



# HEALING THE WOLF'S HEART

SKYE WILSON

# Healing The Wolf's Heart

---

*A Friends To Lovers Shifter Romance*

Silent Ridge Pack

Book 3

**Skye Wilson**

# Contents

1. [Savannah](#)
2. [Kaleb](#)
3. [Savannah](#)
4. [Kaleb](#)
5. [Savannah](#)
6. [Kaleb](#)
7. [Kaleb](#)
8. [Savannah](#)
9. [Kaleb](#)
10. [Savannah](#)
11. [Kaleb](#)
12. [Savannah](#)
13. [Kaleb](#)
14. [Savannah](#)
15. [Kaleb](#)
16. [Savannah](#)
17. [Savannah](#)

[Healing The Wolf's Heart](#)

# Chapter 1

---

## *Savannah*

“Would you just behave yourself for once?” I hissed as I pinned a stubborn curl alongside my head for perhaps the fiftieth time. But just like the other forty-nine times, it lasted maybe twenty seconds before defying all known laws of physics and springing out from the pin.

I groaned, longing to sink my head into my hands but knowing I would ruin the makeup I’d spent so much time putting on. “When my *abuela* told me that I had magic in my veins, I didn’t think it would manifest in such a shit way.”

I could still remember that day perfectly clearly when the wizened mother of my mother took my hand and led me into her sitting room. There, she explained to me that while I was of shifter blood, I wasn’t quite a shifter. I was something else entirely.

An *alma*.

It had been twenty years since then, and while I had learned so much about my special designation within the pack, I sometimes still felt like that nine-year-old girl who just found out that she couldn’t shift like a normal member of the pack.

But that wasn’t the biggest kicker of being an alma. No, that little factoid was that almas didn’t even get to stay with their packs because each pack only needed one alma, and yet the birth of one wasn’t guaranteed. Not like alphas, omegas, or betas. So, it was very possible for packs to end up alma-less for generations.

And it was because of that dangerous lack of power that almas were often sent off once they were of age to help other packs. The assignment

could be refused, of course—it wasn't slavery—but refusing wasn't looked on very charitably.

The Silent Ridge Pack hadn't been my first assignment. No, that was a pack that had lost their alma to old age, and their next one was only seventeen. They'd wanted her to have at least five years to learn, grow, and come into herself as an alma. I'd appreciated that, considering my *abuela* had delayed my training until I was fourteen and told my pack I wasn't to be sent anywhere until I finished my schooling. If I could pass that freedom onto another alma, I was all too happy to.

So, I ended up staying there for the full five years, from twenty-two to twenty-seven, then went back home to rest. I had about one year to reconnect with my family and my pack and settle in before I heard of an urgent case up north.

It was a fairly large pack whose alpha had lost his heir several years earlier and had accepted that he would have no more biological pups. Their city was full of tensions, and the alpha was certain that a greater danger loomed on the horizon.

How right he'd turned out to be.

I hadn't known that at the time, of course. But there had been something so vulnerable in his plea, something so visceral in his fear that when he died, he would leave his pack to untold dangers. So, I agreed to the permanent assignment and traveled there.

Less than six months after I'd joined, that same alpha had been murdered.

It had been a whirlwind of misadventures since then, to say the least. Missing shifters, power struggles, witches, curses—the works. It was a trial by fire, but finally, things seemed to be settling down.

Which was the whole reason for my date. I couldn't remember the last time I had the energy and spare hours to get dolled up and go out. But hopefully, it would become a more common occurrence.

Unlikely though. I would have more time if I gave up my nursing job—the pack would support me, after all—but I wasn't willing to do that. And I would have more time if I just quit being an alma, but that was like asking me to stop loving plants, or to stop healing. It just wasn't in my nature.

Oh, well. At least my partner understood.

For the most part.



I could feel my thoughts slipping into a direction I didn't want them going. But before I could get too far, my phone rang.

I braced myself, ready for some tragedy, emergency, or attack, but instead, I saw Hannah's name illuminated across the screen.

"Hey," I said cautiously, debating for a moment before accepting her request to FaceTime. Normally, I was happy to talk to one of my best friends, but chatting right before going on a date made me nervous.

I was keeping my whole relationship secret from the pack. Mostly because I liked my privacy and absolutely nothing to do with the fact that my boyfriend was stunningly and unabashedly...

*Human.*

Whoops. Yeah, not exactly the best way to keep my life low-key, stress-free, and otherwise breezy, but it had kind of happened that way. At first, I kept it a secret because what was the point of introducing a new relationship if it failed right away? But by the time I thought our relationship was worth introducing, too much time had passed, and I felt awkward.

And heaven forbid I felt awkward. Sure, I could feed my new packmates my blood, stitch their wounds, have them drink healing salves, and reset bones. But feeling awkward? Far too much for my delicate system.

Sigh.

"Hey there, Savvy! You're looking good!"

I jolted, having gotten lost in my thoughts and forgetting that I'd just answered the phone.

"Hah, thanks, Han. I clean up pretty nicely, don't I?"

"You sure do! What's the occasion?"

"Oh, just a little work thing. Nothing special."

I felt bad lying, the words turning into sulfuric ash along my tongue. But I just wasn't ready to talk about my partner. It was just...a bridge that was too much to cross with everything else I had on my plate.

