude, too. It was just a little less gross.

"Candi seemed pretty distraught. She sat down and started crying after you left the room. I don't think she's in any shape to go anywhere."

I gave Ryder a dubious look. It wasn't that I didn't believe him, just that...I didn't trust Candi. Listen, those were two very different statements. Okay?

I marched back out into the dining room, completely expecting Candi to have disappeared. Instead, I found her in the chair that I'd pulled away from the table earlier. I rocked on my heels warily as I watched her shoulders shake. Her sobs were silent, but obvious, nonetheless.

Well, shit.

When I entered the room, she lifted her head a bit to peer at me over her fingers. For an instant, anguish darkened her features. Then it fell apart into grief all over again. Watching her breakdown made me more uncomfortable than I expected.

I wanted to be angry at her. She had just stabbed me in the stomach, after all. But this woman had lived through more than I could imagine. She'd married the love of her life only to find out that he was a psychotic

serial killer and that her beloved son was on the same path. Now, one was dead and in the ground. The other would join him soon, if I had my way.

Her life was one that I couldn't imagine, and I could imagine a lot of horrible things.

Candi didn't apologize for stabbing me—not that I expected her to. Ryder placed himself between us again when he addressed her. She sat upright, rolled her shoulders back, and stifled another sob. When she answered, she kept her gaze on the floor.

"I have no idea where my husband is. He hasn't contacted me."

Ryder heaved a sigh. When he glanced in my direction, I could tell that he wanted to ask if I believed her. I had every reason to doubt her, but that sad, flat tone of her voice betrayed the pain she tried to hide.

I put my hands on my hips and cringed when I felt the new skin on my stomach pull taught. "Where does he go when he needs to hide? You've known about his...pastimes for a while now. I figure you've had to help him here and there. If he's lying low, where can we find him?"

Candi's brows gathered together in thought. When her lips twisted to the side, I knew she had an idea but that she didn't know if she should tell us.

My lip curled in annoyance. Ryder touched my arm and the anger in me bled away. It rushed out and left nothing but exhaustion behind. I much preferred the anger. At least it kept me going. Exhausted, my limbs were heavy, and the road ahead left me even wearier.

Candi shook her head. She sat upright, her lips firmly pressed together, and looked at each of us in turn. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I can't. There's nothing I can do to stop you, but I want out of this mess. He won't let me go if I tell him where the two of you can find him."

I tilted my head to the side. "You want out of the pack?"

Candi was human. She had every right to leave. She could go anywhere she wanted. Human/Shifter divorces happened all the time. Sometimes, the human partner would seek a witch's help to remove certain memories—usually memories of the supernatural. Other times, the human partner simply moved on to a different supernatural lover.

I'd only ever known Candi as Alvin's wife. I couldn't imagine her any other way. Though I knew that was my limited view of the world holding onto a childish ideal, I couldn't help this uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“You’ll be able to go anywhere and do anything without looking over your shoulder if you tell us where to find him,” Ryder said. “You don’t want to spend the rest of your life living in fear, do you? Let us help.”

Ryder had a point. Candi wouldn’t have to worry about anything if we dealt with Alvin. She would be free, once and for all.

Still, Candi held firm. She kept her lips sealed. She even crossed her arms over her chest.

Stubborn bitch, I thought rather cruelly.

I couldn’t force Candi to do anything, though. Her will was her own. Though I was disappointed, I knew when a battle couldn’t be fought anymore. I wouldn’t push her boundaries the way that Alvin had pushed mine time and time again.

Ryder’s phone buzzed in his pocket. I lifted a brow, surprised that he had it turned on. For the longest time, he’d kept it off so that his brother wouldn’t be able to track him. What had changed?

After checking the number on the screen, Ryder quietly excused himself. Before leaving, he spared one last look back. The dark glare of warning that he gave Candi filled me with reassurance that he wouldn’t be far.

Yet, barely a moment after he stepped outside to answer the phone, he returned just to say that he had to leave. Kelsey’s car had broken down, and she needed help. I imagined Ryder was the only person she trusted right now, but I selfishly wanted Ryder all to myself.

He invited me to come along, but a stone sat heavy in the pit of my stomach. It warned me that I had to make the right decision moving forward, and for some reason that meant I had to stay. Though I didn’t know why.

With words like fate and purpose buzzing around my head lately, I wanted to trust my instincts. There had to be a reason for the way I was feeling. It wasn’t just guilt, though I had a plethora of that already.

“I’ll be fine,” I told Ryder when he refused to leave without me.

With one foot out the door, he gave me a pleading look. His beast swam in his eyes, filling them with light. I smiled, glad to know that his dragon wanted to protect me.

“What’s the worst she can do? Stab me?” I asked.

Ryder’s expression flattened, telling me that he did not find that funny in the least.

“Go on. I’ll be fine.”

Finally, Ryder closed the distance between us, cupped the back of my head, and pressed a kiss to my forehead. Had there not been a stone in my stomach, it would have fluttered with unexpected butterflies.

“Be safe,” he said, his lips brushing my skin.

I watched him leave and kept a leash on my hound so that she wouldn’t whimper now that he was out of sight. My hound grieved his absence, even though I told her we would see him in a little while.

Alone with Candi, I dragged a chair over and sat across from her. She groaned. Her eyes were red from crying, but her shoulders were stiff. I wasn’t going to get anything out of her, but I still had a bad feeling. If I left and something happened to her, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. Even if she was partially responsible for my torment, she still deserved to be safe. I couldn’t wait until that brought her as far away from me as possible.

Until then, there were questions that I still needed answers to.

“Does Alvin have any way to keep watch over the house while he’s gone?” I asked, peering around for cameras or more spell sigils.

Candi shook her head. “He doesn’t need any of that to know what I’m doing.”

Her words pulled my attention back to her. “Excuse me?”

A chill ran down my spine and filled my stomach. I leaned forward, lowering my head so that I could look up at Candi’s downcast face.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

She sat upright and gave me a tight smile. The barest shake of her head told me that she didn’t want to talk about it, but the chill in my gut wouldn’t subside.

I pressed my palm to my sternum and felt the cold ice wrapped around my heart. Was it trying to tell me something? Was it trying to protect me? Or was this chill something else entirely?

“Go home, Ness. You don’t have to stay. Accept the fact that there’s nothing I can do for you. I couldn’t help you in the past, and I certainly can’t help you now.”

That was a load of bullshit. Candi could do something. She clearly knew more than I did, but she didn’t want to risk her safety right now. I wished I could convince her that she would be safer if she chose to help us.

Hope swelled inside me. I could win her over. I could show her that we were doing the right thing. All I had to do was play the right card here.

“If I call Cerri, we can work on breaking whatever spells Alvin has over the house. Or you could leave. If he paid the witch to watch the house, then he won’t be able to watch you if you aren’t here.” That was the only explanation for her vague response that I could think of.

Alvin had been using spells and charms to do just about everything lately. Though it gave him power, it showed just how weak he really was.

Candi rolled her eyes, as if there was something I wasn’t getting. Did Alvin stop by frequently? Had he threatened her? She would never tell me. I couldn’t change her mind. And I doubted she wanted me to stay all day.

So, I sat back in my seat and said, “I’m taking that cake home with me, by the way.”

Candi’s brows furrowed in confusion for a moment. Then realization dawned on her, and she gave a solemn nod. “Sure. Why not?” Her tone remained flat and unaffected. “It’s the least I can do to make it up to you after stabbing you.”

I twisted my lips to the side. “You’re...you’re not sorry about that. Are you?”

“Why should I be?”

All right, that was my cue to leave. Maybe Candi was done fighting back, but I wasn’t going to stick around and risk my own neck for someone who might leave me to die if trouble came knocking. I wanted to try and give everyone a chance, but I needed to learn that some people didn’t want that. Still, at the door, I paused and looked back one last time.

That stone in the pit of my stomach grew heavier and heavier by the moment.

Ryder

MAYBE I WASN'T USED to talking to the pack members over the phone, but something about Kelsey's call left me on edge. I replayed her words over and over in my mind, and nothing seemed off. Still, I couldn't shake this feeling.

I blamed it on the earlier events. My dragon was still angry with me. A human had stabbed our mate, and we hadn't been able to stop it. Humans were slow and ineffective. Yet, she'd been able to drive that blade into Ness's skin with ease because I'd been distracted.

The dragon wasn't about to forgive me.

Ness's pained surprise flashed through my mind again. I couldn't escape it. Each time I shook the image away, the dragon shoved it back in my face.

Failure.

Disappointment.

Do your job, damn it.

That wasn't easy when I had several things on my plate at once. Not only had I become the new Alpha of the Lakesedge pack and found my mate, but that same mate kept me at an arm's length while the entire world tried to kill her. Then I had my new Alpha duties.

Like replacing a flat tire for one of my shifters.

I would teach Kelsey how to do it herself. As a shifter, she had the strength. All she needed was someone patient enough to teach her how to do it. I wouldn't have minded, under different circumstances.

A bit of relief hit me when a car appeared on the side of the road and a familiar figure stood beside it. I pulled up behind Kelsey's car and got out to help her. When she turned towards me, she mouthed a single, silent word.

Sorry.

I tensed. With nothing to put my back to, my beast surged towards the surface. The dragon's arcana unfurled over my skin. Scales appeared like a cascade of dark water that flickered in the sunlight. They covered my most tender areas, areas that wolves might try to bite when they attacked.

My dragon had learned this lesson the hard way. Marcus and Jackson had poisoned me once before. Back then, I'd had Cerri's help. Between her and Ness, they'd saved me. I didn't have either at my side right now.

Though I pulled an air current towards myself so I could catch any scents in my surroundings, I should have known better. Marcus and Jackson had been hiding their scents for a while now.

One hit me in the back. I fumbled forward from the impact. Before I could catch myself, the other hit me in the side. Together, they forced me to the ground. I managed to bend my knee and catch myself before I fell prone altogether.

The wolves were relentless. The one to my right—I couldn't discern who it was without scent because their markings were so similar—snapped at my forearm. In that instant, I caught a glimpse of the poison pouch stuck to the roof of his mouth. Though I couldn't smell it, I knew it was there. His teeth glanced off the scales along my arm, thankfully. The other wolf, though, backed away.

I tried to see where the second wolf went, but the back-to-back attacks from the first held my attention. The scales didn't cover every inch of my skin, so I had to make sure the first wolf didn't catch a vulnerable spot, or the poison would enter my bloodstream again.

When would they stop playing dirty? I hoped they would run out of these pouches they used to poison me. That, or they ran out of the antidote that they needed in order to put those damned pouches in their mouths.

Since I couldn't deal with wolf number two, I caught wolf one by the snout. I pried his mouth open and used a claw to rip the poison pouch from his mouth.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry...” Kelsey crouched low behind her car. Her voice shook with guilt and fear, though there was nothing I could do about that right now.

I flung the poison pouch off the side before releasing the wolf’s muzzle. The shifter scrabbled against the pavement and launched himself once more. Though I ducked his assault, his brother caught my leg. This second wolf didn’t bite. He must have realized that I was using my scales as a shield.

Instead, the second wolf threw his weight at my leg and buckled my knee. The first wolf doubled down and slammed into my back right after. I put out my hand to catch myself before my face hit the pavement.

This was growing tiring. Ness had issued a command. These shifters weren’t supposed to return to Syracuse, much less Lakesedge. I couldn’t figure out how they’d managed to return. When Ness commanded me to do something, I had to struggle against its hold over me. Something had happened to my mate’s arcana.

Her command didn’t have the hold that it once had.

“Get out of my city,” I growled as I pushed myself up onto my feet.

I spread out my wings and lifted my chin. The wolves backed away for a moment. They shared a look. I tensed, waiting for their assault. Only one of them would have a poison pouch in their mouth now. I could barely tell them apart, though, so I wasn’t sure which one would have it. So long as the scent concealing spell covered them, I couldn’t smell it.

Aware that one of my shifters had hidden herself behind the car, I moved to stand between the car and our assailants. I couldn’t hear Kelsey anymore, though. Her crying had subsided.

Or something had silenced her.

I hazarded a glance back. Kelsey was nowhere to be seen.

Had this been a ruse? If they’d wanted to steal Kelsey, they could have done that without calling me here. It was possible that the brothers wanted to both kidnap her and try to poison me again, yet something seemed off. This plan didn’t make as much sense as their last attack.

The wind of the gathering storm overhead carried a scent to me from a direction that I didn’t expect. I didn’t look up. Instead, I fixed my gaze on the brothers. They’d stalked closer to me while I’d been looking in the other direction. When I growled, they stopped prowling.

I didn't want to kill them. These hands were bloody enough. All Marcus and Jackson wanted was the freedom to be assholes under Alvin's reign. I didn't think they were killers. If they were, they would have seriously hurt someone by now.

That meant I could run them out of town and not worry that they might take someone's life. I wouldn't have that kind of weight on my shoulders.

Right?

It wasn't that simple, but I didn't have time to work through the tangled moral web gathering in my mind. One wolf leapt at me, his jaws wide. I glimpsed the small pouch of poison pressed against the roof of his mouth and tensed.

A blur of light fur darted out and slammed into the second wolf. While I caught the one leaping at me, Kelsey dropped the other to the ground. She didn't try to pin him. Her form, even as a shifter, was smaller than the other wolf. Instead, Kelsey went for the wolf's leg.

The sound of bone snapping made me cringe, but I knew what needed to be done. I tossed one attacking wolf into the other and sent them tumbling. While they were distracted with each other, I scooped Kelsey up from the ground and pulled my scales back into my body.

Before the brothers could untangle their limbs, I yanked my car door open and pushed Kelsey inside. She bounced onto the passenger seat, so I could take my place at the wheel. My claws slowly folded inward, but my scales remained as if my beast were still worried about the poison.

"Call several members of the pack when you want to get your car. Don't come back here alone."

Kelsey tilted her wolf head curiously, almost asking why I wouldn't come back with her. I couldn't tell her that Ness had been alone this whole time. This attack had been a distraction, and I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach that Ness was in trouble.

Ness

THE APARTMENT WAS EMPTY. I prowled up and down the hall, opening every door as I called out to Ryder. He still hadn't returned, apparently. In

the empty silence, I lacked direction. Aimless, I rocked on the balls of my feet.

Emotion swelled in my chest. It battered the inside of the ice wall. I pressed my palm to my sternum once again in an effort to quell it. If left unchecked, the repressed emotions might shatter the ice protecting me.

Well, if it wasn't one thing, then there was always another. I couldn't allow myself to get close to Ryder or else the ice wall might melt and leave me defenseless. Yet, if I kept myself shut down, the building emotions might explode from within.

I didn't know how much longer I could keep my chin up. I'd been working tirelessly to find Alvin, all while trying to figure out what I really was. Sleep had eluded me, since I knew that Alvin could creep into my dreams and take over my body. Tense and on high alert, I hadn't gotten more than a wink of sleep in the past days.

Unable to sit still in the empty space, I rushed outside and let my feet carry me in a random direction. Though I knew that I had friends I could rely on, who would welcome me into their homes with open arms, it wasn't safe for me to spend time with them. I could feel the ritual arcana inside me like a ticking time-bomb.

If I hurt one of my friends, I would never forgive myself. I could go to Connor.

There was a safety in knowing that Alvin would never ask me to kill Connor, but I wouldn't find the comfort I needed there.

There was one person I needed, and I didn't know where to find him. More than once, I checked my phone to see if Ryder had sent me any updates. I'd thought about calling Kelsey to see if Ryder was done helping with her car. Maybe I should give her a call...

I could also call Candi to see how she was faring. Something about our interaction earlier left me on edge. It wasn't just that she'd stabbed me, though that didn't help.

What if Kelsey's call had been a trap? If Marcus and Jackson had kidnapped her, they could have forced her to make the call and lure Ryder away from me. By himself, Ryder was stronger than either shifter. However, the brothers used dirty tricks. They'd poisoned Ryder once and nearly killed him.

My heart ached just thinking about that night, how I'd listened to Ryder's heartbeat slowly fade while I pressed my ear to his chest. If they'd

surprised him and poisoned him while I'd been aimlessly wandering around the apartment, I wouldn't be able to go on. Guilt was one thing. If I failed Ryder, I knew I would fall apart.

But as I walked, a familiar car pulled up alongside me. Ryder honked the horn, startling me. My immediate anger washed away into relief once I saw his face. He rolled down his window and leaned out.

There were shadows under his eyes. Immediately, I knew something had happened. The hand hanging out the car window was speckled with small scales. As I watched, they folded back into his skin and vanished. I gave Ryder a questioning look because I couldn't verbalize everything I wanted to know all at once.

He jerked his head, a universal gesture for *get in the car*. When I did as he asked, my lip curled. Jealousy hit me in the gut. My hound growled threateningly as another shifter's scent reached my nose.

Ryder let out a breath. "Don't worry. It only smells like Kelsey because I just finished dropping her off at Haylee's place."

That didn't make me feel any better. I still had a million questions and no answers. But I couldn't bring myself to ask any of them. Ryder didn't belong to me. My hound's sudden intense emotions were uncalled for. Though I should have apologized, I bit my lip to keep myself from saying anything stupid instead.

"We were attacked," Ryder said finally.

My heart leapt into my throat. Before I could stop myself, I reached out for him. Hand on his arm, my heart settled a little. Just knowing that he was whole helped ease the sudden fear chilling my core.

I couldn't take this anymore. That sense of dread that I'd picked up while talking to Candi still hadn't left. It kept telling me that there was something I needed to do and that I was going to regret not doing it, even though I had no idea what it wanted of me. Guilt gnawed at me, too. Not just because Ryder was attacked.

Kelsey had gotten pulled into it this time. That call had been a ruse with Kelsey as the bait. Though I should have felt sorry for her, the only thing on my mind was Ryder.

He drove us back to the apartment where I couldn't stop pacing. The heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach made me restless. What could I do? Go back to Candi and get stabbed again? That wasn't really something that

I wanted to risk. Just looking at the cake on the counter made my stomach hurt until I pushed it off the counter and into the trash bin.

“Ness,” Ryder said softly.

“What is this?” I snapped. I spun on him. “What am I feeling?”

His brows lifted in the center, a look of pained compassion overtaking his usually brooding countenance. It broke me. My eyes began to burn. I clenched and unclenched my fists while my hound writhed inside me. She shook herself in an attempt to break free of me.

Ryder cupped my face in his hands. “I think you’re overwhelmed. Are you sure you’re not having an anxiety attack?”

I held onto his wrists like lifelines as I sucked in a deep breath and tried to reset myself. It didn’t work. The feeling wouldn’t go away. I wished the ice in my chest would protect me from this creeping dread, but it was busy with the ritual arcana.

Ryder pulled away but didn’t let go of me. Instead, he led me to the couch where he sat down and pulled me into his lap. I rested my head against his shoulder. The position reminded me of the night he almost died, the poison stealing him away from me.

Now, his heart thumped strongly, though a little frantically. Was he afraid for me?

I needed to calm down, too. There was too much on my plate. The weight of the world rested on my shoulders. While that weighed me down, there was an enemy lurking inside of me, waiting to take control from me at any moment.

Yeah, there was a lot going on. It made sense that I had hit my limit.

“Tell me about your family,” I said to Ryder. “I want to know about all the good things.”

He dragged in a deep breath. For a moment, I thought he would tell me to ask something else. Then, Ryder let out a ragged laugh. I could almost feel him falling back into his past where times had been easier. I went with him because I was eager to taste a bit of that sunshine, too.

“I miss my brother more than I let on,” Ryder began. “I miss having his brain on my side. Morgan got stuck in his own thoughts too often, but I was always there to pull him out. Now that I’m here, I can’t help but wonder if he’s stuck inside his own head again. He doesn’t have anyone who can help him like I did.”

I sank deeper into Ryder’s arms. “Not even Bri?”

Though I knew she was Ryder's mate, I didn't see why she wouldn't be able to help Morgan, too.

Ryder ignored the fact that I brought her up again. He moved past her like a runner sprinting over obstacles. I shouldn't have been surprised. With the feelings building inside me, I knew I couldn't keep them under wraps forever. Now, if only I could figure out how he felt, too.

The way he avoided talking about Bri confused me. But he didn't give me time to think about it before he moved on to a story about his brother. Ryder's words pulled me into a scene that'd taken place long before we'd ever met. He took me back to a time when his father had still been alive and well, his family thriving in the Colorado mountains.

"We were trying to use our wings without fully shifting," Ryder explained. "Neither of us had been able to summon them in our human form yet. Morgan thought that if we jumped from a cliff that we would sprout them as we fell—like a survival response."

"Oh my god," I said. "You acted like baby birds trying to fly for the first time."

Ryder's laugh reverberated under my ear. It filled me with warmth until I remembered to hold tight to the icy feeling in my chest. Damn these feelings. Damn Alvin's machinations.

"Young and dumb, I brought Morgan up into the mountains to give it a try. We didn't tell anyone we were going up there. If anything had happened, we would have been screwed."

"You're telling me neither of you got hurt from this?" I looked up at him questioningly.

He grinned. "I never said that. Let me continue before you jump to the end."

Ryder explained how he and Morgan had climbed the cliff face. He called it a warm-up. I called it insanity. We didn't argue the differences.

At the top of the cliff, Morgan had balked. He'd questioned their thought processes and tried to come up with a new way to achieve what they wanted. Morgan had the right idea, in my opinion. Of course, Ryder proved that he was more balls than brains as he told me how he'd taken his brother's hand and thrown them both from the cliff.