Besides, it wasn't like he and I were in the best spot. I would look like such a fool if I told everyone about him, only for us to break up a month later because I was never around.

Which was a fair criticism. Between my job and everything happening with the pack, I barely saw my boyfriend once a month. I was slow to answer his texts, if I answered at all, and always on call. I knew he might understand a lot more if I sat him down and explained everything to him.



But that was the thing. I was keeping the pack a secret from him, too.

*What a tangled web we weave, when we practice to deceive.*

My *abuela's* words echoed in my head. I wished I had gone about everything differently, but what was done was done. All I could do was go forward.

I would tell both of them...eventually.

Probably. Maybe.

If the timing was right.

"Savvy?"

"Hmm?" I asked, jerking back to the phone call for the second time.

"Are you alright? You're not being yourself."

"Yeah, I'm just tired. Sorry. Did something happen?"

Another lie. A lie to go on top of other lies, all stacked together to make a mountain of lies. I'd always thought of myself as an honest person, but how could that be true when I fed even my best friend a steady stream of untruths?

"Nothing specific, no," Hannah said. "but I wanted to gush about the house plans I've been working on! I've never been so excited!"

"Oh? You and Jacobian moving in together already?"

"Well, no, not quite yet. The house won't be ready for another three or four months, but Emma and Lyssa already have their own houses there, so I'm more than a bit excited! It'll be like our own little wolfy community!"

I could see the cookouts: the thick smell of meat and fresh grass in the air, accompanied by the effervescent sound of children's laughter. With all the terror lately, I cherished those mirthful noises. There was a guileless magic in the joy of young souls that were unburdened by reality's bitterness.

"I can't blame you for being excited," I said. "It's something to look forward to."

"It is, it is!" She heaved a happy sigh, and while I truly was pleased for my best friend, I couldn't help but feel a sort of melancholy.

When I first became part of the pack, their inner circle had seemed impenetrable, a cadre of illustrious wolves who were all handsome, wealthy, and impossibly skilled. As time went by and I got to know them, they became much more real. More human, in a way. But even with that softening of the gap between us, it was clear that the gap remained. They were them, and I was me, looking in from the outside.

Not that this situation was entirely unusual. Almas were always set apart, as far as reverence and experience. We were shifters who couldn't shift. Pack mates who couldn't pack-speak. We were necessary as much as we were alien, and honestly, the whole experience was so...so...

*Isolating.*

So, I'd found a partner outside of the pack. And I hadn't told either my boyfriend or the pack about the other, fearing what would happen if either relationship crashed. It turned out that neither did, time passing in its blur of healing and fretting, until something incredible happened.

Hannah.

She'd come back from college right before my first pack run, where I would share a delicious meal with people but be left alone for hours, sometimes even overnight, while they all shared their unity under the moon. A unity I was purposefully excluded from by whatever magic fueled us.

I'd been nervous about the pack run. Dreading it even. But Hannah had stopped by every two hours, shifting back to human, and talked with me until I returned home to go to sleep.

That had been my first flicker of belonging, but it wouldn't be my only one. Shortly after, another impossible-to-predict anomaly came waltzing into our territory as if she belonged there.

As it turned out, she did.

It was none other than Lyssa, our alpha's fated mate. A very young but bright girl who had seen too much in far too little a time.

Her arrival had certainly changed the pack's dynamic, and I found myself getting invited to things more and more. At first, it was just family dinners, and then girls nights with all four of us. It was nice, to say the least, and I felt less and less like an outsider.

Which was why I was really regretting the whole secret-boyfriend thing. Ugh.

For the third time, I realized that Hannah was still excitedly talking about her house. I nodded along, happy to support her even if my head was such a mess. I tried to listen to her, giving my honest opinion on her ideas and confessing when I had no clue. While my own house was plenty decorated, I'd mostly used family heirlooms and items from my old pack. Being Latina, I had a lot of heritage I didn't want to forget, even if it was hard sometimes to parse out who I was between being an alma, a shifter, a nurse, and an ethnic woman in America.

So many different identities, yet they were all undoubtedly me.

“Hey, Han, this has been super-fun, but I gotta rush off.”

“Of course! I wouldn’t want to make you late for your work party! Have lots of fun.”

“Oh, I most certainly will,” I said sarcastically, as if I were going to be stuck at a hospital event. “Just love hanging out with my coworkers after hours where I can say something wrong and permanently mess up my standing...”

That was actually a real anxiety of mine, but I felt bad using it as an excuse when I was about to be wined and dined. Was I a bad person? I was beginning to think I might be one.

Why was modern life so complicated? Sure, video games, electronic books, and cars with heat and AC were nice. But what was also nice was not having to worry about taxes or navigating the technological world and the increasing surveillance everyone was under. Or trying to balance being a fully employed nurse and a fully needed alma with magical healing blood.

“Hey, it’s not so bad, right?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, it’s not the worst,” I agreed. “Love ya! Talk to you later!”

“Talk to ya later.”

With that, it was time to head out. Turning off my bedroom light, I headed out my front door. It wasn’t usual for me to be alone in my place. There was usually at least someone recovering in my home, but ever since the last intense fight with the witches, all had been quiet on the western front. I was certainly grateful for it, but I couldn’t help but feel like something was building on the horizon. Something that crackled against my skin the way the air did right before a lightning storm. A promise of something spectacular but terrible, lingering just beyond where any of us could see.