This version of Ryder didn't match the man I'd come to know. Life had given him reason to pause and consider the consequences. The man who'd

boldly thrown himself into everything now stopped to think, much like his brother.

That made me wonder if Morgan had changed, too. Consumed by grief and rage, with no closure, had Morgan become more reckless? Did he charge forward into situations now?

No one could escape time. I just hoped that with more time, both could heal. I wanted to meet Morgan and get to know him as Ryder's brother, not as this threat looming over our heads.

"I noticed that you have your phone turned on now," I said.

Ryder nodded. He leaned forward just enough to pull his phone from his pocket. The screen lit up when he pressed the button on the side. No messages appeared, and he let out a breath, making me sink deeper into his lap.

"Even if Morgan hadn't known where I was, he would have figured it out the night that you...well, the night Alvin tried to make you kill me. I called Morgan with the idea that maybe I could talk some sense into him." Ryder hugged me closer and rested his chin on the top of my head. "Morgan heard a lot of what happened that night. I didn't mean for things to end up that way."

I cringed. "He's going to know me as the woman who tried to kill you. That's a great first impression."

"If we're lucky, he'll meet you under different circumstances. You'll get a second chance at a first impression."

I rolled my eyes, but a grin still lifted my lips. "That's not how first impressions work."

Ryder's own smile started to spread across his face, but the sound of his phone buzzing immediately tore the joy away from his countenance. I sat upright as he reached for his phone.

The way Ryder's nose wrinkled at the screen made me realize that it was going to be a long night.

N_{ess}

WE WERE PREPARED for another trap. I didn't want to be back on Alvin's estate for the second time today. My skin itched, and it made my hound restless. She paced inside me. My heart raced as it climbed into my throat.

I glanced behind us over and over. There was no way of telling if anyone was near because Alvin's henchmen had been hiding their scents.

"Ness," Connor said in what he probably thought was a reassuring tone.

I stifled the urge to stomp on Connor's instep. It wasn't his fault that his voice grated on my nerves right now. The last time he'd brought me here, Alvin had been whispering sweet little lies to him.

This time, I had Ryder by my side.

"Tell us what you found," Ryder interjected before Connor could say anything more.

Connor straightened his spine and gave a grave nod. "I came to check on Candi like you asked."

I shot a look in Ryder's direction. When had he given that order? Ryder flashed me a quick smile. I squeezed his hand. It was too late to thank him, and I couldn't blame Connor.

That stone in the pit of my stomach became awfully heavy as we approached the front door.

Connor hesitated at the door. Even here, I could smell it.

Blood.

I'd failed Candi. I'd fucked up, big time.

Pulling in a shuddering breath as my stomach sank, I gave a nod. Connor fidgeted nervously. He wasn't the one to blame here. Ryder had asked him to check in, and he had done just that.

However, I'd known that something was wrong from the moment I stepped foot in here this morning. I'd known, and then I'd left. If anyone was to blame for what we were about to see, it was me.

The door creaked open to reveal a dark hall. I expected to see Candi in the dining room ahead, right where I'd left her. She wasn't there, though. Connor led us deeper into the house, down familiar paths that made my stomach churn around that heavy stone made of guilt.

A light in the living room glowed oddly. It took me a moment to register that the lamp had been tilted, warping the shadows. I swallowed and peered into the doorway. From here, I could see the back of Candi's head. She looked as though she were sitting on the couch, waiting for us.

The smell of blood was stronger here. It made my mouth salivate uncomfortably. I knew that it was nerves, my hound scratching at my insides so that she could escape. Still, my watering mouth made me feel like a beast hungry for the hunt.

That wasn't me. I wasn't anything like Alvin.

Cautious, I stepped around to the front of the couch. That was my first mistake. The squish of the blood-soaked carpet under my feet brought bile up to sear the back of my throat. When I saw Candi, gutted on the couch, that bile turned into vomit.

I lurched toward the nearest window, threw it open, and shoved the screen out. The meager contents of my stomach came back up.

Oh look, I brought your cake back.

Hating the thoughts that rolled through my mind after that, I rested my forehead against the windowsill and waited for my stomach to settle around that stone again.

When would my insides become my own again? The ritual arcana pressed against a wall of ice. Both made my chest too tight. Even though I tried to breathe deep, I couldn't fill my lungs the way I wanted to.

The dread that had been lurking low inside me had turned to soul-eating guilt. Between them both was my hound, trapped and scared. We had nowhere to turn, only a path ahead that was tumultuous and unpredictable.

“This isn’t your fault,” Ryder said from the other side of the room.

I lifted my head to find him in the doorway. He hadn’t entered the living room, yet. He had no idea what the scene on the couch looked like. How could he tell me anything when he didn’t know what Alvin had done?

I got up and went to Candi so I could close her eyes and give her a more peaceful expression than the one she’d worn in death. She’d been gone for a while, I supposed, or else I would be able to feel the reaper here to collect her soul. There was no chill in the air, only a heat pressing against my cheeks.

I remembered Alvin’s dark silhouette outside, when Marcus and Jackson tried to kidnap me. Alvin was always there. He was the shadow clinging to my back. I couldn’t shake him no matter how I tried.

“It’s not your fault,” Ryder said again.

This time, I looked up to find him pointing past me. Craning my neck, I noticed the fireplace. I stared at the wooden knickknack on the mantle until I realized what I was looking at. There was an eye etched into the surface of it. Though there were burn marks at the base, as if someone had tried to destroy it, it seemed relatively unharmed.

That was what Alvin must have used to keep an eye on Candi and the house.

A wedding ring sat on top of it.

A part of me wondered...

Would it be so bad to give myself over to him so that the rest could know peace? Would a sacrifice like that protect my pack?

It wouldn’t. It was the easy option.

I was tired of fighting. This had to come to an end before I fell apart, before there was nothing left to fight for.

Ryder

NESS STOOD OVER THE BODY. As Ness closed her eyes, her head tilted to the side as if she were trying to power through pain. Which, I guessed she was. Finally, Ness lifted her head and stepped away from the body.

We couldn't call the human authorities now that we'd trampled over the crime scene. This was a matter for a witch.

Ness stepped into my arms and buried her face in my chest. I held her tight, but she didn't cry.

Connor shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He looked everywhere but at the couch. I didn't blame him. I couldn't bring myself to enter the room, either. The way Ness's face had blanched at the sight told me all I needed to know.

Ness had seen a lot. If this was enough to make her puke, then it had to be bad. Later, I would come back to pick up the body and give her a proper burial. I would pay witness to Candi's demise then. For now, I would be strong for Ness and Connor.

"You did what I asked," I told Connor.

His breath hissed inward between his clenched teeth. "I should have come sooner. If I'd been here like you asked..."

"Then you would be dead, too. Do you really think you could have taken Alvin on all by yourself? I don't mean to belittle you, man, but if you could fight an Alpha on your own then we wouldn't be here."

Connor's jaw tightened. Those hadn't been the right words. I still couldn't find the right thing to say. This wasn't Connor's fault, but a part of me agreed with him, and that wasn't fair. Connor had done as I'd asked.

Alvin was the one to blame here. We had to remember that.

"Ness, go outside and keep watch." I released her and turned to Connor. "Help me take care of the body. Since we don't have a witch on hand, maybe we can burn the house to hide the evidence."

Connor nodded. "I'll call Vi. Her fire won't leave a trail that arson investigators will catch."

"I don't need to wait outside," Ness growled. "I can help. Give me something to do. I need...I need to be useful."

Cupping the back of Ness's head, I pulled her close so I could press a kiss to her forehead. "You have been giving everything of yourself for years. Just this once, go sit on the sidelines."

She narrowed her eyes at me when I pulled back. Despite everything, a small smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. My beast growled with satisfaction. Something about taking care of my mate left me reinvigorated.

Ness would pout all the way out the door, but that would give her a break from death and pain for a short while.

Before she got far, I called out for her. “Give Cerridwen a call. We’re going to need a potion.”

N_{ess}

WE DIDN'T STICK AROUND to watch the house burn. Vi and Connor took care of that. They glared at one another the whole time. Vi was still pissed at Connor for betraying me a few weeks back. She didn't even try to hide it, which rubbed Connor the wrong way, of course.

I didn't have time to worry if Connor would have eyebrows the next time we saw each other. Ryder and I set off for Cerri's apartment. I dozed in the passenger seat of his muscle car as the roar of the engine lulled me into a stupor. Perhaps it was the loud sound drowning out my thoughts. Or, it could have been the way Ryder's scent permeated everything around me, leaving me feeling safe for a short while.

Cerri greeted us at the door with a tracker potion. She showed us how to use it with a bit of the leftovers in her cauldron. With a map spread out over her dinner table, she dipped a crystal point into the solution and let it dangle over the map from a chain. The crystal spun and spun until it fell onto a spot on the map.

It fell north of here, right in the middle of the broad river that separated New York from Canada. Since I didn't think that the witch was in the water, I figured she had to be on one of the many islands that the St. Lawrence River was known for.

"That's about a two-hour drive from here," Ryder said.

That's how we ended up on the interstate headed north. Once more, I dozed, falling and out of sleep as the scenery changed outside my window. It didn't take long for the city to disappear. Soon, rolling rural landscapes took over. My hound adored the lush greenery and the smells wafting in from the outside.

After the first hour, I grew restless. I wanted to get out and explore the open landscapes on all fours. Maybe, if we had time after, we could shift... well, my dragon wouldn't exactly be able to blend in here. This wasn't the mountains, where cliffs obscured nearby valleys.

I let out a dramatic sigh.

"Are you still beating yourself up for what happened to Candi?"

"No, but I will now that you've reminded me," I said.

I sat upright and tried to keep my thoughts away from everything bothering me. Ryder must have sensed my mounting tension because he flicked the blinker and pumped the brakes to take the next exit. I gave him a questioning look, but he didn't respond.

He didn't have to because he immediately pulled into a drive thru at a chain coffee house. He ordered two coffees and a dozen donuts before heading back onto the highway. Soon, our stomachs were full of caffeine and sugar.

The best part wasn't that Ryder had treated me to food once again. It wasn't that he was doing his best to take care of me. More than anything else, I enjoyed the look on his face as he bit into each donut.

It seemed as though his sense of taste had returned. If not in full, then nearly. He groaned happily, making sounds that I wished I could bring out of him.

Okay, brain. You need to calm down with the horny thoughts.

I shook myself in an attempt to break free from the warmth in my core. It crept upwards and nearly touched the ice around my heart. I had to desperately shove the warmth back down before it could melt the ice.

Though I could have leaned into cold and vengeful anger to keep the ice in place, it was hard to do when Ryder was around. Not only did he make me feel safe, but the swell of emotions in my heart threatened to break the ice from the inside.

Death couldn't do shit in the face of love.

Well, it could, but not in this case. My emotions threatened to overwhelm the cool touch of death that protected me. The beings beyond

the veil who wanted to see me succeed in my fate-given purpose must have been frustrated with my overactive libido lately.

It was fate's fault for putting such an attractive and sweet man in my life. What else could I do but fall in love with him?

When we reached the Thousand Islands region, my heart ached. We parked the car in a lot and walked up to the boat rental. While Ryder spoke to the assistant, I took in the beautiful landscape.

Water crashed against the nearby walls. In the distance, a heart-shaped island boasted a castle that looked out over those on the mainland. The glimmering waters and romantic castle brought an image to my mind that I couldn't banish.

I could see myself, standing on that well-tended island with my hand in Ryder's. I could see him sliding a ring onto my finger while my family shed tears of happiness in the background. It was an empty daydream, but one that I didn't want to let go of in the least.

"Are you ready?" Ryder asked, shaking me out of my reverie.

I startled and a faint heat rushed to my cheeks. Ryder squinted at me but didn't ask what I'd been doing. I wouldn't have told him the truth, anyway.

The daydream was too good to be true, and I knew that. Someone like me didn't get to have a wedding on a fancy island. My hound would never allow me to attach to anyone else. I could feel it in my bones, this intense passion that she held for Ryder that would never fade. This feeling was one of the few things taking up space inside of me that I welcomed—and dreaded at the same time.

My hound thought of Ryder as her mate, even though we both knew that was impossible.

Damn, if only my hound wasn't dumber than a box of rocks.

She snarled at my bitterness. The hound fed me promises that she couldn't ensure. Even though she thought Ryder would fall for me, too, there was no way that would happen so long as he had Bri.

I tried to focus on the sound of gentle waves lapping against the rocky banks just so I didn't have to listen to my hound. Ryder held out a hand to me to help me into the boat. I ignored his touch and jumped in on my own.

"Got a problem?" Ryder asked, his tone terse all of a sudden.

I clamped my lips together and shook my head before taking a seat in the small boat. Ryder looked as though he wanted to press the issue, but the

captain started up the engine in the back, drowning out anything Ryder might have said.

He must have realized that he wouldn't get anything out of me now because he opened the map for the captain and pointed to the island that the crystal point had touched earlier. The captain's brows furrowed, but he gave a nod.

This was going to be expensive. I could already tell.

Ryder

MORE THAN ONCE, I stole a glance at Ness. She peered out at the open waters, her eyes catching on the myriad islands we passed. More than once, I caught her staring at the idyllic castle that loomed just off the coast.

She wouldn't tell me what was on her mind. No matter how I wanted to squeeze it out of her, I couldn't force the issue. Though, I had to admit that I had an idea of what might have been bothering her.

The witch was responsible for the curse that Alvin had put over her. Now that we were getting closer to the witch, Ness was getting nervous. It was a reasonable response after what had happened.

I could have promised Ness that I would keep her safe, but I'd already failed her when Alvin managed to partially entrap her in his curse. Maybe the ritual hadn't run its course, but it obviously had power over her.

Leaving the map with the captain, I went to sit beside Ness. I reached for her hand, but she yanked it away from me and sandwiched it between her thighs. Hurt, I studied her face for a hint. I had no idea what I'd done to make her pull away.

My beast growled. It made demands that I couldn't fulfill. It wanted me to tell Ness that she was my mate. The beast thought that perhaps that was why Ness pulled away time and time again.

I could have told her. What was stopping me? Aside from the looming threat of her insane Alpha and the curse trying to control her? No time seemed right. If we weren't in danger's way, then we were trying to figure out how to get out of danger's way.

The trip across the water dragged on while I tried to untangle my twisted thoughts. The damn beast didn't help a bit. Every time I pushed a thought aside, the beast dredged it back up and shoved it to the forefront of my mind.

Don't die without telling her.

Though I wanted to tell the beast to shut up, it was right. Its words rang around my skull in a way that I couldn't ignore. But when I looked back at Ness, her closed off demeanor stopped me.

Before I could figure out what to do, the boat came to a halt. A small house sat on an island that was almost as small. This time, when I extended a hand to Ness, she took it and let me help her off the boat.

The boat captain took one look at the island and shuddered. It seemed the witch had put up wards already. Ness and I would have to tread carefully from here.

"I'm going to take a little jaunt while the two of you do your business." The captain pulled away from the dock before either of us could ask him to stay.

The witch's wards were doing their job, it seemed. They weren't enough to keep Ness and myself away. I squared my shoulders and led the way forward. There weren't any bone chimes hanging from the front porch this time.

I climbed the steps and rapped my fist against the door. After a moment of startled shuffling inside, the witch cracked the door open.

"Oh, seriously?" The witch groaned. She released the door and stepped aside.

When she didn't make any effort to stop us from entering, I peered cautiously at the doorframe, scanning for any trace of spell work that might bite us in the ass later. When I couldn't find anything obvious, I glanced at Ness.

She shrugged, heedless of her own safety, and ducked inside. I followed after her because there was no way I was going to let her get far from me now. The urge to touch her, even if to just brush my knuckles against hers, damn near overwhelmed me. My beast snarled and told me to push her behind me.

I almost laughed at the over-protective beast. Didn't it know our mate by now? Ness wouldn't talk to me for the rest of the day if I held her back. I needed to keep an eye on the witch, that was all.

“Listen,” the witch began. “I do the jobs that pay well. Since you and the others didn’t bother dropping money into my account, I didn’t see a problem helping your Alpha.”

“He’s not the Alpha anymore,” I interjected.

The witch tossed a smug grin in my direction. She looked me up and down. For a moment, I thought she would sidle up to me and ask me to open my wallet. That look told me all I needed to know. She’d found a new opportunity.

I didn’t have anything to make it worth her while, though.

N_{ess}

BALLS, I thought.

The witch eyed Ryder like he was a four-course meal. My hound rose to the surface with a furious growl. The hound clawed at my insides because she was eager to get out and teach the witch a lesson.

However, I knew that the witch wasn't looking at Ryder like that because she wanted a chance to be with him. That look was all about power. While Alvin had given the witch money, there were other forms of power to be had.

I had access to arcana that the witch had never tasted before. That gave me the upper hand in this negotiation, even if I didn't want to give myself up like that. I'd done it with Beryl. Now I had to do it with the witch.

Ryder owed me big time.

I sighed. No, he didn't. We were working to give the Lakesedge Pack a new start. I would do anything to give them the peace of mind that they deserved. Every small sacrifice would be worth it in the end.

"Ask anything of me," I told the witch. "I'll let you call in one favor—within reason—if you help us today. I'll help you find a rare ingredient. I'll give you some of my blood. Anything that doesn't involve hurting someone else. How's that for payment?"

Ryder made a small noise that sounded very much like *stop*. I didn't stop, though. Instead, I approached the witch.

My body rebelled. The sensation of beetles crawling across my skin returned, making me shudder, but I held firm and stared the witch down. A slow, hungry smile curled across her lips. She wore a partially unbuttoned shirt that parted to reveal a small crystal hanging between her breasts as she closed the space between us.

The witch reached up and cupped my cheek. She trailed her fingers down my cheek until she could slide her hand around the back of my neck. Though Ryder growled in the background, my senses fell away from the present. A prickling sensation pierced my skin and delved into my body, taking my attention with it.

I knew what I felt was the witch's prying arcana. When her power brushed up against the greedy arcana conjured by the ritual, she recoiled. The ritual arcana lashed out at her, but she snatched her hand back. While the witch's chest heaved, I swayed on my feet. The ritual arcana flung itself in every direction in a rampant tantrum.

All because it couldn't get the witch's arcana.

I'd thought it would answer to her, since she was the one who'd compiled the ritual in the first place. To see it attack her, too, left me wary. This thing inside me was a hungry worm trying to rot me from the inside out, and it would latch on to everyone around me, apparently.

"I'd really hoped that you would escape that ritual before he had a chance to get it started. It seems that I had higher expectations than you deserved." The witch gave a condescending smile.

I stifled the urge to slap it off her face.

"I gave you all the tools you needed," the witch said as she knelt in front of a cabinet.

I thought she would pull out an altar or some magical tools. Instead, the witch grabbed a bottle of brown liquor and stood. When she pushed the bottle into my hands, she gave me a snarky wink.

"You're going to need this."

"Have I mentioned how much I hate you?" I said with the weight of the bottle in my hands.

The witch laughed. This time, she went to a filing cabinet in the corner. The metallic beast of a cabinet screeched and groaned when she yanked it open. From its maw, she pulled out a manilla folder marked with

unrecognizable sigils. Just seeing it made my skin crawl for reasons I couldn't discern.

"I don't approve of what Mr. Combs has been up to lately." The witch slapped the folder against Ryder's chest. "I did what he asked because he paid well enough that I could leave town for a while, but... Even I have some morals, and he's doing his damndest to sully them all."

I sidled up to Ryder when he cracked the folder open. A couple of cashed checks sat on top of the contents. One check hadn't been cashed, though. It had a *denied* stamp across the front, which made me toss a glare in the witch's direction.

"This isn't about your morals. He doesn't have enough to pay your exorbitant prices anymore."

The witch grinned and lifted a glass to her lips. Still, there was a shadow over her eyes that made me believe that she hadn't been dishonest. This didn't sit right with her, even if money hadn't been involved.

Ryder pulled a sheet from the folder and scanned it. A list of items filled the page, all with small checks next to them. Censers, herbs, blood. The ritual arcana stirred within me, as if in recognition of these ingredients.

"Alvin is going to cast another ritual," I said. "He didn't get to finish it the first time. That's why Marcus and Jackson keep trying to kidnap me. Alvin wants to make sure the ritual sticks this time. If he can get me..."

My hand rose to my throat. I couldn't feel the command arcana, as it was trapped behind the ice still nestled in my chest, but the memory of my power remained. It couldn't fall into the wrong hands, or the pack would be screwed.

Ryder put a hand on the small of my back. "We'll keep a closer eye on you. Alvin isn't going to get away with this."

I turned my attention to the witch. "Take this curse off me. It's your doing, so you should be able to banish it. Do that for me, and I'll give you another favor. Anything you want."

Oh, I hated the desperation turning my voice into a sad plea, but my heart frantically slammed against my sternum. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't go anywhere without looking over my shoulder again.

The memory of Alvin's dark silhouette outside the building haunted me. He'd been right there. They would have carted me away had it not been for Ryder and his dragon wings.

If the witch could banish this curse, then I wouldn't have to worry about walking right into Alvin's hands.

"He's killing small animals so he can control me. I know that doesn't mean anything to a witch like yourself, but help me put a stop to this. It's disgusting."