Or maybe I was being paranoid.

Either way, I continued to my car, trying to be quick about it. I was already going to be fifteen minutes late, and I had texted Jamie ahead of time to let him know. I had tried to be on time, I really had, but I’d had a last-minute call after work to reset a young shifter’s arm. He’d dislocated it, and it kept rapidly healing in the wrong position, causing it to dislocate all over again. It was torturous, no doubt, so I’d helped him properly reset it and brace it so his particularly fast healing ability would stop fusing it in the

wrong position. After, I had to give his mother care instructions to prevent re-injury.

So yeah, this had put me behind. It would have been so much easier if I could have explained that to my boyfriend, but I couldn't. Because that would mean telling him about my pack, and that was a bundle of threads I wasn't ready to tug on.

Why had I made life so complicated for myself? As I slipped into my car, I promised myself I would find the right time and way to get everyone on the same page. It would certainly make everything less stressful, and I wouldn't have to feel so guilty for lying.

I just had to put my big girl boots on and be brave.

Later, of course. Now I had a date to get to, after all.

Traffic was not forgiving, despite me taking every shortcut I remembered. Not that there were many shortcuts in the city, given that it was a city. To my exasperation, I hit red light after red light. By the time I arrived, I was half an hour late. Yikes.

The thing was, my boyfriend worked in the hospital with me. That was how we'd met. He'd been stoic at first, perhaps even intimidating, but bit by bit, we'd spent more time together and found out we got along well. It was nice to have that connection when I'd moved to the city and felt so removed from my new pack. But I was naive to think things could stay as easy as they'd been in the early days.

Reaching the restaurant, I hurried in. It wasn't one of the many establishments owned by my packmates, which was harder to avoid than one would expect. And maybe it was extra paranoid of me to go that far out of my way to make sure no one I knew spotted us, but we lived in an ever-shrinking world.

"Hello," the hostess greeted me, a demure smile playing across her pleasant features. She seemed nice, but I couldn't muster a similar grin. I was too anxious that I was about to be dumped for putting Jamie on the back burner yet again.

He deserved better, or at least the truth. But it wasn't like I could blurt everything out in the middle of a high-end restaurant.

I told the hostess I was meeting a friend at the high-top bar and boogied my way to the elevator.

My high-heeled foot tapped against the floor as the glass lift whooshed me upwards. The elevator was lovely, sure, all crystalline fractals and

gilded edges, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I was so afraid of losing Jamie because of my stupid double life, which I hadn't needed to live but had inadvertently chosen with my caution.

Then I saw him, looking well-dressed in a maroon button-up and dark slacks. He was sitting at the farther end of the bar, chatting with a woman next to him.

For a moment, I was struck by how handsome and put-together he looked. While my whole life felt like chaos, right down to the wild curls of my hair, Jamie was everything I was not. He was stability. He was reserve. He was confidence and quiet assuredness. I didn't think I was a coward, but I knew I could work on my ability to speak up for myself.

Jamie never had to work that. Nobody made him do what he didn't want to do. He was always so damn *sure* of himself.

Taking a deep breath, I hurried forward. Jamie saw me when I was a little over halfway to him, and the amiable grin on his face quickly turned into a scowl.

*Shit.* I had definitely pissed him off.

"Hey," I said breathlessly. My heart shouldn't have been thundering with anxiety at seeing my partner, but I was the one who'd made my bed. I supposed I had to lie in it.

"You're late," he remarked flatly, which was worse than him being outwardly angry. Anger I could deal with. I could apologize and make it up to him. But the placid disappointment that layered his neutral tone...phew, it was crushing.

"I am," I said as earnestly as I could. "I got caught up in a last minu-"

"It's fine," Jamie said in a tone that meant it was *not* fine. "You're here now, and that's what matters, right?"

I nodded, licking my lips as I tried to recover somewhat graciously. "Yes! But do you want to go somewhere private?"

I was acutely aware of the woman he'd just been talking to. She'd turned away, but I could tell she was half-listening as she played a game on her phone. At least she wasn't openly sneering. I would have loved it if she could leave the bar, but I couldn't blame her for being interested in a bit of live drama.

"No, not really," Jamie said, and I had to resist flinching. "I've been sitting here a while waiting for your arrival, so I'd at least like to get some drinks."

Well, that made sense. “Of course! I could use something to wet my palate.”

“Great. But if you would like something a little away from the hustle and bustle, we can always go to one of the more private booths in the corner.”

Thank goodness, Jamie seemed to be in a more gracious mood now, letting my tardiness slip. It wouldn’t have been such a bad thing if it was a one-off, but I’d been a half-hour to an hour late to all our dates. Considering our dates were usually once a month, I was cutting short our already-limited time together.

“That sounds amazing, thank you.”

Jamie waved down the bartender and ordered our drinks, pointing to an open booth in the corner. We headed over to it, drinks in hand. As we strolled, he put his arm around my waist, pulling me closer.

I knew it was a bit possessive, but I liked it. Surely he wouldn’t break up with me when he was treating me like I was valuable. Like I was worth having. That would be a waste of his energy, and Jamie was not a wasteful man.

But as much as I was enjoying the contact, all those nice feelings ground to a halt when I spotted none other than Kaleb across the bar.