The witch sneered in disbelief. "He's making sacrifices? You royally screwed that ritual up if he needs extra power in order to issue commands. I'm all at once proud and perplexed."

Closing the space between us, I ignored the creeping sensation of bugs on my skin so I could look down my nose at the witch. "I don't care what you're feeling. Take this off me."

She gave a sad shake of her head. "The only way you're getting out of this is in death, love."

My core trembled. The ice in my chest hardened, as if in preparation for what was to come. I could feel that chill slipping into my veins and slowly taking over my body. Though I tried to shake it off, it clung to me in warning.



THE BOAT CAPTAIN returned at just the right time. I couldn't help but wonder if that was the witch's doing, or if it was just coincidence. Either way, we climbed back onto the boat and made our way back to the mainland.

I wasn't ready to go back to Lakesedge. I wanted to stay here, near the glimmering river water where I could see castles. The lake back home was pretty, but it didn't hold the kind of majesty that could be found here.

We climbed back into the car, nonetheless. I mourned the pretty landscape disappearing behind us, because I knew we had a task ahead that would end horribly.

The witch's words haunted me. She'd warned that this curse would only end in death. Though I'd come back from the dead before, I had no idea if it would happen again. How many chances did I get? Was it only one? Had it already been wasted?

I snuck a glance in Ryder's direction. My stomach flipped.

Another question tumbled into the forefront of my mind—one more vulnerable. I clenched my fists as a wave of emotion swelled in my chest. Sucking down a deep breath, I tried to steel myself for what I needed to do.

If only I'd said what I meant to. Instead, something else slipped out.

"I need to know what your relationship with Bri is."

Oh, I could have slapped myself in that moment. I cringed, fully aware of what I'd just done.

Ryder slammed on the brakes. He jerked the wheel so that we came to a halt on the side of the road. I was suddenly grateful that we'd decided to take a scenic route back home instead of the highway, or someone would have rear-ended us for sure.

"What the hell?" I threw out my hands to brace myself against the dashboard.

Ryder jammed the gearshift into park then twisted to look at me. His glare was dark, his jaw tight with tension. Clearly, I'd kicked a hornet's nest and was about to face the consequences.

Putting my hands up, palms out, I said, "Fine. I'll stop asking. Clearly things between the two of you are still complicated."

With no words, Ryder reached out and cupped the back of my head. He pulled me in, our lips crashing together. Though I wanted to push back, I immediately melted against him. The taste of his tongue on mine scrambled all thoughts.

I let him kiss me, let his tongue push into my mouth so that he could fill me in ways I'd craved for so long. Hands fisted in the front of his shirt, I nearly begged him to stay.

Keep going. More. Please. I'm so hungry for you.

Ryder gave in to my silent plea. He deepened the kiss, pushing me back into my seat until there was only him. His teeth dragged against my lip. The taste of metal bloomed in my mouth from his rough love. It woke a feral need in me that made me claw at his shoulders.

Finally, he pulled away. I tried to drag him back, but he held firm.

"If Bri was my mate, would I kiss you like that?" he asked, his voice low and gruff. His hand slid up my thigh, the tips of his fingers delving between my legs in a way that made me want to part them for him. "Would I touch you like this if I had a mate elsewhere?"

An electric spark leapt through my chest and zapped my heart. I let out a shuddering breath because that's all I could manage. No words came to

me. No thoughts surfaced in the puddle of my brain.

The corner of Ryder's mouth lifted. He ran a thumb along my lower lip. It came away with a speck of blood even though there was no pain.

"I have a mate," he growled, his hand tightening on my thigh.

My heart clenched unexpectedly. I shoved his hand off my thigh with chilly fury. "Well, if you have a mate, then why are you teasing me like this?"

I reached for the door handle with every intention of getting out of the car. Ryder's chuckle made me fumble and struggle. Flustered, I shot a glare back at him.

"What is your problem?" I snapped.

"Okay, let me rephrase this. Would a mated dragon kiss someone who wasn't his mate?"

I narrowed my eyes. The gears in my brain were stuck fast. They wouldn't turn. What kind of riddle was this? He'd clearly kissed me, so I didn't...

Before the ritual had broken it, there'd been a bond between Ryder and me. The ritual had severed it, though. There was no way that Ryder and I were...

It couldn't be.

"What? Angry that you can't rush headlong into the correct answer? You're being stubbornly quiet." Ryder grinned.

He leaned back in his seat and pulled the gearshift into drive again. We coasted back onto the road. Meanwhile, my mind churned.

"I'm going to give you time to think this over and come to the right conclusion." His bright gaze slid over to me, making my heart leap unexpectedly.

The way his gaze dragged over my body before rising back to look me in the eye filled me with more heat than I knew what to do with.

Ryder adjusted his position in his seat as he tugged at the inseam of his jeans. "I'll be ready for you when you figure it out."

Did he really mean it? Could it be possible? There was no bond between us anymore! If the ritual could break it that easily, then it couldn't possibly be a mate bond. Yet, the way Ryder kept looking in my direction made my heart warm.

Shit.

I turned my attention out the window. The ice in my chest threatened to melt like my brain had. I pressed my knuckles to my breastbone and tried to calm my warm emotions. The heat of my desire licked at the ice.

If the ice disappeared, then we were screwed. Alvin would have complete control of me again. But if it disappeared, my arcana would be stronger. I knew that the barrier inside me was what made my command weak. What had once kept Ryder from touching Harvey at all, now struggled to keep Jackson and Marcus out of town.

Mate. Holy shit. I had a mate.

I clenched my fists. The ice in my chest shrank little by little, assaulted by the heat of my excitement. Though I wanted to touch Ryder, I had to keep my hands to myself. Alvin's curse reached into every part of my life and left its stain on everything. Even though I had the bond I'd wanted for so long, I couldn't enjoy it.

It was a good thing that Ryder was driving. Had we been back at the apartment, I doubted I could have kept my hands to myself. Already, the ache of my yearning pierced my heart. It hurt more than Connor's betrayal. It hurt more than the time I'd died. It didn't hurt quite as bad as the lightning strike, but damn it was close.

Ryder took his hand off the gearshift and placed it on my thigh. I nearly whimpered but managed to keep the pained sound inside my chest. Unable to hold back any longer, I placed my hand over his. He gave a squeeze before he slid his hand higher up my thigh.

Warmth blossomed in my core. I shoved it down, but that only made it burn hotter between my legs. My breath hitched when his pinky grazed my groin.

My mind churned with demands. I needed him to pull over onto the side of the road and lean his seat back so I could crawl into his lap. But I somehow managed to keep my desires to myself as the scenery outside bled from green wildlife into the winding streets of the city.

When we got back to the rental, I wouldn't be able to stop myself. I knew that I was going to cave. Desire fluttered low in my stomach like butterflies with wings made of fire. They singed my insides with a kind of heat I'd never known before.

Even Ryder seemed affected by the mounting temperatures inside the car. His eyes burned with the light of his beast. I could feel it watching me

in hungry anticipation. What was going through his mind? What was he eagerly awaiting? I needed to know.

I needed to experience it.

Stop, Ness. Control yourself. You could lose everything.

If the ice melted, and the ritual arcana took ahold of my command while Ryder was unguarded, then today could end badly. I had to find a way to keep my pants on today, even if that sucked.

Maybe I should go home and spend the night with my parents. Or, I could call Cerri. Connor might be my best bet, actually. I didn't like the idea of losing control in the night and hurting Mom or Cerri. Connor was a survivor. He would know what to do.

My hound growled. She knew that Ryder wouldn't let me spend the night with Connor now. Ryder had staked his claim over me. I belonged to him. Ryder's beast would allow no other man near me, especially not overnight.

What was I supposed to do? I couldn't risk Ryder's safety just for the chance to ride him.

I'd made sacrifice after sacrifice for my pack and my family. The number of times that I'd risked my life to keep others safe made me greedy. I wanted something in return. Fate decided to screw me over one last time.

My affection threatened to put me at risk. Even though I'd come to find the one thing that I'd craved my whole life, I couldn't show him the love that I felt. My hound tried to tell me that everything would be all right if I let my guard down this one time, but I couldn't do it.

My phone vibrated, pulling me out of my lust-addled internal conflict. I moved in my seat so I could pull it out of my pocket. Catriona's number glowed on the screen, which left me perplexed.

Ryder didn't pull away as I answered the phone. He gave me a squeeze of reassurance after a darting glance in my direction.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, breathless for reasons that had nothing to do with nervousness.

Catriona grunted. "Remember that record book? The one with the missing pages?"

"Did you find them?" I asked excitedly leaning forward in my seat.

"I did. You're going to want to see this. Are the two of you still out on your adventure?"

“I wouldn’t exactly call it an adventure,” I said. “We left Jefferson County. We should be back home in...an hour?”

Catriona groaned on the other end.

“I can’t twitch my nose and magically appear back home,” I said with more sass than I should have had for a pack elder. “You could just take a picture with your phone and send it over to me. Technology is an amazing thing, you know.”

Whatever. Catriona had been prickly with me for most of my life. A little bit of sass wouldn’t hurt her.

“That’s fine. I’ll meet you at Ryder’s apartment.”

I bit back a frustrated groan. “Just take a picture!”

Catriona was silent for a long moment. “I’m afraid that there’s magic on these pages that technology won’t catch. It’s better if you hold the papers yourself.”

Well, that didn’t help. I sighed, told Catriona that we’d be there soon enough, then hung up.

When I’d gone to her for help, she’d been resistant. Hell, Catriona had looked me in the eye and blamed me for everything that had happened since my first shift. Since then, she’d made an effort to help, but I was still frustrated with her attitude. I’d been even more frustrated with her records, at the time.

Catriona was the pack’s current historian. She kept the records of the past and transcribed new events for the future generations to reference. The idea was so that mistakes wouldn’t be made twice—it also helped prevent inbreeding when a pack was small and intermingled too often back in the day, but we don’t talk about that anymore.

When I’d tried to learn more about myself from the past records, I’d found the beginnings of a passage about a previous Barghest, but most of the account had been removed. Apparently, Catriona had found it. Her ominous message filled my stomach with butterflies again. These butterflies weren’t as fun as the ones from earlier.

At least it helped distract me from my lust-addled stupor. An hour passed by with bated breath. Catriona’s truck sat on the side of the road, behind my little sedan. I peered at it and felt another heavy stone fall into the pit of my stomach. Dread greeted me like an old lover.

My head snapped up. I ran to the door and threw it open. Behind me, Ryder called out for me to wait. Confusion twisted his voice, but I didn’t

have time to stop and explain.

The smell hit me first: death and Alvin. The stink of rot made my gut churn around the stone again. I knew I was too late.

Guilt rammed into my gut. It shoved me back. I staggered out of the doorway and into Ryder's chest. He caught me and held me upright while my mind spun. His hands were firm and gentle. I wished I could have savored them, but there wasn't time.

"She's dead," I whispered.

Ryder pushed me behind himself. He slowly entered the room. I watched him scan his surroundings carefully, taking in every inch of the space.

"I...I don't think you're getting your deposit back." I couldn't believe the words that left my mouth.

Someone was dead. I could smell it in the air. Yet, here I was cracking stupid jokes in a sad attempt to relieve some of the weight sitting on my chest. It was disgusting, and I hated myself for it.

"We don't know anything yet," Ryder said slowly. "This could be another dead animal."

The weight in the pit of my stomach begged to differ. I knew this feeling. Death had paid this place a visit in recent hours. From now on, I would pay attention to this sensation when it came knocking.

Impatient, I reached past the ice in my chest and withdrew a small sliver of my own arcana. Of course, the ritual arcana made a grasp for it, but I shoved my power into my voice before the curse could take ahold of it.

"If you're here, show yourself." It was a simple command, one that could be followed easily at least once.

When no one stepped out, I gestured for Ryder to proceed. We were the only people here who could hear. That much we knew. The brothers had used earplugs before. Alvin could have done the same, but something about his slow descent made me doubt he had the presence of mind to remember them.

Alvin might have big plans, but he was consumed by them. I wrapped my arms around myself and took comfort in the fact that we could trust our enemy to be unhinged. How wonderful.

We found Catriona in the kitchen. She sat at the table, her hands flat on the surface. At first, it looked as though she were simply staring off into space. The longer I looked, the more obvious it became.

This wasn't like Candi's death. Candi's murder had been brutal, a display of rage at being betrayed by a loved one. She'd taken her ring off. I guessed she'd decided enough was enough, but Alvin couldn't bear to lose anything else. This murder, however, was purely practical. The odd lump in Catriona's neck gave away the injury that her shifter healing would never repair.

Reflexively, my own hand went to my throat. I could almost feel my own neck snapping all over again. I'd come back from that. Catriona never would.

"Janessa isn't going to take this well," I whispered.

Janessa had already lost her mother to Alvin's wrath. Now, she'd lost her aunt, too.

Through the guilt and shame, I remembered why Catriona had called me. Fumbling forward, I reached for Catriona's pockets. I patted her body down in search of those pages she'd promised me. Frantic, I double checked pockets I'd already emptied, convinced that I'd missed something.

When I found nothing on Catriona's body, I ran to the trash bin and shook it to see if there was any paper there. I found nothing among the crumpled receipts and takeout wrappers. Frustrated, I tossed it back down and bent to check under the table.

"Ness," Ryder said softly. "I know what you're looking for. Do you really think Alvin would have left it behind?"

Crouched, I paused and pouted. The urge to lie down and press my cheek to the cold tile floor nearly won out. Somehow, I managed to stay on my feet. "No. I just...hoped that Catriona's actions hadn't been in vain. You know?"

Ryder extended his hand down and helped me back up. Before I could go anywhere, he pulled me into his chest.

What would I do without my rock? Ryder had been my safe space since he'd arrived. The electricity in him answered to the growing storm inside myself. I was sure that if I stepped outside and shifted, my storm would drop thick balls of hail instead of rain.

I'd wanted to chill the ice in my chest so that it would protect my arcana, but I didn't want to be this numb. The frigid cold sitting in my heart threatened to shatter me. It made me brittle and stiff.

All the excitement I'd felt over my newfound mate bond had bled away. I couldn't summon that heat again, and I hated the part of myself that

selfishly wanted it back when I knew that I should have been mourning the dead packmate in the kitchen.

Ryder said he needed to make a call, stepped back, and opened the back door. Immediately, Alvin's scent wafted in as if he'd been right outside the door. My eyes widened. I looked to Ryder.

Wordless, we both rushed outside. A familiar dark silhouette leapt over the back fence and disappeared. Ryder rushed forward, but I backpedaled inside. I cast one wary look over at Catriona, still staring into the nothing, and offered a promise of vengeance.

As soon as the words left my mouth, my hound rushed forward. She poured out of me as if she'd always been in this form. I hit the ground running. In no time, I caught up to Ryder.

The sky overhead gave an ominous rumble that echoed the growl tearing from my muzzle. The slam of my feet against the ground almost satisfied the anger seething in my chest. I needed to dig my claws into something, though. I wanted to feel flesh tear and watch blood spill.

It was a vengeance long overdue. The righteous knowledge that Alvin's time had come fueled me. It propelled me forward and allowed me to overtake Ryder.

Ryder

ALVIN'S FORM ran ahead of us. He ducked around a corner and disappeared for a moment. My stomach dropped and flipped. He was so close, yet so far.

Ness surged ahead of me. I shoved my wings out and asked the winds to carry me so that I could keep up with her. The winds answered my request, but Ness seemed to be carried on the same wind. No matter what I did, I was always just behind her.

She'd lost two packmates in the span of twenty-four hours. I wouldn't lose her, too. Not now that she knew.

That excited look in her eyes, lit from the sparkle of hope for the first time, wouldn't leave my mind. I held onto it, hugged the memory close so that it would give me what I needed to keep my head up. After seeing her joy, I couldn't figure out why I'd kept this secret from her for so long.

We ran out of the neighborhood and into a dense patch of woods. Ness darted between trees and over fallen logs. They were barely an obstacle for her small form. However, my wings became a hindrance here in the woods. I had to tuck them close to my back and rely on my own two feet.

Alvin slowed. He stopped and turned. A broad smile slid over his manic features. Eyes too wide, he grinned down at us. I called out for Ness to stop, but she ignored me.

The sky above flashed with lightning. It illuminated the dark foliage for a split second. That was how I noticed two more figures standing behind Alvin. Marcus and Jackson held a pig between them.

Alvin turned and bent. He raked his claws along the pig's throat. Arcana curled in the air, turning it thick and choking. I held my breath as I darted towards Alvin.

Ness's cry made me change trajectory. I twisted toward her just in time to see her fall to her knees. She'd shifted back to her human form. On her knees, she hung her head. I saw the tremble of her shoulders right before they collapsed. Her cheek hit the earth, but she didn't make a sound.

When Ness rose, it was as if a string tugged at her head. She lifted like a puppet being controlled by a master. I rocked back, heart lurching.

That light in her eyes was gone. She wasn't dead, but the Ness that I loved wasn't there anymore. This had been an ambush. They'd forced us to chase them, so we would fall right into their hands. This close to their sacrifice, the arcana was the strongest.

"Don't let him win," I cried out.

Ness didn't acknowledge me. She turned, a stiff about face that was more robotic than mortal. I lunged forward and caught her by the shoulder. When she twisted, her lips parted. No words came out, though.

Only a strangled groan.

Her brow furrowed. Beyond her, I could see Alvin's face contort with frustration—almost a perfect mirror.

I cupped Ness's face and leaned in so that my scent would overwhelm her. I rubbed my cheek along hers and whispered in her ear.

"Come back to me, mate. Don't leave me now."

Ness put a hand against my chest, right over my heart. I thought I'd won. Nothing could separate us.

Then she shoved. I didn't reel back, but the push startled me. She ducked out of my hands and resumed her march toward Alvin.

His laugh echoed between the trees. "This is my territory, dragon. You were never anything more than a visitor. My pack will kneel to me once again. I don't have any doubts about that."

My lip curled. Attention on Ness, I reached into my pocket. My fingertip touched the sensor on the back of my phone. It would have been nice if Morgan chose this instant to touch down and cause havoc, but that didn't happen. It was just Alvin and myself, and his puppets.

And Ness.

Oh, boy. I prayed that I was doing the right thing as I swiped across my phone screen without looking. There was a strong chance that I wouldn't press the right buttons. Touchscreens were so much more difficult to navigate than regular buttons.

"If you stay, you'll kneel, too." Alvin lifted his chin imperiously. There was a sick gleam to his eyes when lightning flashed again.

"Her arcana is weak right now," I warned. "Ness won't be able to control everyone for you, if that's what you're thinking. She'll run out of power before you get what you want."

Alvin's gaze slid over to Ness. My beast rose and gnashed its teeth in warning.

Take one more look at my mate, and you will lose those eyes. I will pluck them from your head so you can't see anything but your own demise.

The pack would come. I'd sounded the alarm. A while back, while watching Ness sleep, I'd struggled to find my own rest. Instead of wasting time, I'd programmed an SOS into my phone. One tap of a button and it would fire a message out to everyone in the pack.

Now, I just had to buy us some time until everyone came.

They would. This pack had been through a lot together. They could survive anything, so long as they stuck together. I had to show them that. They'd been focused on themselves for so long, always worrying about their own hide.

Together, we would escape Alvin.

I straightened and rolled my shoulders back. It took every ounce of willpower that I could muster, especially when Alvin grabbed Ness by the upper arm and yanked her closer, like she was a petulant child.

For a moment, her gaze narrowed as it slid in his direction. I thought, maybe, Alvin had made a mistake and Ness had come back to us. Then her expression went blank once more.

My beast roared defiantly. It stamped its feet inside me. The creature was ready to shake the earth and the skies for our mate.

THE LEAVES SHOOK as beasts prowled out of the dark. They kept their heads low. A chorus of growls rose in unison. My spirits lifted, and I let out a breath that I must have been holding. Several wolves moved to put

themselves between Alvin and myself. I stepped up alongside them because that was my place, not behind them.

Two wolves stared Alvin down with murderous intent. The cinnamon-colored wolf bared its teeth. Though Connor had failed Ness in the past, it seemed that he was intent on doing better. He still had feelings for Ness, that much I could tell.

The other wolf was darker, with a streak of white down his back. Ness's father stalked towards Alvin. But Alvin noticed. Alvin yanked Ness off balance and dragged her between himself and her father.

My growl rumbled like thunder. The storm above answered with fury. This would be Alvin's last stand. I wouldn't allow him to keep entering our lives and throwing everything off balance.

The pack deserved time and space to heal. Ness deserved to be safe and loved.

Ness

ALVIN HAD DONE IT AGAIN.

The eerily glowing walls of the red room surrounded me. The light in here made my heart race. Though I knew I was only a thought trapped in my own head, the thunder of my heart rate shook me.

Furious, I kicked and pounded on the walls around me. They shuddered under my onslaught but didn't fall. Nothing I did brought them down, no matter how hard I tried.

"You dirty son of a bitch!" I screamed into the void. "You keep acting like a sniveling puppy dog."

He couldn't hear me. Nothing I said would shake him, but it did make me feel a little better. I needed to find a way out of here. He wouldn't even show me what was going on outside. In here, I couldn't tell if Ryder was safe.

Ryder.

If Alvin touched one hair on Ryder's head, I would burn everything to the ground. I would make sure that Alvin's last breath came out as a

scream. I would savor that sound for the rest of my life. If Alvin used *me* to hurt Ryder...

That scream wouldn't be Alvin's last.

Cold fury settled my heart. It turned me to ice, no longer brittle and easily shattered. I became the immovable force of an iceberg. If Alvin thought he would control me, body *and* soul, then he was sorely mistaken.

Though my senses were muted, I could hear a little of what was happening beyond my body. I could smell my pack, too. Panic hit my senses and ramped my heartrate. Alvin couldn't have them. I would throw myself into the line of fire a dozen times over before I let him take them.

But my hound nudged me. It was an odd experience, seeing her standing outside my body for once. She looked up at me with her big, hopeful eyes. At first, I didn't understand the sentiment. My panic made my thoughts tumble, one after another like a tsunami crashing down over my head.

I stared into her eyes and found the center of the storm where all was calm. My hound asked me to have faith.

Faith?

In my pack? I wasn't sure if I could do that yet. They hadn't earned trust, let alone faith. Though I loved them, they'd failed me left and right. Now my hound wanted me to have faith?

It wasn't in me yet. I couldn't muster the trust that it took. My core shook. I didn't know how to put my life in the hands of others. As everything else spiraled out of control, I grasped onto what I could. I made my own choices, even if they'd all ended poorly.

I had a mate, though—a man who loved me enough to sit beside me every night even though I'd tried to kill him. He was out there.

Even if I couldn't trust my pack, I could trust him.

Alone, I could sink into the cold chill inside me and show bravery in the face of adversity. When I had to put my life in the hands of others, I shuddered. That couldn't last forever, though. If I asked the pack to change, then I had to change, too.

We would all change for the better.

And Alvin would fall.

Ryder

“MAKE a move and I’ll slit her throat,” Alvin said.

He shoved Ness onto her knees and tucked his claws under her chin. Ness stared straight ahead, her blank eyes flickering with light as if there were some sort of battle raging within. I sure hoped so.

I wanted to see her rise and direct her command at Alvin, because he deserved it. I wanted her to tell him to kneel before me so I could end this.

No.

I wouldn’t kill again. I would make sure that Alvin could never hurt another soul, but I wasn’t going to take a life. Blood was one thing, but death was another.

My beast snarled in disagreement. It craved blood and violence for what our mate was going through. Alvin’s hands were on her, on her bare skin, threatening her life.

The pack prowled closer, though. Connor and Bruce approached from the front while others pressed in from behind. Jackson and Marcus snarled at the wolves behind them, but the way they looked to their master for direction told me that they were scared.

I opened my wings again and flexed them. The sky overhead lit up with chain lightning leaping from cloud to cloud. The display did nothing to

change Alvin's expression, though. While his minions nervously looked from wolf to wolf, Alvin wore that same manic grin.

Alvin straightened. As he rose, his claws pressed into Ness's throat. Thin rivulets of blood trickled down her pale skin. My beast slammed into the surface and sent me rushing forward. Alvin's laugh drew me to a halt. More blood spilled down Ness's throat.

"Wake up, Vanessa," I growled. "Get your ass back here, right this instant. You know where you belong. You know your place in all of this is at my side."

Her eyes lit up. She lifted her chin as her attention slid in my direction. Before we could lock eyes, the blank stare returned to steal my mate away from me again. She'd heard me, though.

"Everyone is here," I said. "Your pack came out to save you. Don't let them down. Show them what it means to be an Alpha's mate."

I expected Bruce to look back at me with shock, but it was Connor who stopped. Stunned, Connor shook himself. We would have a talk later, but right now I was grateful that the young wolf didn't let his jealousy get in the way.

Connor loved Ness. That affection kept Connor staring straight ahead, at the target before us. He deserved better rank, I realized. I would give it to him. I would award the changes he'd made and the valor that he'd been showing.

Ness's shoulders shuddered. Her skin rippled. For a moment, her form darkened. Her hound was trying to break free. But she remained human. No fur appeared on her skin; her body wouldn't bend to the hound's will.

I nearly laughed when a slight frown turned down the corners of Ness's mouth. Even though she was locked away from us, her frustration was so immense that it could still reach her face. That was my stubborn mate, always fighting the impossible odds and coming out on top.

But when her mouth opened and her eyes rolled up to meet Alvin's, she spoke two words that destroyed me.

"Kill me."

I rushed forward. The wind roared in my ears as I threw myself at Alvin. He jerked back, away from me. I thought he would drag his claws along her throat, but he grabbed ahold of her, instead.

From the right, Connor struck. His teeth closed around Alvin's forearm. Alvin cried out, the sound turning into a snarl. Even though Alvin

backhanded Connor, the cinnamon-colored wolf held on tight. Connor tossed his head back and forth, tearing flesh from bone.

Released from Alvin's grasp, Ness dropped. I caught her before she could hit the ground. Her nose wrinkled and light flared in her eyes. She sucked in a deep breath, her expression coming to life.

A snarl beyond her sent me into motion. I twisted and snapped out my wings to put my body between her and danger. Alvin's roar cut through the tense air like shattering glass. The resounding snap that came afterward chilled me to the bone.

Ness thrashed and threw herself out of my arms. She scrambled onto her feet. Though I twisted and caught her wrist before she could fling herself into the heat of action, I wasn't quick enough to stop her from seeing what'd happened.

Alvin released Connor's body. He slumped lifeless at the base of the tree that he'd been thrown against. Ness whimpered before clamping a hand over her mouth.

I gently tugged her back into my body. The pack pulled in around us, wolf bodies pressing against ours like a wall of fur and fangs.

Rage turned my blood into fire. I rose and pulled Ness behind me. Alvin's shoulders heaved. Half bent, he spun and snarled at us. Whatever curse had been placed over him was taking its toll. He was more monster than man at this point. It wasn't the way his claws curled or the sneer on his lips. It was in his frantic fury.

"Connor!" Ness called out.

She ducked around my outstretched arm despite all attempts to stop her. She dropped to her knees near the cinnamon-colored wolf and pulled his head into her lap. Marcus and Jackson saw her distracted and decided to strike.

I moved to intercept them, but Alvin planted himself between us. Ness's roar tore me in half. Marcus and Jackson hauled her to her feet even though she thrashed in their arms. Her face twisted with rage. She threw herself forward.

Alvin swiped at me, drawing my attention back to him. The reek of rot that wafted off him wasn't just the curse eating away at what was left of his soul. It was more than that. I caught the scent of poison.

He knew he couldn't win a fair fight. Once more, they had to resort to playing dirty.

But that meant...Alvin's claws had pierced Ness's skin. I leapt out of the way of another of Alvin's swipes and craned my neck to see Ness. Already, her movements were growing sluggish. Her eyelids drooped. She still had fight left in her, if the curl of her lip told me anything.

How long would it take for the poison to take her from me? A few minutes? An hour?

"Drop me," she commanded.

Marcus and Jackson jerked their hands back. Ness fell to her knees. She paid no attention to the men behind her before she began crawling to Connor.

"Leave," Alvin snarled. "This is my territory."

I struck out, reaching for his throat. He fell back, and my hand closed around empty air. He wasn't fast enough to dodge my strikes, so he'd shifted instead. His form shrank beneath my reach. I tried to push one attack into another, shifting my body weight so that I could throw myself at the wolf.

The missed grapple cost me precious moments. The time that it took me to turn my grasp into a full-body grapple allowed Alvin to leap away from me. My beast bellowed. It shoved its way out of me. Wolves scrambled out of the way as my claws slammed into the earth. I charged ahead with Alvin's form in my sights.

"Stop," Ness called out.

My body froze. My momentum nearly sent me tumbling face first into the ground. Behind me, she quickly cursed under her breath. Ness caught up and put a hand on my flank. She sighed, defeated.

The command broke, and my body relaxed. I turned my attention to the darkness ahead. No one remained in the shadows. Alvin and his minions had gotten away.

Ness pulled her hand back, clutching it close to her chest. There was a fine sheen of sweat on her forehead. The edges of her lips were turning blue. She leaned her weight on me as if she couldn't hold herself upright any longer.

She glanced between me and the body I knew to be on the ground behind us. "I didn't mean... I acted without thinking."

Restless, I shook out my wings and lashed my tail. I wanted to give chase, but Ness had been poisoned. I had to stay here.

Ness sobbed. She clamped a hand over her mouth. I hunkered close to the ground so she wouldn't fall as her knees buckled beneath her. Her breath became raspy. I tapped her thigh with my tail to keep her awake. Ness muttered.

Don't fall asleep on me, I wanted to shout. Someone had to call Cerri. Where was the potion maker?

Cerri was pack. I'd already called her. She shoved her way through the crowd and dropped beside Ness.

I could have chased Alvin. The pack was safe. Ness was in Cerri's hands. Yet, my body refused to move. My beast planted itself right by Ness's side. There was nowhere else in the world that I wanted to be.

I only hoped that the pack wouldn't see that as a sign of weakness. If they expected me to hunt Alvin down tonight, then they would be disappointed.

NESS

"YOU DUMB BASTARD," I muttered, my tongue too thick.

I pulled Connor into my lap again. This wasn't blood loss. It wasn't poison. We couldn't scramble to heal him with potions or modern medicine. His shifter healing wouldn't kick in and fix what had been broken. There wasn't anything we could do to bring him back from a swift death.

Somehow, that made it worse. There was no tension, no breath held as we waited for a turn of luck. He'd been ripped from our hands in the blink of an eye, as if he meant nothing to Alvin.

Alvin didn't even give Connor a chance to heal.

And now I could feel the poison trying to burn away my insides. It infiltrated my body in a way that the ritual arcana couldn't. The chilly ice wrapped around my heart couldn't stop poison from getting in.

Already, my breathing had turned shallow. My skin prickled when a wind washed over me. I should have felt the cool brush of it, but I had become numb. Cerri tapped my cheek. She tried to pull my attention up to her, but all I could see was the dead wolf in my lap.

The ice in my chest pulsed. Resolve hardened inside my heart. Alvin would go down kicking and screaming. This poison wouldn't be able to take me. Even if Cerri hadn't been here, I would have come back from this.

Maybe it was foolhardy to depend on something we knew so little about, but I was confident that my anger would bring me back to the world of the living. I couldn't leave until Alvin was dead and in the ground.

"Vanessa!" Cerri shouted, though her voice was muted in my ears. "Stop moping. Drink this, damn it."

Cerri pressed something, a bottle perhaps, to my lips. I let them part so she could pour its contents into my mouth. It tickled all the way down my throat. In moments, the poison would be gone. That didn't seem fair.

Nothing about this was fair.

My three packmates had everything ripped away from them. There would be no more chances for them to redeem themselves. Their voices had been silenced.

"All right," Ryder said.

He lifted me into his arms. I kicked and twisted to break free, but the poison had sapped me of my strength. There was no more fight left in me, not even for Connor.

"This isn't fair!" I cried out, my voice breaking.

The wolves watched me. I couldn't stand their gazes, so I turned my face into Ryder's bare chest. The walk back to the apartment didn't take long. That should have been a small comfort, but the moment Ryder stepped foot back inside, we came face to face with another body.

Another soul ripped from this life.

The rage in my chest was too much. It battered the inside of my icy cage. If I didn't let it out, then I would shatter for sure. Ryder set me down, perhaps a bit reluctantly. When I wobbled outside, he followed not far behind me.

The storm above roiled across the sky. Lightning danced among the clouds. I could feel it on my skin. I pulled the power around me into one strike as I unleashed a primal scream. Lightning blasted the ground in front of me. The roar of it drowned out my scream. The bolt's light blinded my eyes.

I let out a breath. The pressure in my chest had diminished. Once more, I could breathe.

But as I came back to myself, I noticed the wolves slowly gathering in the back yard and the way they watched me. There was no wariness to their expressions. If anything, I saw commiseration.

“I’ll kill him myself,” I said before turning back towards the back door.

N_{ess}

I KNELT at the edge of Connor's grave while his parents wept. They'd been like a second set of parents to me when I was a kid. Now, they were practically strangers.

They didn't give me any accusing looks, though. No one put blame on my shoulders save for me.

I'd watched Alvin rip Connor off his arm. I'd watched as Alvin swung Connor into the tree. Ryder's shoulder hadn't been enough to block my view, and his body couldn't block the sound that Connor's spine had made upon impact.

That was the third death in...how many hours? Less than forty-eight. I knew that much.

I'd been apathetic about my childhood friend, but only to protect myself from the hurt of his betrayal. He'd given in to Alvin's lies, once upon a time, and handed me over to the horrid man. In one night, Connor had redeemed himself.

I only wished he could have been here with us, still.

I stood and dusted off my knees. The pack graveyard was growing crowded. I rolled my stiff shoulders, uncomfortable with the weight I'd placed on myself.

"This is bullshit," I grumbled.

It would have been nice if Marcus or Jackson had leapt out of the woods in that moment. Then, I would have had somewhere to channel my frustration. There was no future for anyone until they were all dealt with.

When I looked back at Ryder, hovering close by like he couldn't bear to let me out of his sight, I tried to fight back the blame that I wanted to place on him, too. He didn't deserve my anger. I swallowed it down so that it could fester in my gut instead.

Ryder gently touched my shoulder. I let him turn me and pull me into his chest. There, his scent eased the knot tightening my chest. If I let him hold me for long, his kindness would melt the ice in my chest.

Over Ryder's shoulder, I noticed someone kneeling in front of Catriona's newly dug grave. Janessa's shoulders shook violently as she cried into her hands.

Through the crowd, Addie appeared. Her expression was tight. The way she glanced here and there made me think she could see the ghosts of our recently departed. I hoped they weren't bothering my friend when I was right here. Their deaths were on my shoulders, not hers.

"We need to show you something," Addie said.

She grabbed my wrist and dragged me along. Ryder grumbled something behind me. When I turned, I caught him looking between me and the pack. I gave him a thumbs up. I would be fine with my friends. He could stay and watch over the pack.

Ryder's jaw tightened. My heart flipped. He wanted to protect me. I could see the battle he waged against his beast. The dragon wanted to keep me safe, too.

When would we get another chance to be alone? I wanted to feel his lips on mine again. This longing made my skin tight. Every small touch turned into a bonfire that threatened to destroy my cool resolve.

"Get your mind out of the gutter." Addie tugged my wrist.

I shook my head. "I'm not in the gutter!"

Away from the mourning crowd and the graveyard, Addie gave me a sly smile. Her shoulders had relaxed, and a bit of color had returned to her face.

"Yeah right. I saw the way you were fucking him with your eyes."

I snorted. "Well, I would fuck him with my body if we could get a chance. Alvin keeps cockblocking me by killing people."

Both of Addie's brows rose dramatically.

I cringed. "Yeah, that sounds awful out loud."

She laughed. “I can’t say I understand, but I’m assuming the mate bond makes everything a little more...intense.”

“I wouldn’t know! I can’t get a moment alone with him to find out.” I threw my hands in the air.

“Ness, that’s not what I meant. I was talking about the desire. I don’t need to know if the orgasms are better. It’s bad enough that I can’t make love with anyone without their dead grandma looking down her nose at me. I don’t need to know that shifters also get better climaxes.”

“Oh,” I said rather stupidly.

We caught up to Cerri and Vi who were standing near the hood of Vi’s jeep. They had a map spread out. I looked for the crystal point that we’d used to find the witch, but the only crystals present were the ones holding down the corners of the map—okay, they weren’t crystals. They were just rocks from the ground. Crystals totally sounded cooler.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I approached the map.

They’d marked three places on the grid that was Syracuse and Lakesedge.

“Alvin is up to something very dirty,” Cerri began.

I cut her off because my mind was still in the gutter. “I don’t need to know about his sex life.”

Cerri’s expression flattened, unamused. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

Vi moved aside to let me stand a little closer to the map. I studied the three points but drew a blank, so I looked to Cerri.

“These are the places where...where our friends died.” She swallowed and blinked before her expression went stony once more. “It seemed like Alvin was killing to keep people silent, but I got suspicious. He killed so quickly. They all seemed back to back. I knew there had to be something else up. It seems that I was right.”

My brow furrowed. I didn’t see what was so important about the three different spaces. At least, not until my mind connected the dots—literally. Though Connor had died not far from the rental apartment where Catriona had been murdered, connecting the two made a line along the outer boundary of Lakesedge.

When I connected Alvin’s estate, where Candi had died, to the outer corners of that line, it created a triangle that swallowed almost all of Lakesedge. Alvin had trapped our territory within a circle of death.

“What’s he up to?” I muttered under my breath.

We knew from the witch that Alvin had purchased more ritual supplies. I’d assumed that he planned on binding the pack one by one. This made me think that his plans were much larger—and perhaps a little more immediate.

I looked back and saw Ryder’s head above all others. He stood in the center of the pack. They gathered around him because he’d become their new safe space. So long as Ryder was around, they would feel protected. The pack would be safe in his hands.

That also meant I couldn’t ask him for help.

Damn, I wanted to tell him that I loved him. I wanted one more night with him just to know what I might be losing. Yet, if I approached him now, he would insist on coming with me. I couldn’t let him abandon the pack like that. Not right now.

I gave a nod. “Thanks for letting me know.”

If I took off now, my friends would get suspicious. Vi would never let me go alone, either. Almost as bullheaded as myself, Vi would charge ahead alongside me. Her fire arcana was dangerous, though. If she didn’t burn down half of New York, then she might succumb to her demonic heritage.

I wasn’t going to ask her to risk that for me.

Alvin was my problem, and I was going to take care of it.

“I have to pee,” I said, because it was the only way out of this conversation.

The only one who seemed to see through me was Cerri, but I spun and marched off to the port-a-potty that stood off to the side. When the sensation of being watched vanished, I ducked around the back of the port-a-potty.

I hated those things. They were vile and always reeked of shit no matter where you stood, like smoke from a bonfire finding you even after you switched positions. However, that also meant that no one would catch my scent over here. In the shadow of the port-a-potty, I tugged my shirt over my head and let my hound out.

She was ready for the hunt. My hound tossed her head and shook out her tail. The lines of the map remained in the forefront of my mind. I dove into the woods and made my way to the border of Lakesedge.

Alvin hadn’t been using the witch’s scent-hiding spells lately. If I could find a hint of Alvin’s rot, then I would be able to track him down. Then, it

would be just him and me. So long as I could catch him off guard, he wouldn't be able to use the ritual arcana against me.

Ryder, I'm so sorry. I would have told you if it weren't for the pack. They need you more than I need you. I'm so sorry.

If the mate bond had been intact, I would have sent those thoughts down the line to him. The ritual had snapped the magical bond between us. I couldn't tell Ryder how much I loved him even though my heart swelled with affection as I thought of him.

I marveled at how lucky I'd become. I'd thought that my life would remain cursed because of what I was. Alvin had beaten me into submission and convinced me that I would never have anything of value, that I would never be loved, that I would never prove to my pack that I could be of use.

All of that had been shattered when Ryder showed up. I'd gone about it all wrong at first. I'd asked Ryder to kill for me. That'd been my first mistake. If I hadn't asked him to do something so drastic, maybe we could have confessed our love for one another sooner.

Sorry, Bri. I don't know if you loved him. Maybe you were waiting for him to love you back. I didn't mean to steal him from you, but I'm so happy that I did. If that makes me a bad person, then I hope this sacrifice makes up for it.

But I remembered Bri's all-knowing grin when she looked at Ryder and me. She'd known before I had. Bri had been the first to see the truth that I'd fought so hard. I didn't steal him from her. If anything, I think Bri was happy that Ryder and I had found one another.

Too bad we didn't have longer.

I wasn't strong enough to take Alvin in a physical fight. This would be all about timing. I had to pull my beast back at just the right time so I could use my arcana against him. If I pulled back the ice protecting my arcana, I would only have a moment before the curse struck.

Running made me yearn for wings. My lungs and legs burned with the effort. I ran along the edge of the lake, with water to one side of me and supernatural territory to the other. I left the urban sprawl and found myself in woodlands again.

Not once did I catch the scent of Alvin's rot. A million other scents tickled my senses, from dumpsters to cookouts. I caught everything, and yet not even a hint of what I wanted.

My resolve faltered, but I pushed on.

My pace slowed as I neared Alvin's estate. I didn't want to be back here. The place felt like an enemy. I knew it wouldn't attack me, but every shadow held a potential threat. My hackles rose nervously. If I kept running, then nothing would catch up to me. Yet, my body grew weary.

A figure stepped out of a nearby shadow. I startled and darted back to put space between myself and the person. I expected Alvin's reek to reach for me. Instead, the smell that wafted towards me was softer. It held mossy notes under the overwhelming aroma of bread.

I tilted my head to the side while the figure stepped further out of the shadow. The young fae man from the corner store looked down at me. Though his arms were crossed over his chest, I didn't get the sense that he meant any harm. If anything, it seemed to me that he'd appeared just to make fun of me. At least, that's what I got from his smug grin.

"Hello, puppy. What brings you out this way?"

I snarled in warning. Puppy was such a stupid nickname.

"Are you looking for your wayward Alpha? You've spent too much energy searching, though. What will you do once you find him? I see how you're already wavering on your feet. The world might be trembling before you, but that's only from your point of view. It trembles because you're moments away from falling, puppy."

I bared my teeth at the impetuous fae. He sighed and rolled his eyes. When he strolled forward, he patted the top of my head. I half expected a surge of energy. Instead, darkness rolled over me.

"We don't know enough to let you kill yourself," the fae said, his voice fading as I fell into the dark.