He was incredibly easy to pick out amongst the humans. Between his large frame, towering height, and frankly impressive muscles, he wasn’t exactly a figure who blended in. But the bigger question was:

*What is he doing here?!*

Frantically, my eyes scanned around for Parker, the more outgoing of the wolf pair. I couldn’t spot him anywhere. Was that even physically possible, or was the youngest wolf of the inner circle just in the bathroom?

I supposed it didn’t matter because there was no way Kaleb wouldn’t eventually hear or smell me. While I didn’t have enhanced senses myself, at least not when it came to hearing or smelling like the rest of my pack, I knew how powerful they were. It seemed like my little secret might be out a lot sooner than I’d hoped.

Nerves raging, I slid into the booth while trying to keep Kaleb in the corner of my vision. He was trying to read a book, but a lovely young woman with copper hair and dazzling green eyes kept trying to start a conversation with him.

I could tell she was a shifter in that vague way most almas could sense such things, so that was a relief. Hopefully, the pheromones she was throwing everywhere would mask my presence long enough for me to convince Jamie that we should go somewhere else.

“So, how was your day?” I asked as we settled in. I wished I had something to do with my hands, but I didn’t want to appear agitated or nervous. Damn, what had my life become when even a date with my long-term partner became so anxiety-inducing? I needed to get a grip like whoa.

I could sense that Jamie was answering—and I wanted to listen—but it felt like my brain was going a million miles an hour, panicked thoughts flying this way and that. It didn’t help that I kept glancing to Kaleb, sure he would spot me at any moment.

“Hey, are you listening to me?”

I blinked, forcing my attention back to my boyfriend. “I’m sorry, it’s just really loud in here. Could you repeat that?”

He didn’t say anything, but I could tell by his slightly sharper breath that he was getting exasperated. I prepared another apology, but thankfully, he rolled right along into an answer.

Whew. He was certainly being generous with me.

“I’ve just had a really long shift today,” he said. “You know how it is.”

I nodded. “Yeah, your shift ended a couple of hours after mine, right?”

“It did. And yet, I managed to get here on time.”

“I’m sorr-”

“It’s fine. What’s done is done. But as I was saying, it was a long shift. And my caseload doesn’t seem to be any lighter despite all the extra hours I’m putting in.” He let out a sigh, and I felt a pang of pity for him. He was busting his ass at the hospital, but it always seemed there was more work to do.

“I know you don’t ever pick up extra shifts,” he continued. “But if you ever change your mind, they could certainly use you.”

“I picked up an extra shift last month,” I said, knowing I sounded defensive but unable to help it. I was sure that in my coworkers’ eyes, I was an uncharitable sort, only taking a shift once every few weeks. But how could I, with the witches, the pack, and all the curses we’d just overcome?

Luckily, we hadn’t been attacked since the last blow-out with Emma and Theo in the middle of the city—and that had been its own nightmare. Though we’d gotten out alive, the covering-up we had to do was insane. I



had no idea how the council hadn't shown up yet to banish us from the known world.

"Right. Well, if you ever have time for more, it would be appreciated."

How was I supposed to respond to that? "Sorry, I can't work any more shifts in case any of my packmates need to drink my blood to stop a witch from draining their life force." Except even if I said that, Jamie wouldn't understand unless I explained packs, shifters, and all of faedom.

Jamie was a human, after all.

Not only was I dating someone from outside a pack, and not only was I dating a regular ol' non-magical *homo sapien*. I was dating a human who had no idea of the magical world. Not a drop. He didn't even believe in tooth fairies, vicious little things they were.

Big yikes, as Lyssa liked to say.

"I know," I said finally. "Did anything good happen today?"

Fortunately, he launched into a story that sounded less positive and more him complaining about a particularly obstinate senior nurse in his rotation. I loved Mrs. Kim, but I got how her dry, strict personality wouldn't mesh with Jamie's reserved one. In some ways, they were just too similar.

But as Jamie talked, my attention again drifted to Kaleb. What was he doing here? And Parker hadn't shown up at all. I didn't think I'd ever seen one go out without the other unless it was for a pack mission.

Was Kaleb on a mission, then? It was a possibility. But if so, what could he possibly be doing in a bar? As far as I knew, most of the inter-pack tensions had been forgotten while the witches terrorized and kidnapped shifters from all over, so it wasn't like the woman he was talking to was a double agent. And even if the tensions weren't down, it was far too close to our territory for that to be a valid theory.

Puzzling. Normally, I would just go up and ask Kaleb. But normally, I wasn't with my boyfriend, whom I was trying to keep as unseen as Bigfoot. I supposed he could be on a date—after all, I was out on the town with my SO. But as far as I knew, Kaleb had little to no interest in dating. Sure, I figured he had his hook-ups, especially when he was in rut, but all he seemed to need was Parker and the rest of the inner circle.

I wasn't sure, but I'd heard whispers that Emma had a crush on Kaleb for years, and he was so oblivious, it was borderline painful.

When I first joined the pack, I'd just assumed that Parker and Kaleb were a couple; they were so glued at the hip. But it became apparent that

Kaleb liked *looking* at beautiful women, just not interacting with them. I'd been so puzzled about it until Ellibie took me aside and explained there was deep, deep trauma there, and for a long time, Parker was the one who got Kaleb through every single day.

"Who's that man you're staring at?" Jamie asked sharply.

*Shit.*

"Uh, just a friend," I said quickly, jerking my gaze away from Kaleb.