Ryder

I BARELY HAD time to tell the pack where I was going before my beast tugged me away. The dragon knew that Ness was missing before I did, which upset me. I should have had an eye on her.

I made it to the edge of the cemetery before my phone rang. Of course, even though I didn't have Beryl's phone number programmed into my

phone, it still displayed her name on my screen through some sort of fae magic.

“Your mate is in the woods near Alvin’s old estate. Once you’re there, you should be able to catch her scent pretty easily,” Beryl said so casually, as if she were calling to gossip while her nails dried.

“Is she okay?” The words rushed out of me while my beast slammed against my insides with an urgency I’d never felt before.

Already, my feet were carrying me in the direction of the estate.

“She’s fine. I have one of mine watching over her.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. My beast didn’t either. Though I wanted to fly to her, I didn’t want to expose myself like that. I had to run on foot because a car wouldn’t be fast enough, either. The beast would grow frustrated with the gearshift and with speed limits.

Ryder

CAREFULLY, I knelt and gathered her small hound form into my arms. Asleep, Ness seemed so small and fragile. I clutched her close, gave the fae man a nod, and turned back the way I'd come.

"She's a stubborn little beast," the fae man called out. "Keep an eye on her, so she doesn't run off like that again. My mistress won't be pleased if your little puppy goes and gets herself killed."

I could have stayed and showed the fae man that he was in no position to give orders, but there were other, more important matters at hand. The fae man didn't deserve my time right now.

The walk back to the apartment seemed to take forever, but at least I knew where Ness was. I knew that she was safe in my arms. My beast calmed, all of its attention on Ness now.

Inside, I set her on the bed and watched her shift back as she woke. She stretched, naked before me. I couldn't help but look her up and down. A hunger flared inside me. It was one I had not sated in so long. One taste of her would not be enough, though.

Subtle dark circles nested beneath Ness's eyes. I leaned forward and cupped her face. She turned into my embrace, a gesture that made my heart dance happily.

“Woman, if you do not take care of yourself, then I will be forced to do it for you,” I growled down at her.

She scowled, her eyes closed. The gentle brush of her dark lashes over her cheek entranced me. I couldn’t stop staring at her pale countenance and the splattering of freckles over her sun-kissed nose.

Pressing closer, I parted her legs so that I could position myself over her. She wrapped them around me, almost as if in reflex. My dragon growled in anticipation. Hot blood rushed south.

Could she feel my need? How I wanted to be inside her and see pleasure ripple over her exquisite face?

I could tell her. I could whisper all the ways that I wanted to comfort and excite her.

But she was tired. Ness had run herself ragged, perhaps in search of Alvin after grief had overwhelmed her. She was a fool, but at the end of the day, she was my fool.

Ness

THE FAE’S spell bled away with every stroke of Ryder’s hands over my skin. He ran them up my thigh, up my waist, and along my chest. I arched my back and pressed myself into his open palms. The growl that slipped out of him lit a fire inside me.

I knew that I had to keep that fire low so that it wouldn’t melt the ice in my chest, but I was growing weary. I needed something to keep my frigid soul from freezing over. Already, I felt too close to the void that was apathy. If I fell into it, I might never find my way out. I needed Ryder to hold me away from the edge and keep me turned towards the light of hope.

Brushing my knuckles along the scruff of his jaw, I stared into his bright eyes. The churning tones of gray flared bright with flashes of lightning. Electricity crackled along his skin and licked mine like a lover.

I let out a small moan from the sensations climbing my body. Ryder pressed himself firmly between my legs so that I could feel the full length of his need through his jeans.

“Don’t you dare take off without me again,” he growled over me.

Even though my eyes were nearly rolling into the back of my head, I managed to say, "The pack needed you."

Ryder cupped the back of my head and forced me to look at him. He was so close that our breath mingled. If I leaned forward, our lips would brush one another.

"I need you," Ryder breathed.

Mate, my beast whispered.

I tightened my fists in the front of his shirt to hold him near. When his lips met mine, it was a thunderous crash of passion that blazed hot and fast. His tongue pushed past my lips and carved into my mouth. Eager, I opened for him.

Unable to bear the thought of Ryder being too far from me, I threaded my fingers in his hair and held him close. The soft groan that left his lips when I tugged made my heart leap. I pulled tighter and he shoved me back onto the bed. The weight of his body covered mine, not crushing but comforting.

"Do I have to show you how badly I need you?" Ryder whispered in my ear.

Chills ran from my skull to my throat to my core. I whimpered and shuddered against him.

"Show me," I begged. "Show me what it's like to be needed. Please."

Gruff, Ryder gripped my hip with one hand while he worked to unbutton his jeans with the other. My core clenched tight, hungry for what was to come. I couldn't help but move under his grasp as impatience took over.

He laughed at me, writhing. I saw it in his eyes, that teasing look right before he slowed his progress. He held my gaze and slowly pushed his jeans down his hips. I growled and reached for the waistband of his boxers, but he caught my wrist before I could do anything.

The corner of his mouth lifted. Butterflies fluttered through my stomach as I watched him lower himself until he was on his knees. He looked up at me from between my legs before cupping the backs of my knees to pull me closer.

I opened my mouth to tell him that he didn't have to focus on my pleasure. But before I could say anything, he ran his thumb along the damp line of my folds. My breath shuddered out of me from the slightest touch.

“Has anyone touched you like this? Has anyone taken the time to show you exactly what you’re worth?”

I couldn’t respond. Ryder pulled me into his face. His tongue delved past my folds, and stars burst across my vision. I cried out and buried my hand in his hair, holding him close as if he might get away.

Ryder laughed before pressing deeper. He lapped up the moisture that he’d conjured as if I were a fine wine. I would have blamed his lack of taste for his eagerness, but I knew that he’d gotten that back. Ryder’s enthusiasm was all his own. The way he savored me, the flick of his tongue adding to the pressure building between my legs.

When he slid one finger inside me, I thought I might break. I clenched around him and drew another satisfied chuckle from his lips. Ryder crooked his finger and found the spot inside me that turned the gentle pleasure into a firestorm.

I cried out and clenched my thighs around his head. He didn’t pull back. He didn’t complain. Ryder pressed harder, his tongue moving faster as his fingers teased the spot buried deep inside me.

I thought my climax would be gradual, but I suddenly found myself spilling over into pleasure that radiated from my core to my toes. The pleasure rocketed back up like lightning. It found the far corners of my body as I arched my back and curled my fingers in the bedsheets.

Through my pleased haze, I watched Ryder stand and lick his lips. He slid an arm beneath the small of my back and lifted me, tossing me further onto the bed so that he could climb atop me.

He bent his head into the crook of my neck, littering my throat with soft kisses until I felt the scrape of teeth. The lightest bite made another wave of pleasure flare bright. The firework burned inside me while Ryder covered me with more bites.

When his teeth found the soft muscle where my neck met my shoulder, he bit down right as he buried himself inside me. He didn’t wait, didn’t ease himself in. With one sure stroke, Ryder filled me as his teeth sank into my skin.

I dug my nails into his shoulders because I needed something to hold onto. The waves of pleasure washed over me and pulled me under. He bit down harder. I felt my skin break under the force. Instead of pain, it rippled with pleasure until I scrabbled at his back with my nails.

Ryder pulled away and rocked his hips back. His husky laugh filled the dim room and wrapped around us like a safe blanket. Nowhere else in the world would ever feel as secure. Only Ryder could give me the peace that I'd craved for the past decade.

He thrust once, sending another wave of pleasure to the already throbbing mess that my neck had become. The wave crashed into the bite mark and doubled in pleasure. He thrust twice more, each one slow and deliberate. Ryder knew what he was doing, he knew that he had power over me in here.

I didn't care. I gave everything over to him. For once, every muscle in my body relaxed. I sank into the pleasure, a breath rushing out of me.

Ryder hooked an arm underneath me and lifted me into his lap. He rocked his hips, bouncing me in his arms while he gazed up at me. From this position, he teased me both inside and out. I let my head roll back as I savored the double sensations.

He kept one arm around my lower back, but the other hand lifted to cradle the back of my head. He tugged me close and pressed a kiss to the bite mark on my neck. Once more, waves of sensation pulsed from my neck only to crash into the pleasure building between my legs.

I could barely breathe. The room became a blur. As I clenched in anticipation, Ryder whispered in my ear.

"You belong to me, heart and soul. The same way that I belong to you, now. We were made together. Fate separated our souls and put every obstacle in our way to keep us apart, but now I have you.

"And you have me."

I whimpered. My heart couldn't take this. The love and dedication warmed my chest. If I wasn't careful, the ice would melt. I could already feel it turning into a slick, glistening mess. The ritual arcana was somewhere inside me, waiting to strike. Though I couldn't feel it through the sensations Ryder had conjured, I knew it would always be there.

The witch said I would only break free from this curse in death.

If I had to hold back every time I made love, our mate bond would turn sour. I would never be able to give myself over to this man who'd dedicated himself to me. The lopsided relationship wouldn't work.

And I had no idea how to tell him that. I wanted to believe that we could find a way. Through hope and love, there was a solution to everything. Right?

That's not how my life had played out so far, though. Neither idea had given me much to work with. Though I clung to both in the moment, I knew I wouldn't be able to hold on to them forever.

Though my thoughts wandered, the pressure never stopped building. It grew and grew, drawing my attention back to Ryder's hands on my skin and his eyes on mine. The promise that he gave me with his eyes alone chased away my fears. It dragged me back into the moment so hard that I fell over the edge into climax.

I didn't bother fighting back my scream as this orgasm tore through me. Ryder bucked one last time and filled me. His spasms sent a ripple through my climax, magnifying it until I had to cling to him once more.

Ryder huffed, a sound that was both exhaustion and joy, and slung an arm beneath my buttocks. Carefully, he lifted me from the bed without sliding out of me. He didn't pull out until we were in the bathroom. There, he helped me clean myself, his attention so tender that I thought I might break down into post-climax tears.

Ryder

I CARRIED Ness back to bed once we were done in the bathroom. As she slipped into a deep, satisfied sleep, I sat on the edge of the mattress and watched her. I ran my hand along her hair to remind her that I would be here.

If Alvin made another sacrifice tonight, Ness would be too tired to do much of anything. Her search across Lakesedge and our night together had sapped much of her energy. An exhausted body couldn't do anything. I would gladly do this every night from here on out so long as it meant that my mate was safe.

The witch said that the curse Alvin had put over Ness was only escapable by death. The thought made me shudder. My dragon reared its head and snarled in warning. I wouldn't let my mate die, but I'd also made a vow that I wouldn't kill.

If I banished Alvin and the curse remained intact, we would have to live in fear of Alvin for the rest of our lives. My beast knew what to do. Even

though I hated the thought, I knew, too. We couldn't let Ness live like that.

She'd already suffered enough.

I had to become the Alpha that this pack needed. I had to step up and be the mate that Ness deserved.

Even if that meant taking a life.

Needing to focus on anything other than the decision I'd made, I reached for my phone. I wondered when my brother would show up. He had to be on his way by now. My phone had been on for days. I'd heard his voice the night that Ness had tried to kill me.

Morgan had answered my call that night. His response had been less than kind, but I'd been preoccupied. By the time I'd gotten back to my phone, Morgan had hung up. There'd been no use in hiding after that.

I didn't let my thoughts linger on Morgan, either. The pack needed something good. They needed to know that better times were ahead. So, I called Bruce.

He was a little groggy when he answered but otherwise in good spirits. When I explained what I needed from him, he happily agreed. We were of the same mind. This wouldn't be a celebration. It would be a wake, but one that would allow the pack to celebrate those that they'd loved and lost.

And, maybe, while the pack was together in a safe place, I would be able to hunt Alvin down once and for all.

N_{ess}

I HOPPED onto the edge of the table and twisted the straw in my iced hazelnut mocha. When Ryder told me what the plans for the day were, I knew that I wouldn't be able to do anything without getting some caffeine first.

It helped that I got to see my friends at Bad Moon. I hadn't been to work in so long. I'd forgotten how the small café made me feel safe and welcome. Perhaps it was the company I found in my coworkers. Or it could have been Audra Miura's territory that made me feel safe.

All that I knew was that I lost it the moment I stepped away. Here, at my childhood home, my nerves prickled uneasily. I glanced around, searching every shadow for a hint of danger while my packmates casually milled around and laughed at each other's god-awful jokes.

Ryder had called for a cookout. Summer was coming to an end, so we would soon lose beautiful days to fire up the grill. We also needed to bond again. Funerals weren't really the best bonding activity.

I couldn't bring myself to join my packmates, though. I lingered in the kitchen and watched them through the window over the sink. The smell of smoke and meat wafted inside in an attempt to entice me out of my hiding, but I held fast.

Vi kicked open the front door and came in like a blast of thunder. She stomped in her heavy combat boots, her arms full of bread products. At the table, she ceremoniously dumped the buns into a haphazard pile before turning a grin in my direction.

Though my friend wasn't pack, she was like a sister to me.

"The other two will come by after they close up shop for the day," Vi said as she swiped a slice of pepperoni from a nearby snack tray.

When the backdoor opened, a pair of voices called out for Vi. Haylee and Kelsey needed help with something. Vi flashed me a grin and flexed her lean bicep before heading outside.

I couldn't help the satisfied grin that reached my face. Ryder sidled up to me and placed a kiss on my cheek. He stayed close, his breath warming my skin.

"Don't worry. We're going to keep them safe."

I reached up and held onto my mate. He had become the pack's new Alpha, and I his mate. Maybe we weren't the best leaders yet, but we could become better in time. We only had to survive that long.

The curse under my skin was sluggish today. It gave me hope that perhaps this would fade. Or our mate bond had reconnected and now took up so much space within me that the curse didn't have room to move.

I didn't really have any way of knowing. It wasn't like I could call up the witch and ask her what this would do. She'd gone into hiding again, this time with better wards. Not even Cerri's scrying potion could locate the witch again.

When Ryder pulled away to grab a snack from the nearby tray, I hated to see him go. I let my hand hover in the empty air because I wanted nothing more than to pull him back into me. I watched him eat with his back to me.

Soon, Ryder's brother would catch up. Would Morgan be able to pull Ryder back into their clan in Colorado? I didn't see any reason why Ryder wouldn't want to go back home. Even I couldn't give up my home, and I had suffered so much here. The way Ryder had spoken about his family and clan made me think that he missed them.

"When this is over..." I paused and bit my lip. "When this is over, are you going to stay?"

Ryder froze. He turned slowly, his flat brows arched in the very center as he glared at me. My cheeks warmed with embarrassment.

“Did you really just ask me if I’m going to leave this pack?” He shook his head. “Did you really ask if I’m going to leave *you*? Do we have to have this conversation every day?”

My jaw dropped, and my words failed me. More embarrassment crept up to warm my face. I didn’t realize that I was this insecure.

Ryder left the snack tray, wiped his hands on his jeans, and cupped my face in his hands. He squished my cheeks as he tilted my head back, so I would look up at him.

“I’m not leaving you, Ness. Not for anything or anyone. You are my home. You are the place where my heart belongs now. And so long as your heart belongs here, to this territory and this pack, then so will mine.”

Tears seared my eyes until I wiped them away. I gave Ryder a weak yet teasing smile. “So, you’re telling me that you don’t care about the pack? If I left, you’d abandon them?”

“My god, woman. Quit nitpicking my words. You know I wouldn’t be able to leave them, either. This is my damn pack.” He gave a small shake of his head before leaning in to press his forehead to mine.

We waited like that for several moments, our breath mingling, before I turned and grabbed a couple of twist-ties from the bags that Vi had left behind. I took one twist-tie and wrapped it around Ryder’s ring finger.

“No matter what happens, you belong to me,” I whispered.

The corner of Ryder’s mouth lifted. “That’s a bold statement. I belong to you, but you don’t belong to me?”

I gave him the second twist-tie that I’d stolen. He quickly snatched my hand and wrapped it around my ring finger so that a small knot sat atop my finger, like a gemstone might.

Ryder’s hand slid up my arm, his fingers trailing along my skin and drawing shivers from me. When I lifted my gaze to meet his, an electrical shock pulled through my core. My breath hitched.

“And you belong to me, Vanessa.”

I cringed playfully. “Ew, never say my full name again.”

Ryder laughed under his breath, cupped the back of my head, and pulled me close as if for a kiss. There, where our breaths mingled, he whispered:

“Anything for you, Ness.”

My heart nearly stopped. It started again when his lips met mine. I scrabbled for him, hungry and desperate to keep him near.

“Stop making out near the food,” Vi quipped.

“They’re kissing?” Addie asked excitedly as she entered the room. “It’s about time.”

Cerri laughed behind them.

Ryder stepped back. I missed his warmth, but I couldn’t give in to need now. There was work to be done.

“Are you ready?” he asked my friends. “I trust the three of you to keep the pack safe while we’re gone.”

Cerri nodded. She lifted a backpack. Beside her, Addie gestured to her hiking backpack slung over her shoulder. Both clinked with bottles. Cerri must have been up all night brewing potions for the two of them.

Vi, on the other hand, had her fire. Her arcana gave her an innate ability to fight. I just hoped that she wouldn’t fall into her demon side while I was gone.

“The pack is safe in our hands,” Cerri said. “Nothing will get past us.”

Even from here, I could hear the sounds of joy outside. They were telling stories of their loved ones, the people we’d lost. I even caught Candi’s name here and there. Though she’d been Alvin’s wife, she was missed, too.

I didn’t want anything to interrupt this day for them.

That thought was quickly shattered by a scream. I leapt off the table and ran for the door. Ryder and the others were right behind me.

Wolves leapt into the throng of people. Marcus and Jackson had struck again. The pack scattered as more screams pierced the air. I started forward only to be dragged back. Ryder tugged me by my wrist.

On the other side, Cerri gave me a look. “If they’re here, then Alvin is up to something. They’re a distraction. I can feel it.”

Though I hated to leave, Cerri was right. Vi laughed and lifted her hands; fire ignited in her palms. She tossed a fireball at one wolf—Marcus, I think.

Ryder pulled me away from the fight. I wanted to stay. My arcana would have been useful, but I was needed elsewhere. I had to save my strength for the final fight.

This would end today. Even though the sounds of fire and snarls behind me made me want to turn back, I followed Ryder as he led me away from the cookout. I’d hoped that Alvin wouldn’t make a move today and that we could hunt him down while he was distracted.

It seemed that wasn't in the cards today. We had to move fast. Alvin had the means to trap the pack in the same binding ritual that he'd used against me.

I cursed under my breath. "We should have held the cookout at a pavilion outside Lakesedge."

"You know that the pack wouldn't have been able to hide in plain sight like that. We should have struck sooner."

Ryder was right, but I still didn't like leaving the pack on Lakesedge territory. Alvin had it circled. The pack was sitting ducks. They needed someone to keep them safe. I hoped that I had what it took to do that for them.

"Let me shift. I'll be able to catch his scent better," I said as I slowed.

Ryder nodded but didn't wait. Once I was on four feet, I lifted my nose into the air and caught a hint of Alvin's reek. I made a sharp turn and yipped for Ryder to follow.

Alvin was close. Of course, he was. He's sent the brothers after the pack to cause chaos and distract us while he started his ritual. I only hoped that we could find him in time, before he could even start it.

The ritual arcana swirled under my skin. It rose like a wave, a crescendo that answered to similar magic gathering in the distance. I let it tug me along even though my feet were starting to burn against the ground. The pads of my paws would heal.

Only death would break the ritual bond.

I had to make sure that death was Alvin's.

But his scent disappeared. Above, little wooden charms dangled from the branches. It would have thrown us off his trail if it weren't for the ritual arcana still singing inside me. It tugged and pulled, eager to return to the puppet master.

It left a sickly feeling in the pit of my stomach. If we got there and Alvin made a sacrifice to control me, then our chances would be cut in half. Alvin would have the upper hand. I should have spent more time cultivating the ice protecting my arcana. I should have looked up ways to protect myself from Alvin's influence.

"Where do we go?" Ryder asked me.

The swell of arcana inside me lurched to the left. I followed it, my feet tangling beneath me before I could correct myself. The ritual arcana seemed

to laugh at me. I could feel it's menacing presence ready to dig its claws into me. Given the opportunity, it would gladly hand me over to Alvin.

It led us back to Alvin's estate. The house had been burnt to the ground. Yellow caution tape dangled from the charred carcass of what had been a house. The smell of smoke still lingered in the air because it had infiltrated everything. I shook my head to cast the acrid smell from my nostrils, but nothing worked.

"Where is he?" Ryder muttered under his breath as he scanned the landscape.

I tried to think back to the ritual Alvin had set up the day that he kidnapped me. He'd circled me with candles before starting the incantation. Though I didn't see any candles, I searched for firelight. There had to be some sort of fire.

Right?

I caught the soft flicker of light behind a blackened wall inside the estate. Before running headlong into danger, I grabbed Ryder's pantleg with my teeth and tugged. His attention flicked to me. I tossed my head in the direction of the house—or what remained of it.

For a moment, Ryder's expression furrowed into confusion before his eyes caught on the light. Ryder rolled his shoulders back and cast another glance in my direction.

He seemed to ask if I was ready. I would never be ready for this. I hadn't been ready any of the times Alvin had separated me from my pack to berate and hurt me. All of those times prepared me for this, though. Those instances helped me brace myself before we charged forward.