"A friend? Huh. Should we go talk to him?"

*Shit, shit, shit!*

"N-no, that's fine! He hardly ever gets out, so if he's putting the moves on a date, we shouldn't interrupt. Besides," I reached across the table, gently resting my hands over Jamie's. "I want to spend the evening with you. No distractions."

"That's sweet," he said, lifting my hand to kiss the top of my palm. Goodness, he knew how to make my heart flutter. "Well, the evening would be nicer if I had another drink."

I chuckled, excusing myself to get him his usual. We could wait for our server, but it was a weekend night, and both bartenders were swamped with thirsty patrons thirsty.

As I hurriedly crossed the floor, I did my best to avoid looking at Kaleb, like that would somehow help. But I should have known better, because as soon as I reached the bar, Kaleb was sliding up to me.

"Savvy, my friend, my stalwart alma. What are you doing here with that pretentious dickhead?"

"So you could hear that all, huh?"

"I'm a wolf. Of course I could."

I gritted my teeth behind my perfectly painted lips. I'd hoped he couldn't, but since I didn't have the same super-hearing abilities, I wasn't sure if we were far enough.

Drat.

I didn't want to answer any of Kaleb's questions, so I went on the offensive, which was not my style.

"Why are you here, by the way?"

"Meeting up with someone from another pack who thinks they're also being targeted by the witches."

"Oh, really?"

“Yeah. It’s hard to say because they’re right on the state border, and so much of the strife seems localized around us city packs. But I’m helping them fix their manual security and guardian duty while Jacobian’s supposed to help them with all the digital stuff.”

“Ah, are they one of the techno-phobic packs?”

“Not quite techno-phobic, but technology hasn’t ever been a priority for them. What they have is pretty rudimentary at best.”

“Well, I’m glad we’re able to help them.”

The bartender approached, and I ordered the drinks, glancing over my shoulder at Jamie. But he was on his phone, and I had no desire to sit in front of him and listen to him chat while completely ignoring me.

So I turned my attention back to Kaleb. “Where is your other half, anyway? I rarely ever see you two apart.”

Kaleb didn’t answer right away, and I didn’t miss how his face went carefully blank before he spoke. “Parker had a prior engagement, and I really couldn’t put off helping the border pack any longer.”

“Ah, at least y’all are booked, busy, and blessed, right?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s one way to put it.” He shook off whatever was bothering him, and his amiable grin brightened his rather striking features.

When I’d first joined the pack, Kaleb was borderline mute. He spoke when spoken to and let people know vital information, but I didn’t recall him ever saying something conversational.

However, as time passed, he’d come out of his shell little by little, microscopic progressions of his social skills. Strangely enough, the biggest change came after Lyssa had popped up out of nowhere. That young woman had stirred up the pack quite a bit, and I appreciated most of the changes. When I thought about it, I pretty much liked every change.

For example, I’d suddenly been asked to more family dinners, and then to hang out with the girls outside of family dinners. It wasn’t just me who was more welcome—Hannah, too. She and I had commiserated about being on the outside of the pack. Me because I was new and an alma, and her because she’d gone away for so long to go to college. But Hannah had been included lately just as much as I was.

Then there was Parker. Although he’d always been a chatterbox, he’d been completely inseparable from Kaleb when I joined the pack. While I hadn’t known the full story at the time, their relationship hadn’t seemed healthy to me. But now? Well, he was apparently off and doing his own

thing, allowing himself and Kaleb to interact with the world outside of each other.

“You alright? You seem like you zoned out there.”

I blinked and came back to the conversation, realizing Kaleb was looking at me with his deep brown eyes.

“Oh, yeah. Just thinking about stuff.”

“I got you. Well, I don’t want to keep the pack rep waiting, so I will go ahead and dismiss myself. But you be safe, Savvy, alright? And don’t let that guy shit on you.”

“I won’t,” I said, feeling my cheeks color. “I promise.”

“Good on ya.”

With a small cheeky salute, he headed back to the other side of the bar, leaving me to grab the drinks and return to Jamie.

When I reached the table, he was hanging up his phone, and I congratulated myself on my good timing. But his pinched expression told me I had done something wrong.

Couldn’t I get anything right lately?

“Who was that you were talking to?” Jamie asked.

I forced myself to plaster a Stepford wife-approved smile on my face. “Oh, he’s a close friend of my friend’s fiancé. He was just checking in since it’s been a bit since we’ve seen each other.”

“Ah.” My explanation seemed to satisfy him, or at least I thought as much until he fixed me with one of his flat looks. “Maybe I would have known that if you ever introduced me to any of your friends.”

Uh-oh.

I really didn’t want a fight or to lie more about why I religiously kept parts of my life so separate. It was exhausting, and I could blame no one but myself.

“I’ll make sure to introduce you to everyone at Emma’s wedding coming up! Don’t worry—everyone will love you, I’m sure.”

He nodded absently, seemingly uninterested. But I knew he sometimes came across that way even when he didn’t mean to.

“Anyway, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” he said.

“Oh?”

He nodded, his hands reaching for mine and gripping them gently. There was the strong, assuring doctor I’d fallen in love with. Funny how that guy didn’t seem to be around as often lately.

“We’ve both been working so hard, and I think we deserve a break.”