"It's too late," Alvin said from inside the house.

The ritual arcana spiked. It pierced my body like a thousand nails. I let out a whimper and tried to keep my feet steady though my legs wobbled uncertainly.

Ryder noticed, but I shook my head. He couldn't slow now. We had to stop Alvin from going further.

We could escape this curse in death: Alvin's death.

Ryder launched himself forward. His form exploded. Wings snapped out and shattered the brittle burnt walls. His tail lashed over my head, making my ears ring.

Before Ryder could make impact, the ritual arcana probed deeper. I lurched forward and nearly fell onto my face. My form changed. Human

hands hit the ground while my vision refocused.

The ritual arcana lifted my chin and moved my lips. I fought back, but Alvin's gaze remained fixed on me. My vision cleared, and I saw Alvin's outstretched hand covered in the blood of a recent sacrifice. I shuddered and wondered what had died to give him this power.

It would be the last death. Alvin couldn't have me, my body, or my arcana. I grabbed ahold of the ice in my chest, but the ritual arcana split it open and snatched a sliver of my magic.

"Stop," I said against my will.

Ryder dropped to the ground, inert. I watched his talons dig into the charred floor out of frustration. He knew that my command wouldn't hold him forever. The ritual arcana had only stolen a fraction of my power. Soon, the command would break, and he would be able to attack.

Behind Alvin, a brazier flickered with bright light. A fire roared inside it, replacing the candles that he would have needed on a smaller scale. That led me to believe there would be more braziers, perhaps situated where the others had died.

If I could reach my arcana without Alvin stealing it from me first, then I might be able to summon a storm that would extinguish the flames. Thunderstorms followed me everywhere I went. I'd used my arcana to summon lightning before. Could I call for rain, too?

Maybe I couldn't, but Ryder could. I didn't have to use my arcana, either. All I had to do was ask. For a brief moment, my mouth was my own. Hope flared bright when I moved my lips.

Alvin clenched his fist, and my body seized. My jaw snapped closed, nearly taking the tip of my tongue with it. I was still present, though. He didn't cast me back and turn me into a husk. At first, I thought that was a good thing, but then I realized Alvin wanted me to see.

From behind his back, he pulled out a long blade. "I misspoke earlier. You are, in fact, right on time."

Alvin tucked that blade under Ryder's neck. The soft sound of metal tapping scales sent chills up my spine. Though I wanted to believe that no normal blade could cut through dragon scales, I was stuck as I watched Alvin maneuver the blade *beneath* the scales. A rivulet of red slid along the metal.

My whimper turned into a growl. My hound resurfaced, eager to break free from my human body. She hit a wall each time she threw herself

forward. It seemed as though Alvin had chosen to lock her inside me this time.

That was fine. I would break free of this damn ritual arcana and get up to kick Alvin's ass on my own. I just had to push. The ritual arcana fought back. It nearly suffocated me as it enveloped my entire being. I could feel it trying to shove me down, but I would not let it win this time.

Alvin's outstretched hand trembled. My hound snarled deep within me. Defiantly, I held his gaze so that he would know the exact moment that I broke free of his hold. All I needed was my mouth, so I focused my attention there. I filled my body with the force of my will and pushed the ritual arcana back until I could move my tongue.

Though I wanted to let out a sigh when my jaw came unclenched, I didn't have full control of my chest yet. Though my breath was shallow, I had what I wanted.

However, Alvin still had the blade tucked under Ryder's scales. While Alvin struggled against me, he couldn't focus on the blade at my mate's throat. I had to buy Ryder some more time, so that the command could run its course. There was a chance that if I pushed against the ritual arcana any more, then I would lose what I'd fought so hard to win.

As it was, we seemed to be caught in a strange three-way standoff. Alvin held both me and Ryder at his mercy, but so long as I could use my determination to undermine Alvin's binding ritual, then Ryder still had a chance.

My control slipped when I realized that Alvin meant to use Ryder as his final sacrifice. Alvin had learned that the ritual was stronger when he spilled blood, so he sought to spill the blood of the largest creature in the area: Ryder.

Like hell would he use *my* mate as a sacrifice in his god-awful ritual!

I pushed the ritual arcana back. It clung to me stubbornly, like wet clothing refusing to be shed. I peeled it away and filled the empty space with my own power. It wasn't the power of my command or the arcana that allowed me to call upon lightning. Instead, I used the cold, vindictive resolve that assured me I was on the right path.

Though I trembled with the chill of it and what I would have to do before the night was over, it was working. I could win this. We could survive.

"Every time you laid a hand on me, you hardened me," I said smugly.

Alvin's lips twisted with hatred. "You're nothing but a lowly cur, a mutt that I will use to maintain my power here. Don't act as if you can ever be better than me."

"Your ego is so fragile that you fill the cracks in it with the deaths of others."

Alvin's eyes flashed wide. His ire flared red-hot—or maybe that was the burning brazier reflecting in his expression. He dropped the blade and stormed over to me. Victorious, I grinned up at him.

"Once more, your ego has proved to be your downfall. Alvin Combs, you do not deserve to breathe. I revoke your right to go on living. You will die today, and you will meet justice in the afterlife. I say this with my entire being: get fucked."

I didn't have to pour my arcana into my voice. The words came to me, unbidden. They were the final seal on his fate.

Perhaps that was what had been on the passage stolen from the records. If another Barghest had visited town, then it meant they'd had a purpose. The Alpha of that time might have been like Alvin. That Barghest had seen the horrors and leveled her judgement upon the wrongdoers.

"Ryder! Make it pour!"

Alvin's head snapped up. He whirled around just in time to watch Ryder toss his head and let out a furious roar. The skies opened up. A sheet of rain fell down upon our heads. The brazier hissed. The light flickered and dimmed until it finally sputtered out of existence.

"No!" Alvin snarled.

Ryder spared no time before twisting toward Alvin. I caught the flick of Alvin's fingers just as the ritual arcana dug itself into my body once more. My body jerked of its own will. Alvin ducked behind me, placing my body between him and Ryder.

Even though Alvin didn't have the blade, he could still summon claws that he pressed into my fragile human skin. Alvin thought that he would escape once again. I was tired of letting him go, though.

Ryder hesitated. He looked between me and Alvin. Those uncertain eyes were filled with love and rage. Ryder wanted to protect me. Maybe he thought that he'd failed.

Neither of us could fight the ritual arcana stinging my insides like a hive of angry wasps. There wasn't anything we could do until death severed the connection.

“Do it,” I whispered.

Perhaps thinking that I was talking to him, Alvin dug his claws into my neck. I didn’t break eye contact with my mate, though.

“Do it.”

I had more than one purpose in life. Though I’d been put here to stop Alvin from hurting others, I knew that I had more to look forward to. Nothing would stop me from returning to my mate. Not a damn thing.

Ryder

No.

I didn't want to do it.

Alvin's claws pierced Ness's skin, but her countenance was perfectly calm. If it hurt at all, she didn't show it. Her expression was placid, as peaceful as it'd been when she'd accepted her fate after falling off the rooftop.

Ness knew what the next step would be. I didn't know if I would have the strength to follow through. Maybe my mate had a clear view of what needed to be done, but I would never be able to live with myself.

"Death cannot hold me back from you forever," Ness said with a small smile.

Alvin's lip curled. "Let's test that."

Without thinking, I moved. I didn't have time to worry. I couldn't afford a single thought or else the window might vanish. Ness had given the signal. I just had to follow through.

I wished I could speak. If I'd had a human jaw, I would have told my mate how much I loved her. She'd brightened my life and given me purpose when I'd had none. I didn't want to lose her just yet. I certainly didn't want her to die without knowing what she meant to me.

However, I lashed out with my tail. The razor-sharp barbs sliced through delicate flesh. She didn't make a sound until those barbs hit the man behind her.

A small sound like triumph left Ness's throat just as a weak smile touched her lips. Her skin paled. The falling rain washed the blood from my tail almost as soon as it blossomed from her stomach.

Behind her, Alvin staggered back. He tore himself off my barbed tail and stared down at the hole that it'd left in his stomach. For a moment, I thought he might heal. I prepared myself to attack again, but Alvin slumped to the ground.

I didn't waste time. I shifted back so that my tail would shrink and vanish without further hurting Ness. She began to fall, but I caught her in my arms. The rain pelted our bodies and tried to wash away the blood pouring from her wound. No amount of rain could hide the damage that I'd done.

Though I bent my head over hers, she turned away from me. I thought she was angry, that maybe I'd misread her signal. Instead, her gaze landed on Alvin.

"Is...he...dead?" Each word seemed to steal more life from her.

I gently turned her face back towards mine. She fought me, at first.

"Is he...dead?"

I glanced up even though I hated taking my attention off hers for even an instant. Alvin remained unmoving. The rain pelted his unblinking eyes. I'd dealt a blow that he couldn't heal from. How Ness was still holding on, I would never know.

I prayed that meant she would begin to heal. Perhaps she was stronger than Alvin, she would return from this.

But by the time I looked back to my mate to tell her that we'd won, her heart had stopped. Her eyes were closed, and a peaceful smile sat on her lips. She knew.

Ryder

IT TOOK a bit of time to clean up the mess that Alvin had left behind. We disposed of the dead animals and sold the braziers on a digital marketplace—a nice theater company snapped them up for a decent price, which was a relief.

Thor had returned and brought a number of shifters with him. They were eager to join a new, stable pack. I was happy to have them. Tonight would be their first run as part of the Lakesedge pack.

We had a pair of wolves to run out of town tonight.

Bruce backed his truck up to the hill and hopped out to help me pull the two silver-bound shifters from the truck bed. Marcus and Jackson glared at both of us, but they'd been hog tied and gagged. There wasn't much they could do about their situation.

The pack, with the help of Ness's friends, had quickly captured and secured the two shifters. I was oddly proud of them.

As was Ness.

She knelt in front of the two shifters and plucked the gags from their mouths. Immediately, both started into a torrent of insults that kind of drowned each other out. I could barely make sense of what either was saying.

Ness stood, grinned, and shook her head.

I marveled at my mate in the moonlight. Her wild hair fluttered in the wind. Even in this pale glow, I could see the flush of life coloring her cheeks. She lifted her bright gaze to mine, and a rush of excitement burst through my chest like fireworks.

Her own smile warmed, her lashes lowering ever so slightly in a way that beckoned me towards her.

How my mate had returned from death, I would never know. We weren't even sure if she could do it again. We weren't about to try, either. I'd watched, that day, as her body pulled itself together faster than any shifter healing I'd seen before—all while her heart sat still.

She'd returned with a gasp thirty minutes later. Hell, she'd bolted upright so fast that she'd headbutted me in her excitement. Her laughter had told me that she was alive. This wasn't some kind of undeath, but true life.

"Get ready to run," Ness commanded Marcus and Jackson.

Both stiffened and cast wary glances at their bindings. A new shifter from Thor's sanctuary stepped forward wearing a pair of gloves and wielding wire cutters. He cut the brothers free. The moment the silver fell to the ground, the brothers shifted and ran.

I rolled my shoulders back and let my beast slowly rise to the surface. The two wolves ran down the hill, their forms growing smaller and smaller as I gave them a proper head start.

They were going to need it.

Ness shifted beside me. A black hound appeared and almost immediately vanished into the dark. A wave of wolves followed her lead. Even though they were all larger than her, they watched her as if she were the Alpha.

Pride swelled in my chest. My beast savored it as scales rippled over my body. My tail hit the ground, and I stretched out my wings. The steep incline of the hill allowed me to leap and coast on the air. I surged towards my pack before rising up to circle above them.

We chased the brothers out of our territory. At the edge, Ness shifted back and stood proud.

"Never come back to Lakesedge!" she shouted after them, her voice ringing with her arcana.

The Lakesedge Pack was almost safe. There was just one more hurdle on the horizon.

N_{ess}

WHILE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN nice to buy a house that would serve as the pack's new hub, neither Ryder nor I could afford it at the moment. I'd lived every day like it might be my last. Ryder had spent a year on the road which had kept him from being able to work.

That meant we were rental hunting. Ryder pulled up outside a small ranch style home on the border of Lakesedge. The hedges needed to be trimmed and the front door might have been yellow at some point, but the elements had given it a grimy cast.

Ryder grimaced.

I lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "It just needs some attention."

The idea of doing boring home and lawn maintenance enticed me more than I wanted to admit. Compared to the last few weeks, lawncare seemed like a nice change of pace. I took Ryder's hand, intertwining my fingers with his, so I could feel the flicker of our reignited mate bond, and tugged him towards the front door where we would meet with our new landlord.

This property had been listed as rent-to-own. The location was perfect, with plenty of sprawling woodlands and fields beyond the property that hadn't been taken over by new housing. This could be a good hub for the pack once it belonged to us.

I only hoped that the inside wasn't as unloved as the outside. We would find out when we met with the landlord, who was waiting inside for us.

The car outside looked familiar. I tried to place where I'd seen it before as we approached the front door. I was so distracted by the car that I didn't catch the scent on the air—or the lack thereof.

The front door swung open on its own. A familiar voice, like smoke and whiskey, called out to us from deeper within the house. The voice beckoned us into the kitchen.

I shouldn't have been surprised to see the witch leaning over the kitchen island, her chin in her hand as she grinned up at us. Her hair had been pulled into several bantu knots. She wore a swipe of lime green eyeliner that was so sharp I could have cut myself on it. A small blue metal beetle hung from each ear.

She straightened and held out her hand in greeting. Both Ryder and I looked down at the extended offer with hesitation.

The witch rolled her eyes. "I'm trying to turn over a new leaf here. Give me a break."

"How am I supposed to sleep in any home that you've gotten your hands on?" Ryder's voice rumbled with a low growl.

"I feel like I'm going to go into the crawlspace under the house and find a stack of cursed bones." My lip curled at the thought of going into the crawlspace.

The witch held up both hands, palms out. "I took the money that your shit Alpha paid me and invested it into this property. I've owned it all of two days. If you want to scour it for sigils and curses, be my guest."

I peeled away to do exactly that. The witch heaved a sigh, but I ignored her and continued on my way. Room by room, I scoured every inch of the house. Though I was looking for proof of witchcraft, I also got acquainted with the place. I opened the cabinets and peered into every closet. There wasn't a basement, but I did shine my phone flashlight into the crawl space.

An hour later, I returned. Ryder and the witch were posted up on either side of the kitchen island. The air smelled of coffee, the scent emanating from the little single-serve coffee maker standing alone on the counter.

Ryder lifted the mug in front of him and pushed it into my hands. The warmth filled my tired bones. I hadn't found anything that might have been witchcraft. There wasn't even a scratch in the lintels.

"So?" Ryder asked. "What do you think?"

I huffed. “I think we’re going to need a lot of furniture to fill this place.”

A smile cracked the corner of his grim-set lips. He reached to wind an arm around my lower back and pull me in.

The witch gagged mockingly. She gave a tight, unamused smile before adding, “My name is Bianca. Names have power, so you should understand that I’m giving this to you in a show of good faith.”

“What do you stand to gain in all this?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

This time, her grin widened naturally. “Hopefully I can earn the trust of the next Lakesedge Alpha, so I can get his tasty money, too. Every pack could use a witch with dubious morals to help them hide their mistakes.”

I stiffened. “We won’t have any mistakes. Not like Alvin did.”

Bianca waved me off. “I doubt you will cause any trouble. If anything, I expect trouble will come your way.”

I hoped that she was wrong. I was ready for some peace and quiet.

We signed the lease agreement, and the witch even offered to toss in some protection wards for us. At first, I was hesitant to accept her offer. Ryder picked up on my reluctance, but he urged me to make an exception this time.

Everyone wanted to turn over a new leaf. Why not let the witch do it, too?



WE MOVED what little we owned into the house and found it rather empty still. I suggested thrift shopping for tables and chairs. Ryder didn’t look convinced. In fact, he cringed. I figured he must have been a spoiled rich boy back in Colorado.

I grabbed the front of his shirt and tugged him close, leaning my head back so I could smile up at him. “Trust me. It will all work out.”

Before he could answer, there was a knock at the door. The scent of pack drifted in from the open windows. I shared a look with Ryder. He shrugged and went to answer.

Outside, several trucks had pulled up to the house. Members of the pack stood on the front walk or the lawn. From the wide grins on their faces, it seemed they could barely contain their excitement. The truck beds were packed to the brim, but covered with protective tarps.

Dad hopped onto the back of his truck and untied the first corner of the tarp. When he peeled it back, I noticed a mattress and the pieces of a wooden bedframe. My jaw dropped as others pulled their tarps away to show a dresser, a table, and a pair of nightstands.

“What’s this?” Ryder asked quizzically.

Dad jumped down from the back of the truck and came over to put a hand on Ryder’s shoulder. Dad’s expression was soft yet proud, a look that I had not seen in years. When he turned it on me, I damn near cried.

“This is what it means to be pack,” Dad said.

He lifted his hand and motioned toward the front door. People launched into action. Haylee and Kelsey carted the nightstands inside, where they stopped and looked back questioningly. I ran inside to direct them to the master bedroom.

Cerri, Vi, and Addie showed up as well. They each brought a box of food. Cerri supplied coffee syrups. Everything Addie brought was homemade and carefully wrapped or canned. Vi hefted a box of junk food and boxed meals with a feral grin.

In no time, the house was filled to the brim with furniture, kitchenware, and food. There was almost nothing that we would need to buy ourselves other than décor. All the bases had been covered, we just had to put our touch on it.

I rocked on my heels as I fought off tears. Watching everyone come together for me made everything I’d gone through worth it in the end. I hadn’t expected this. I’d thought they would all ignore me while their wounds healed. That would have been the easiest way for them to recover from what Alvin had done to them.

The pack chose another route. They came together to tend to each other’s wounds. Their support helped mend my shattered view of the future. This proved that nothing would be what I thought. It would be better.

Until the house shook. Everyone stopped as the walls trembled. A roar filled the air, deafening me. Dust rained from the ceiling. I tensed, waiting for it to come crashing down around our heads.

Ryder glared up at the ceiling. His face paled ever so slightly when his nostrils flared. I lifted my nose to scent the air. The familiar aroma of ozone and smoke began to fill the house.

Since Ryder wasn’t in his dragon form, I knew that it couldn’t have been him. That could only mean...

Ryder rushed outside. I lurched after him, hot on his heels.

On the lawn, Ryder spun. A chill raced down my spine as a predator set its sights on me. I knew what I would see when I turned, but I almost didn't want to.

A stormy black dragon with horns on the sides of his head that curled forward menacingly glared down at me. His talons dug into the roof shingles. Behind him, his tail lashed and tore branches from the tree behind the house. His eyes weren't filled with storm-light like Ryder's. Instead, they were red-hot and swimming with hatred.

Before Ryder or I could say anything, Vi piped up.

"Get off the fucking house. You're not a cat."

I gaped at my friend. There was a giant dragon shifter on my roof, and she was talking to him like he was a petulant pet. I reached for her arm, a hush on my lips.

Vi jerked away from me and pointed her finger up at the dragon. "This is a good day, and you're not going to ruin it. Do you hear me? Save your shit for another day."

The air around Vi wavered with heat. Her anger was spilling over faster than I'd ever seen before. Soon, she would tip into her demonic side.

Soon, Morgan would tire of Vi and immolate her on the spot.

But Morgan didn't attack. He slithered forward and dropped off the roof of the house. His form shrank, shifting back to human, before he hit the ground. Dark hair curled around the corners of his jaw. He had a dark beard, trimmed close. He stalked towards Vi, the full force of his wrathful glare upon her, before his attention flicked to Ryder.

"We have a score to settle, brother." Morgan's voice was deep and resonant.

Ryder shook his head. "No. This isn't a score to settle. You need to sit down and listen."

The clouds darkened overhead. I couldn't tell if the cacophonous thunder was Ryder's doing or Morgan's. Either way, I knew a storm would touch down soon if no one did anything.

In unison, Vi and I jumped in between the two dragons. She put both hands against Morgan's chest and shoved. I touched my mate's cheek and tried to draw his attention back to me. When that didn't work, I gave him a light slap.

Ryder narrowed his eyes at me. I grinned, feeling victorious for a moment.

“Damn demon!” Morgan howled.

Vi laughed in his face.

Ryder groaned. “They’re going to be a pain in my ass. I can feel it already.”

Confused, I twisted to face Vi and Morgan. Ryder slung an arm over my shoulder in a possessive show that I didn’t mind in the least. From here, I could watch Vi and Morgan glare at one another. The air between them rippled with heat and electricity.

I leaned into my mate and whispered, “Do you think we can get back to moving stuff into the house if we leave them outside like this?”

He lifted one brow. “Possibly. Let’s give it a try.”

While Vi ran interference, Ryder and I went back inside and began putting things away. Mom filled the cupboards and set up a coffee corner for me while Dad put the bedframe together. Slowly, the house began to empty as everyone went home.

Still, the smell of pack lingered on everything. I dropped onto the new couch and inhaled. For the first time in years, the scent brought me complete peace. The pack had come back together. They were safe and happy, and that was because of me.

Well, Ryder and me.

I turned to smile up at my preoccupied mate who was trying to set up a streaming service on the new TV. Flopping down to sit on the floor before me, he cursed at the remote that stubbornly kept him from clicking the right letter on the screen’s keyboard display.

When I yanked the remote from his hand, he leaned back and rested his head against my stomach while I finished what he’d started.

We were safe. We were happy.

Damn, I never thought I’d make it here. Fate gave us so many challenges, but we’d conquered them all. Any others that came our way would be like child’s play in comparison. Nothing would ever keep us apart.

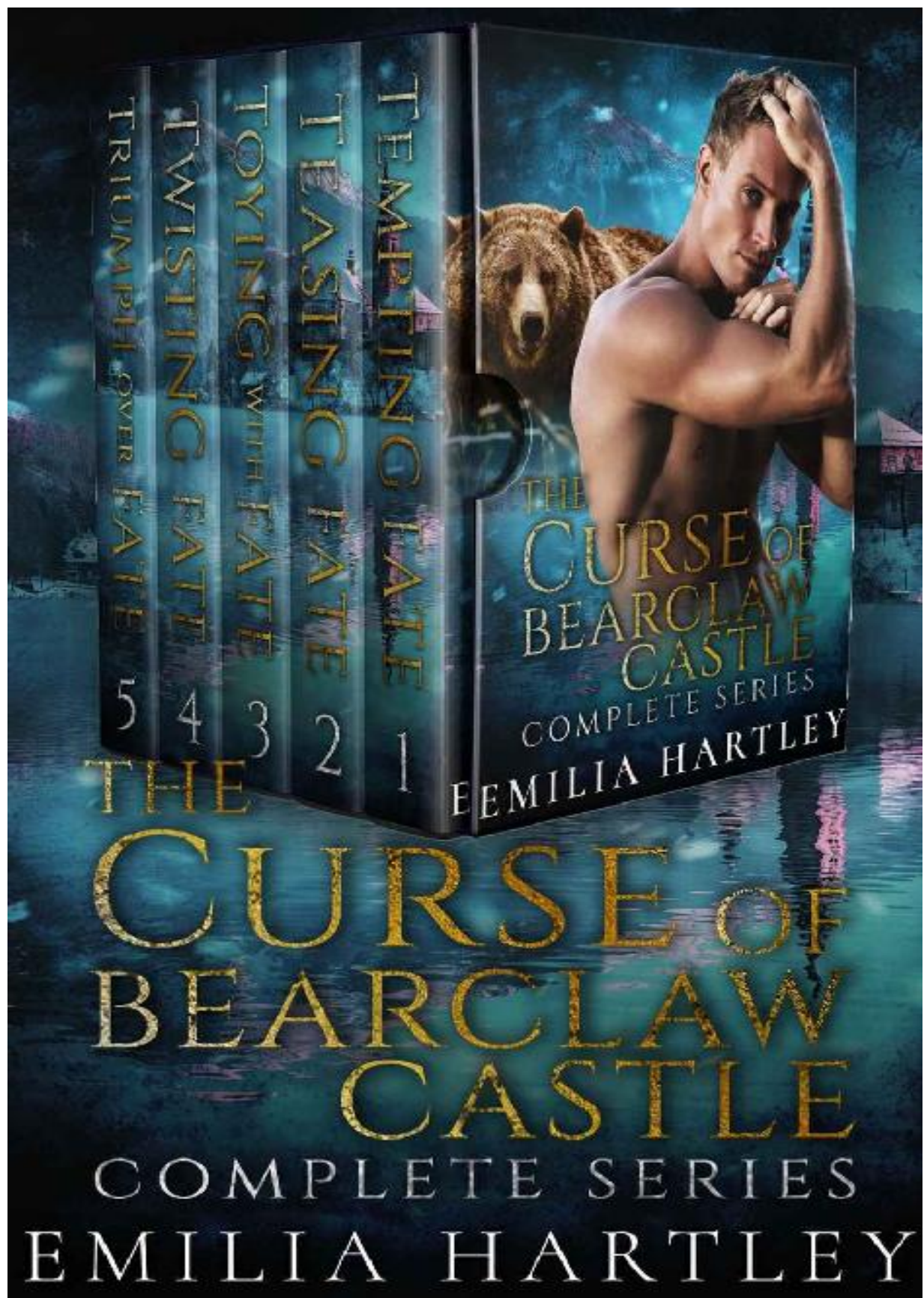
I tossed the remote into Ryder’s lap and reached for his hair so I could run my nails along his scalp. He moaned and leaned into my touch as he browsed the streaming service.

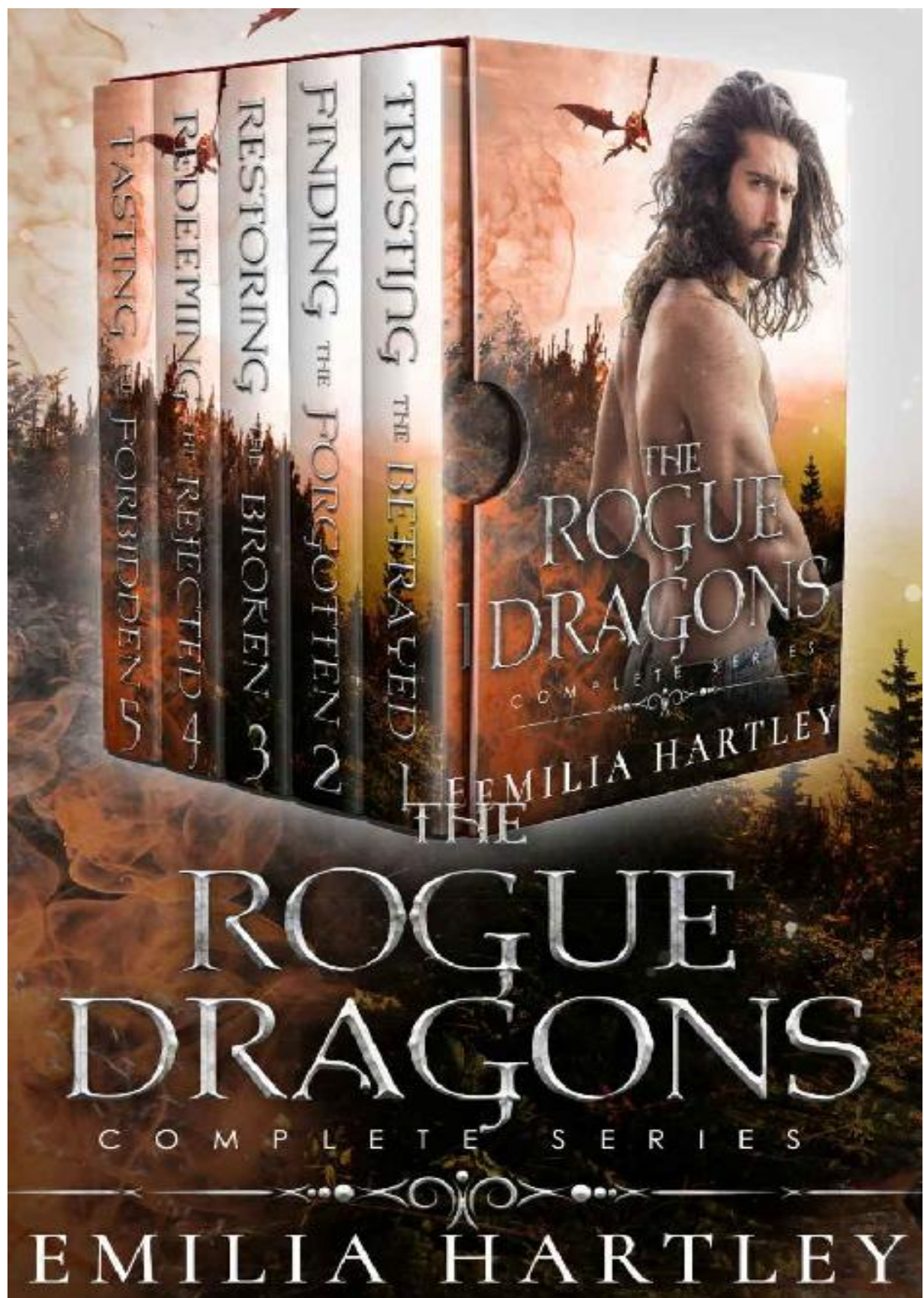
All was normal and peaceful until Morgan blasted through the door. The sounds of Vi's shouting drowned out the trailer playing in the background, as well as Ryder's beleaguered sigh.

"Here we go," he mumbled.

That was fine. This wasn't anything we couldn't face together. I hoped, that by the end, I would have another family member, and Ryder would have his brother back.

HEARTLIES BOX SETS

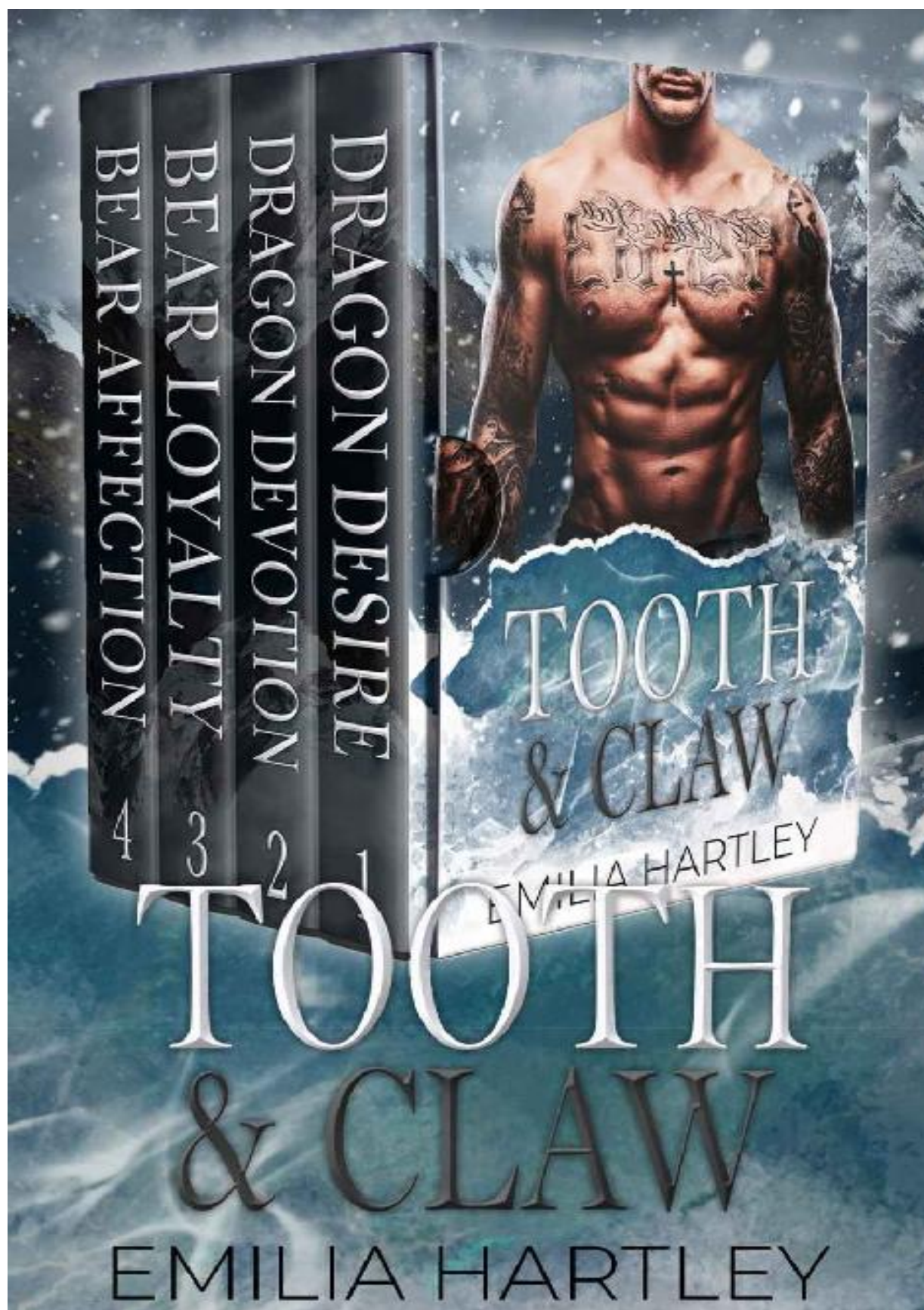




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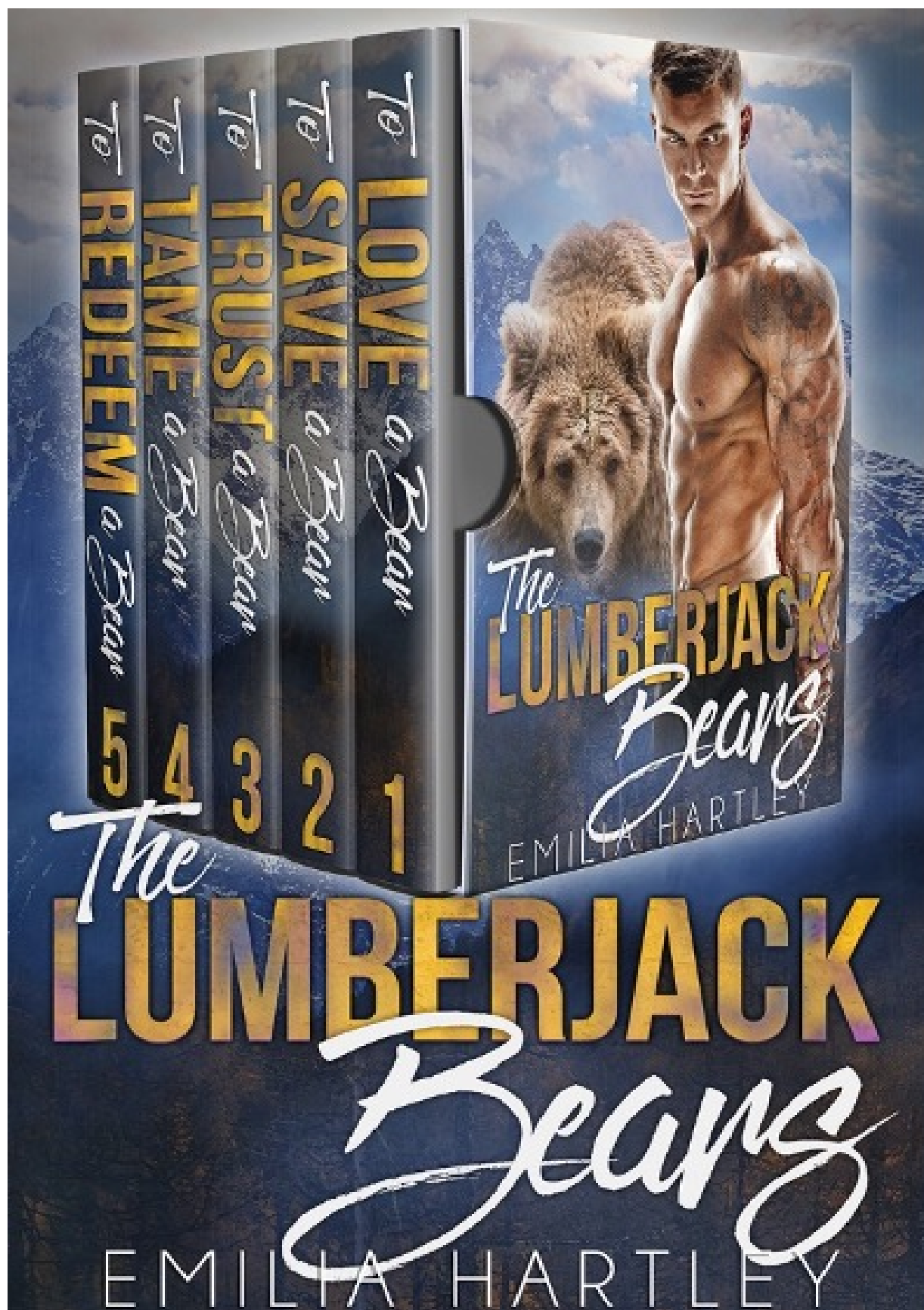
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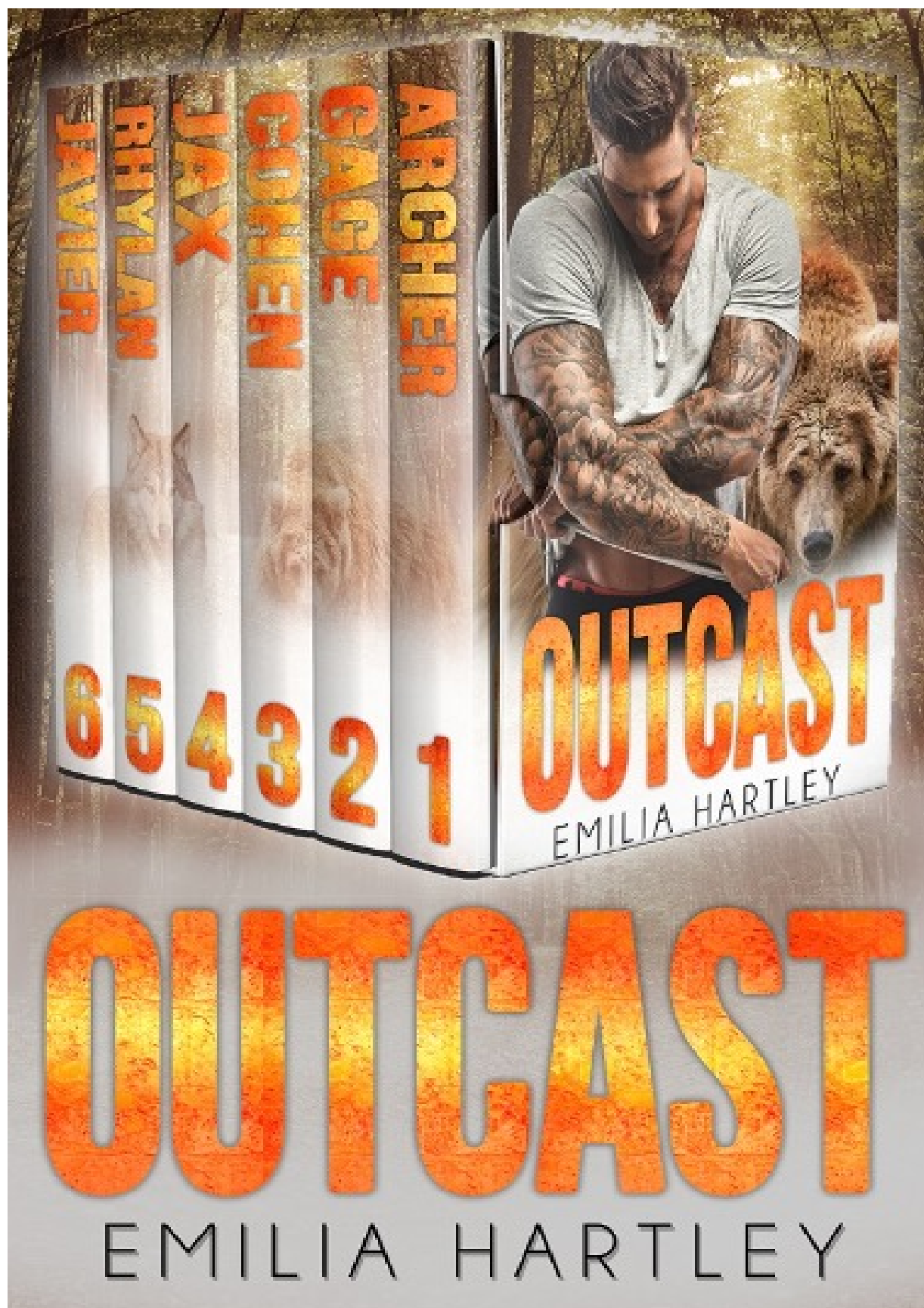
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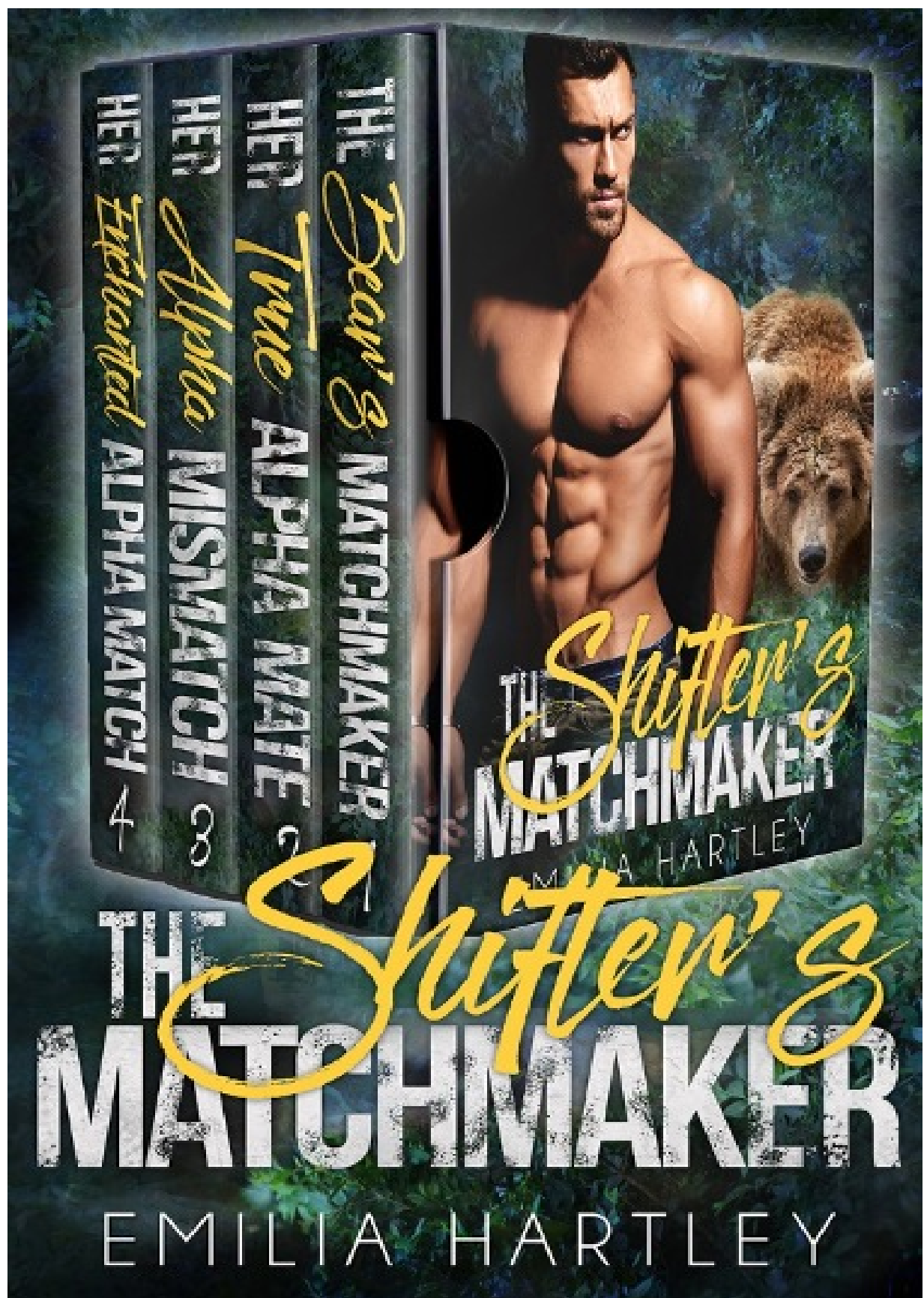
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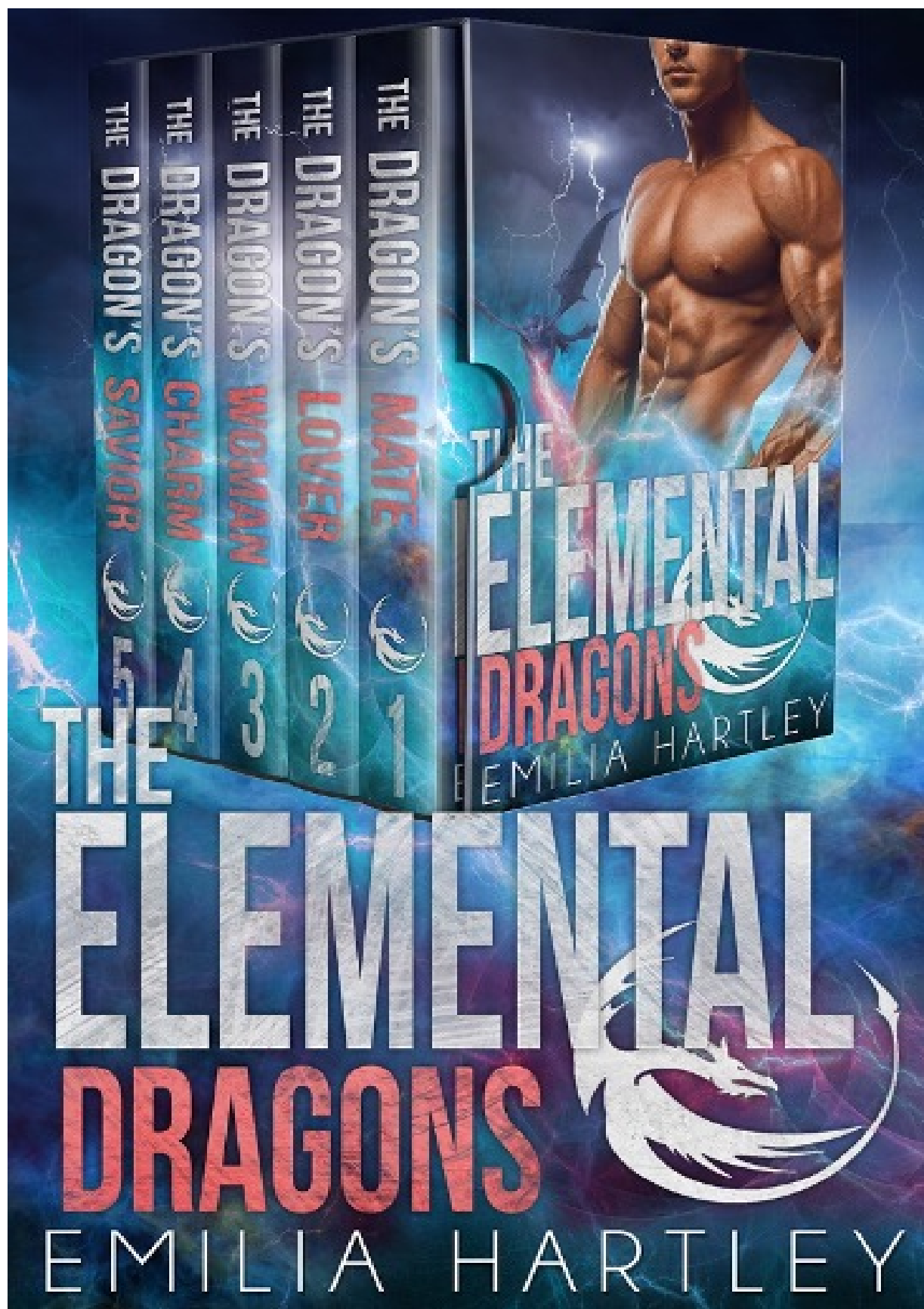