I couldn’t agree more. We’d both been going so much, and it killed me inside that I couldn’t tell my long-term boyfriend about everything I’d been dealing with. While his work as a surgeon was vital, it wasn’t fate-of-all-humanity levels, yet what my pack and I were dealing with *did* have ramifications for faekind all over the state. Potentially over the whole continent if things kept escalating.

“That sounds lovely,” I said, relaxing ever so slightly.

“I’m glad you agree! So, I looked at the schedule and noticed a real miracle.”

“A miracle?” I parroted. God, I sounded like a dolt, but my brain was going in so many directions.

“Yeah. You and I have three days off in a row—the *same* three days off! I don’t think that’s happened a single time in the entire time we worked together.”

My jaw almost dropped. That *was* a miracle in our understaffed hospital. The two of us getting a single day off together was a cherished event. But *three* in a row? It had to be a divine intervention.

“I was thinking that you and I could head out of town, maybe the Hamptons. I know it’s the tourist season, so everything is expensive. But between the two of us, we won’t have issues splitting the costs.”

My mouth went dry as I remembered when my day off was. “I’m sorry, I have a prior commitment on that first day. And you know how you mentioned I should pick up extra shifts?”

He groaned. “Why do I have the feeling you’re about to say something that ruins everything?”

Ugh, the guilt was rising again. “Because I am...I, uh, I tried to pick up shifts, and they put me on call. So we *can* go away! Just someplace...local. Maybe an Airbnb? Have a nice little staycation together?”

Jamie’s eyes narrowed, and my stomach sank. I knew what I sounded like. I was throwing away what seemed like a miracle. But given what the pack was going through...I just *couldn’t* miss a dinner.

I mean, I was sure I could ask Mahlan, who would be more than happy to let me take time off, but *I* wouldn’t feel comfortable with that. What if someone attacked while I was away? As much as I didn’t like to toot my own horn, there were multiple times that one of our pack’s inner circle

would have died if I hadn't been there, including Emma. I couldn't risk losing any of the family I'd only just cobbled together.

"Why do you need to pick up shifts? Are you short on money or something?"

The sharper part of my tongue wanted to answer that he'd just lectured me on taking more shifts to help the hospital, but I pushed it down. It was typical of him to be upset that he was trying to do something romantic, and I'd just thrown a wrench into his plans.

Once more, I'd trapped myself within the confines of my secrecy. I'd really shot myself in the foot, hadn't I? But I found myself quickly cooking up yet another lie. Ugh, when had I become so dishonest?

"No, it's not that. I'm trying to save up to buy a lakefront property for building a house. Don't want to live in the city my whole life, you know?"

"Oh?" Jamie's eyebrows went up, and I saw curiosity behind his eyes. "You haven't ever mentioned that before. What lake?"

"It's something I've been thinking about recently, but I didn't want to jinx it. Some of my friends bought property there, and I fell in love with it. It's right outside the city. Close enough not to be a hellish commute, but far enough away that it's a nice escape from all the hubbub."

"Oh no. We can't move out of the city," Jamie said as a matter of course. "I've got a primo condo I'm not letting go. The area is very competitive."

"I...I don't want to live in the city my entire life. I want to raise kids where they can go out and play."

"Kids? We've never talked about kids."

Hadn't we? "I...I'm sure we have?"

"No, I would have remembered that. And that would have been putting the cart before the horse, considering we've got a relatively new relationship."

Relatively new? In what world were we in a *new* relationship? We'd been together for a long while, longer than many relationships lasted.

"Savvy, I'm not trying to shit on your dreams, but how are we going to have kids when we can't even successfully schedule a trip together?"

I opened my mouth to try to answer when my phone rang. Thankfully, Jamie, being a doctor, understood that I *had* to answer.

Pulling it from my purse, I saw it was Mahlan and quickly answered. "Yes?"

“There’s an emergency. We need you ASAP.”

I swallowed hard, some of my worst date anxieties coming true. “I’m, uh, I’m a bit buzzed right now.” I didn’t realize it until I said it, but the two drinks I’d panic-gulped down were hitting my system hard. Had I even remembered to eat? Emma and Hannah were always on me about that, which I didn’t mind, but they didn’t understand that I didn’t have their same caloric needs. Getting hungry was inconvenient, but I wasn’t liable to pass out or wither like they were. It would be a lot harder to get through a nursing shift if I had to worry about that on top of everything else.

“God, I’m sorry, Savvy. I know you don’t get a night to yourself very often. Are you sure you’re not safe to drive? Can you Uber?”

I paused. “Yeah, I can do that.”

I didn’t have a choice. If it was an emergency, I *had* to go. It would have been so much easier if Jamie didn’t work at the hospital because I could just claim there was an emergency there and rush off. But that didn’t work when he could roll in with me, especially since he was likely to drive me there himself.

“I’m sorry,” I said, all the dread I’d managed to shove away rushing back in full. “I have to go.”

He let out a huff so dry, it was practically the Sahara. “Let me guess...a family emergency?”

I nodded, already pulling up a ride-sharing app on my phone.

“You know, I could drive you to them.”

“No, I’m not ready for y’all to meet, especially in a stressful emergency.” And apparently, I could only keep the sharp side of my tongue contained for so long. “Especially since we’re in a ‘new relationship.’”

Jamie’s lips pressed into a thin line, but he couldn’t argue with me. If he did, that would mean he’d be arguing with his own words. It wasn’t the nicest thing to do, but he couldn’t have his cake and eat it, too.

“I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you, I promise,” I said, knowing there was no way I would unless I came clean about everything with everyone.

Ugh, I had gotten myself into such a mess.



## Chapter 2

---

## *Kaleb*

I was planning with the other pack's representative when my phone sounded the distinctive tone for my group chat with the guys. Normally, I kept my notifications on silent, relying on Parker's borderline phone addiction to stay informed. But I'd had to change my habits for whenever he went without me.

Which was happening more and more lately. I wasn't exactly fond of the change or the good, hard look it made me take at myself, but I understood that Parker needed to live his own life. Even if our lives had basically been carbon copies for more than a decade.

Whipping my phone out, I saw there was an emergency. While I wasn't being recalled, Savvy was. Curious. I wondered if our alpha even knew where she was or that she was out with a guy who was being a world-class Chad towards her, as Parker liked to say. Or maybe that was what Sam liked to say, and Parker was repeating it. He seemed to do that more and more lately.

*Hey, none of that,* I scolded myself, banishing my bitter thoughts. My best friend and brother from another mother deserved happiness. He deserved to go out and build his memories with the witch he got on with so well. And if anything went wrong, I would beat the ever-loving shit out of Samuel.

But I was pretty sure nothing would go wrong. I'd vetted the green witch since day one, when I'd noticed the first spark of interest between the two. Sam was a spitfire, and he didn't do well with authority, but he was a good guy. And I liked how happy he made Parker.

Even if I missed my best friend.

A familiar stabbing feeling tore its way through my chest. Anger rose sharply within me as a response. It took quite a bit of willpower to stomp that down.

What was that my mother always said? Ah, yes: our immediate response to something is often what society or trauma taught us. But it was how we conducted ourselves afterward that really spoke of how we were as wolves.

“Something urgent?” Patricia asked, bringing me back to the moment.

“Yeah, it’s my alpha. He needs our alma over there.” I gestured to where Savvy was, my shifter ears listening to her conversation as much as I tried to block her out. I was trying to give her privacy, as she was clearly embarrassed that I’d witnessed her on her...date? Friend hang-out? I didn’t know what it was, but I got the feeling that she didn’t want to be spied on.

“I’m, uh, I’m a bit buzzed right now.”

Was she? I had to admit, I’d never seen our alma drunk, but she didn’t seem particularly sauced. Granted, I was sitting opposite her on the rooftop bar.

I listened more closely, blocking everything else out to concentrate on the conversation that wasn’t my business. Ever so faintly, I could hear Mahlan’s answer on the phone, although certain words faded out.

“God, I’m sorry...know you don’t get a night...often. Are you sure...not safe to drive? ...Uber?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

Her voice had a weariness I wasn’t used to hearing. Admittedly, though I didn’t usually hang out with our alma outside of family dinners, she’d always seemed a cheery, effervescent sort. Or relentlessly determined if she was in “healing mode,” as Parker called it. He was endlessly impressed with our new alma and everything she did.

Now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure the guy had a soft spot for magic users. Huh.

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” Savvy said, her weariness shifting to outright misery. Confusion swamped me at that. If she was on a date, I got her being reticent to leave, but the guy was an ass. Surely Savvy knew she could do much better than that. And if she was having a work meeting or some friend thing, why did she sound so miserable? And why was he talking to her so

disrespectfully, and why was she taking it? I'd never thought of Savvy as a doormat.

Not that I thought of her much.

I was bad about that, which was something I was beginning to realize the more time I spent away from Parker. He was my rock who had gotten me through the worst experience of my life. I was serious when I called him my brother from another mother. If it weren't for him and his family, I was pretty sure I would have gone the way of my mother by now.

Like it or not, her illness ran through my veins, and it was one of the few our shifter abilities couldn't cure. Cancer? No problem. Impaled by a spike? Probably fixable. But a potent combination of severe depression, high anxiety, and bipolar disorder? Being a shifter couldn't heal anything about that.

And my mother had tried, she really had. She'd fought every day of my young life to be the best parent she could be, even after my father was killed in the same skirmish that had taken Alpha Sawyer's son. But it was insanely difficult to properly medicate a shifter with mental issues because our metabolism burned through them so fast.

So yeah, I'd spent most of my life feeling like a ticking time bomb just waiting to go off and hurt everyone around me. In a lot of ways, Parker was my security blanket. As long as I was around him, as long as we were two sides of the same coin, I was safe.

Now, I was rapidly approaching twenty-nine, and it was time to let go of that security blanket.

At least some of the time.

Savvy's date/friend/whatever he was let out the rudest snort, making one of my hands ball into a fist. "Let me guess...a family emergency?"

What was with that *tone*? I couldn't help but wonder if they were corporate enemies or something.

"You know, I could drive you to them," he said.

"No, I'm not ready for y'all to meet, especially in a stressful emergency." Savvy paused. "Especially since we're a new relationship."

There it was, straight out of Savvy's mouth. This wasn't just a date with a potential match; she was in a straight-up *relationship* with Mr. Douche Canoe. Maybe I was seeing him on a bad night or something, but the red flags were waving at full mast.

Still, Savvy had said it was new, so there was a chance she could run for the hills. That would be the best course of action, in my humble opinion.