AURUM COURT *Dragons*

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1

THE DRAGON'S CHARM



2

THE DRAGON'S WOMAN



3

THE DRAGON'S LOVER



4

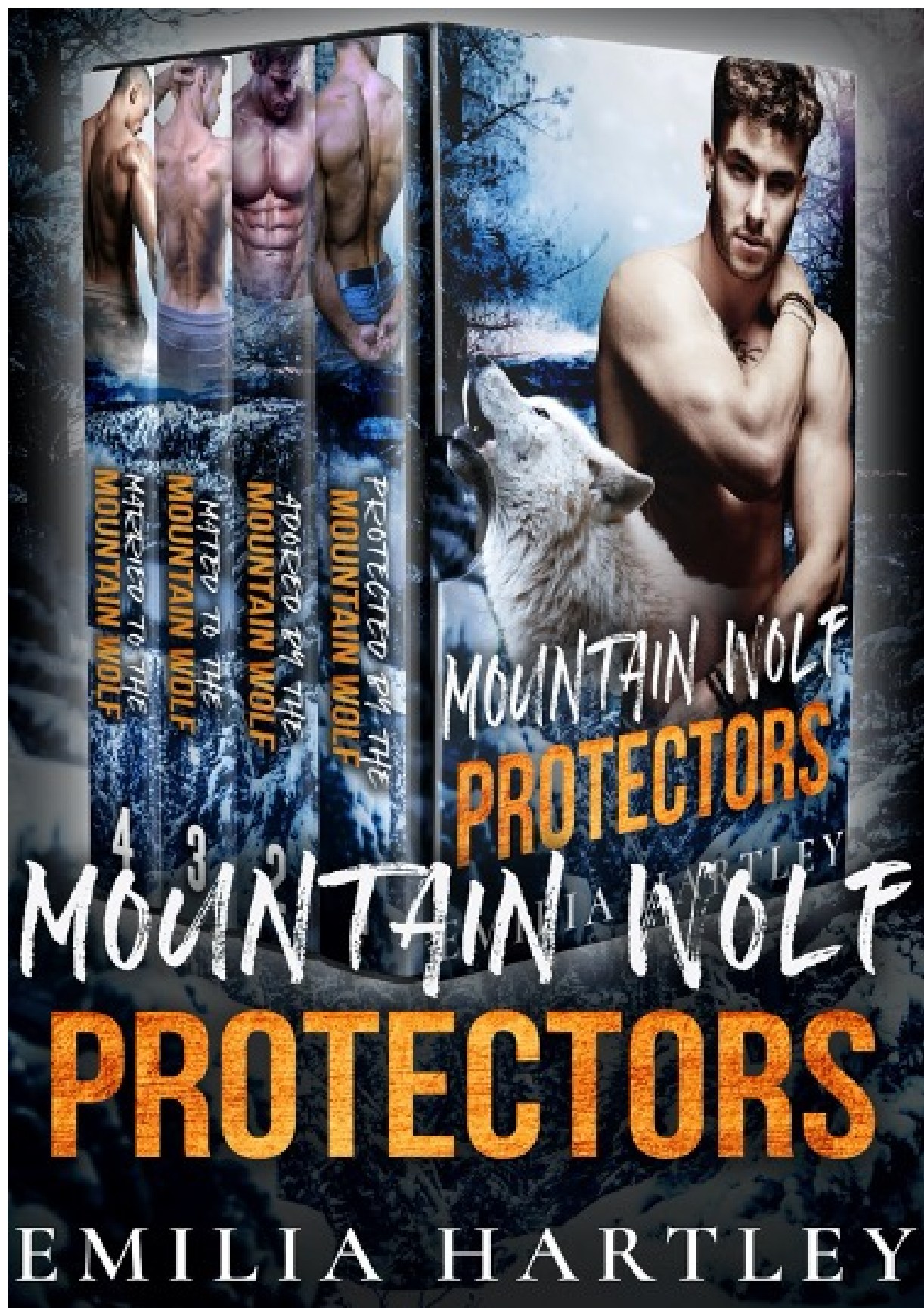
THE DRAGON'S MATE

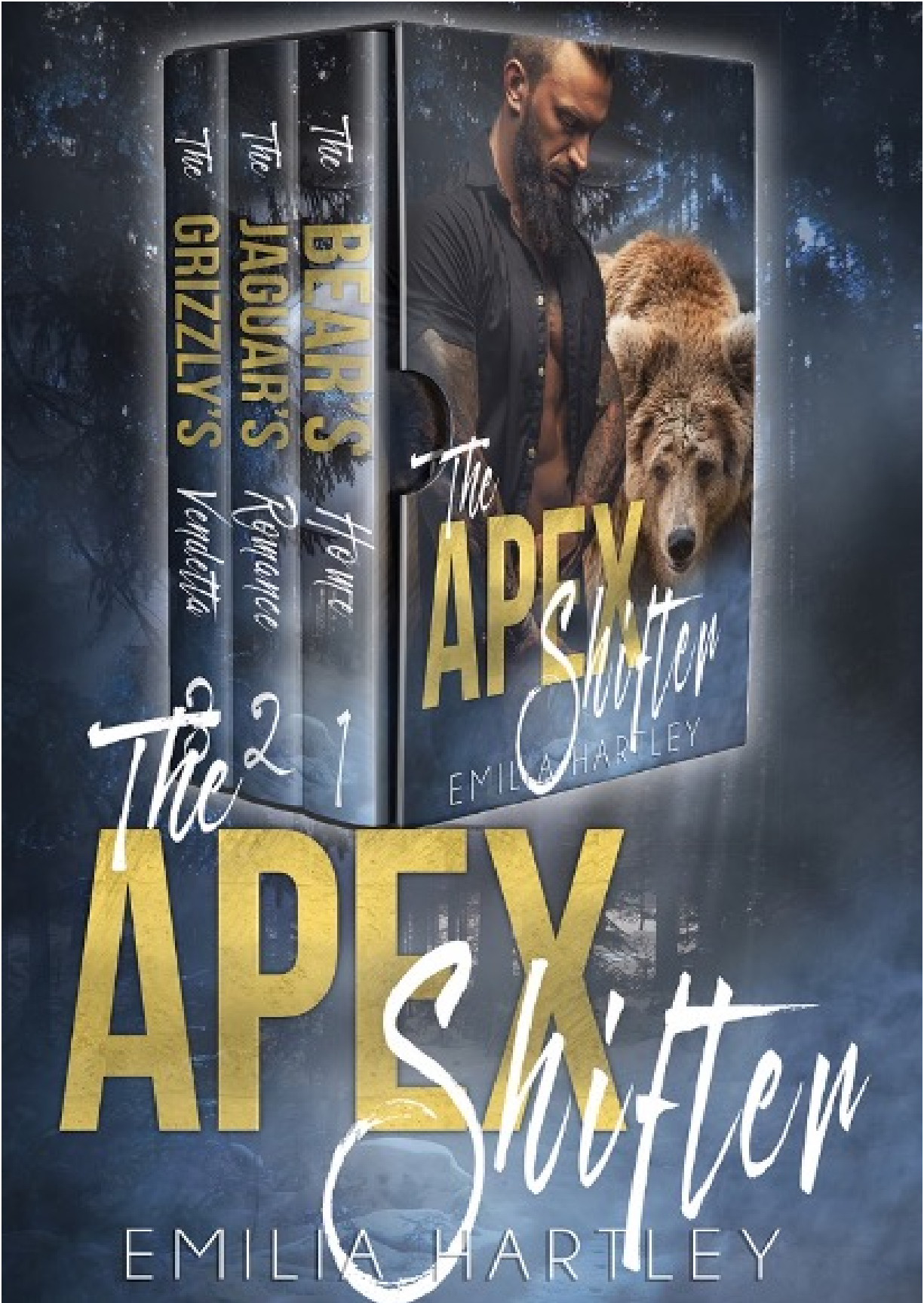


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THE ELEMENTAL DRAGONS

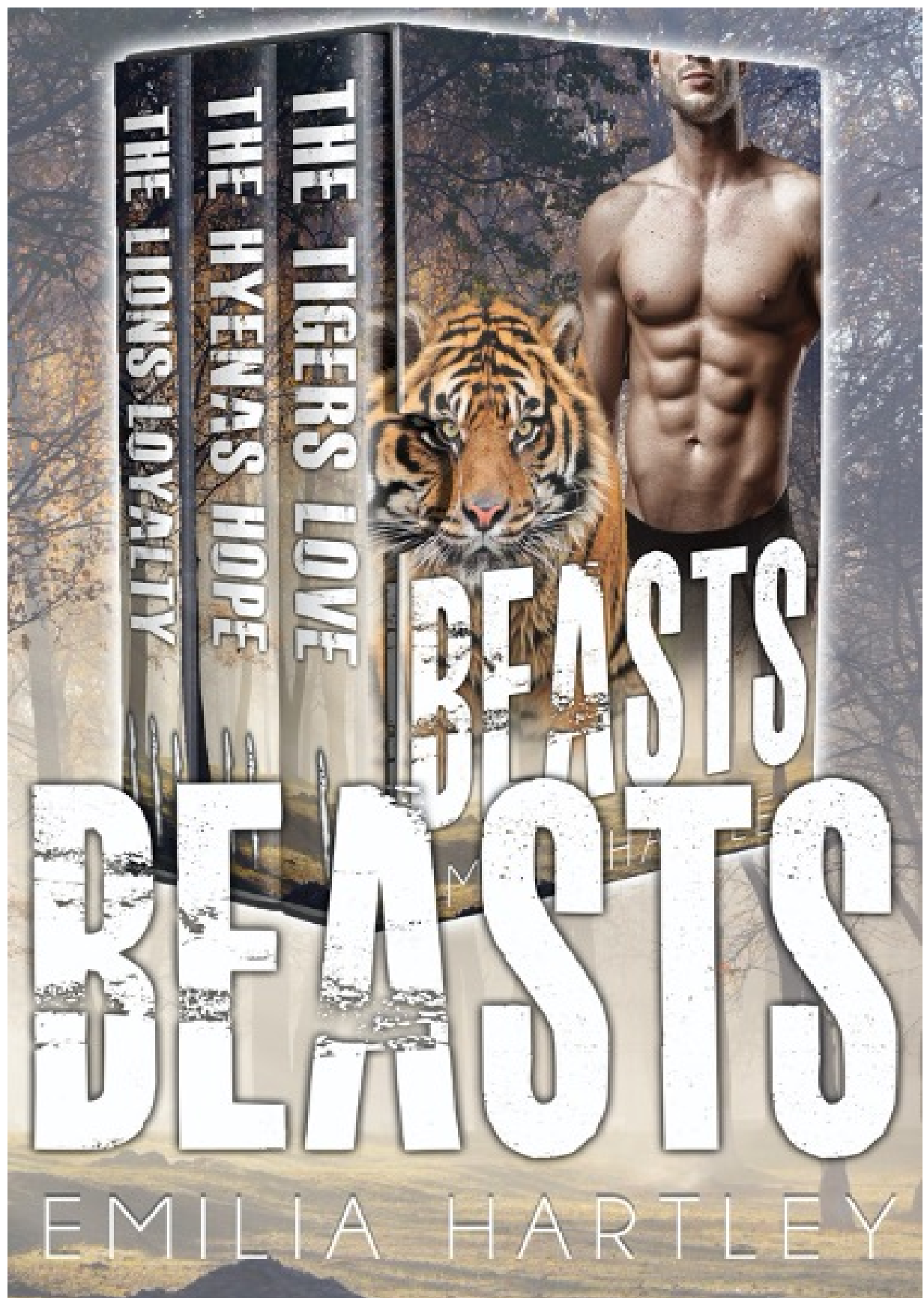
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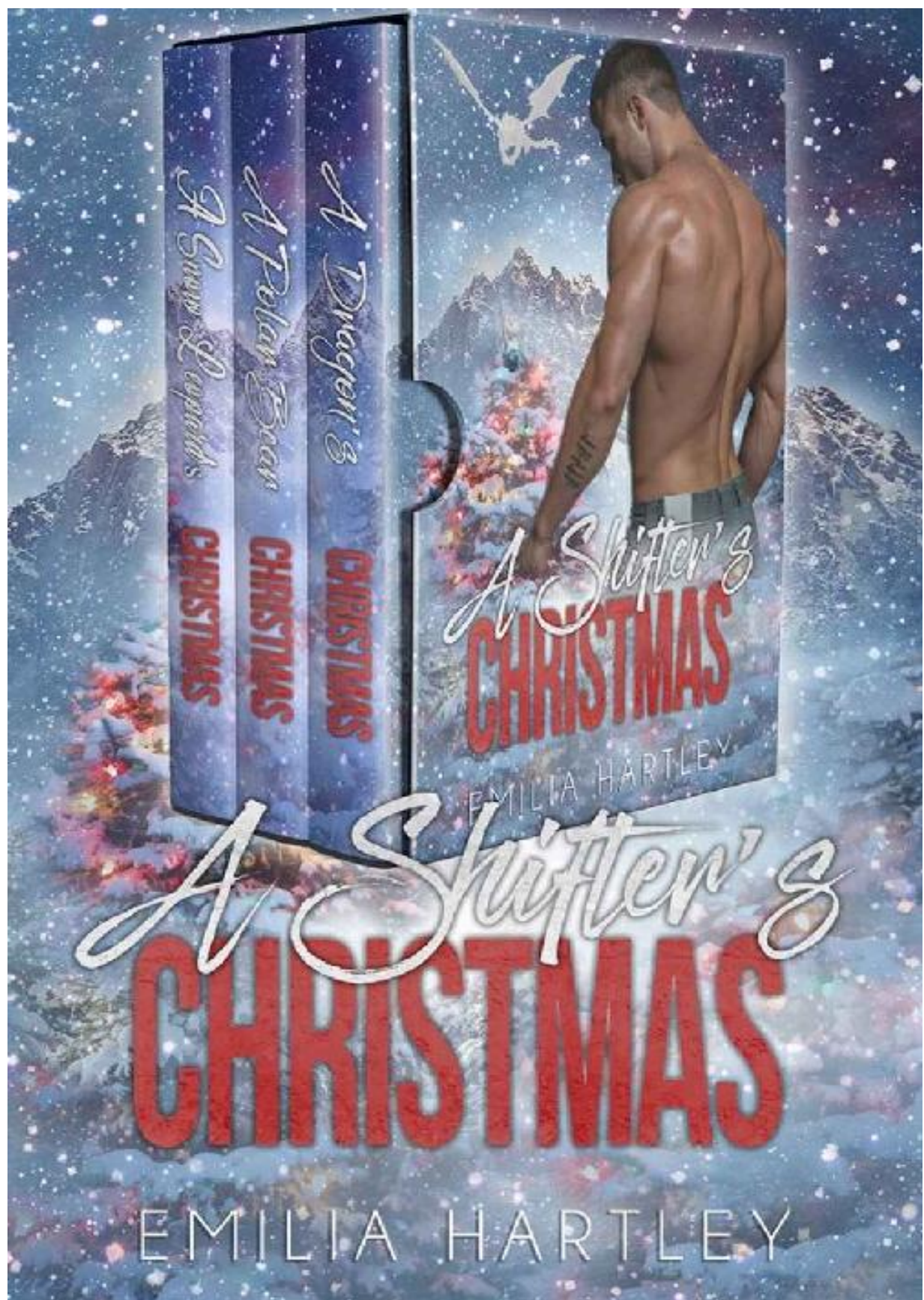




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