Not that I was an expert or anything. I hadn't been in a real relationship, well, *ever*. I'd dated, and I'd had my hook-ups, but I never had the urge for romance. It probably had to do with that whole attached-at-the-hip, codependent thing with Parker—and by probably, I meant definitely. But I was working on it.

Even if the only reason I was working on it was that Parker had forced me to by doing things on his own like a normal, functioning adult.

It was funny how I'd faced down enemies that would make most men scream in terror. How I'd fought off three witches by myself and managed to survive. But having to go about my life on my lonesome horrified me.

Ugh. Psychology.

"I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise," Savvy said, drawing me back to the present. I apparently had issues staying present without drifting into my thoughts. I guessed I was used to Parker's chatter to keep me grounded.

Another thing to add to my long, long list of things to work on.

But I was cognizant enough to see that my friend and packmate needed help. And the type of help I could very much provide.

"We're gonna have to reschedule," I said to Patricia, standing up and offering my hand to her. She took it, shaking it firmly. "Maybe next week, we could go on a run and finish this up?"

"Let's shoot for something this weekend, if you're able. I'll connect with you later after you tend to your alpha."

"Sounds perfect."

Releasing her hand, I gave her what I hoped was a respectful nod, then rushed over to Savvy.

"Oh, Kaleb!" she blurted, looking at me with wide eyes. How had I never noticed those beautiful hazel orbs? They had molten honey at the center with gold flecks and an emerald rim around them, a viridian orbit that contained so much emotion I wasn't used to seeing aimed in my direction.

"Just wanted to swing by and say hi!" I offered my hand to Jamie, pasting a Parker-worthy smile on my face. "Jamie, right? I've heard so much about you! It's so great to finally meet you!"

Jamie took my hand, but unlike Patricia, it was clear that our interaction wasn't amiable. Yet another red flag erected itself, flying proudly above all our heads. "Can we help you?" he asked flatly.

"Oh no. I just happened to be around and wanted to meet the mystery man. You know, better now than during some emergency." I gave the most subtle look I could to Savvy, silently begging her to catch my drift.

Thankfully, she seemed to get it, her eyebrows shooting almost to her hairline. "Actually, Kaleb, I could use a ride. There *has* been a family emergency, and I'm afraid I'm too tipsy to drive."

"There has?" I acted surprised. "Shit, that's no good. Yeah, I can take you! Let's go!"

Maybe I was naive, but I had expected that to be settled. But the next thing I knew, Jamie was on his feet and stepping into my space menacingly.

It was hard not to laugh at the idea he was intimidating. He was a human—a soft and squishy human without so much as a gun to help him.

But I didn't want a fight for two reasons. One, that was a terrible situation to put Savvy in. Two, it would draw way too much attention. I was only beginning to dip my toe into socializing on my own, and I was pretty sure that causing some sort of brawl was not the way to go about it.

"I can take her myself," Jamie said, voice low.

But I was a grown man with an alpha like Mahlan, so his posturing didn't remotely affect me. Actually, that was a lie—while it had been funny at first, it was quickly growing annoying. Mostly because he was making an even bigger ass of himself in front of Savvy.

"Jamie, honey," she cut in, standing and placing a gentle hand on his chest. Funny how she had the untold healing magic of centuries running through her veins. I'd seen her put her hand inside a dying man's chest and force his heart to beat until his accelerated healing took over. Yet, she was so gentle. "You've been drinking, too. Neither of us is safe to drive. Why don't you finish your drinks, take an Uber home, and I'll head there as soon as I handle this emergency."

That was certainly diplomatic. Savvy had a way with words.

"If you leave without me, don't bother coming back."

Oh.

*Oh.*

So that's how it was, huh? I drew in a breath, ready to tell him exactly where he could shove his empty glasses on the table, but then Savvy spoke,

and I didn't want to interrupt her. Unlike her new partner, I wasn't a rude asshole.

"You don't mean that, Jamie. Look, I really have to go, but we'll talk later. I don't want to walk away from you, but this is an emergency." She reached up to stroke his face, and he jerked away. What a wad. "Please remember to drink water when you get home."

With that, she started to walk away, and I was smart enough to follow her. I could hear her sniffing and smell the extra saline that could only come from tears, but I knew better than to say anything.

At least not until we were in the elevator.

Once we were inside and the door slid shut, I allowed myself to comfort my packmate. I rested my hand on her back, gently rubbing it in a way I hoped was soothing.

"That wasn't right of him," was all I said, hoping that was enough.

"He doesn't know what's going on," she answered glumly. "If he did, he wouldn't be acting like this."

If she said so. I didn't know the guy from Adam, but he sure left a bad impression. I knew that wasn't something I should say out loud, so I kept quiet. If Savannah wanted to talk about it, she would.

Because as bad as I was about socializing outside of Parker, Savvy wasn't exactly the most forthcoming person. I could remember maybe a handful of stories she'd ever told about herself. I knew she was Latina and came from a long line of almas who had helped packs across the entire continent. Which was pretty amazing when I stopped to think about it.

But that was it. I didn't know her favorite color. Or her allergies, if any. Or her hopes and dreams. I didn't even know her favorite food, and most of our interactions were while we were eating.

Huh. I should probably fix that.

I resolved to myself that getting to know Savvy would be my new special project, something to force myself out of my shell. It wasn't like it would be a burden. As far as I could tell, she was a courageous, intelligent, beautiful, and funny woman.

"My truck is this way," I said as we entered the parking lot, leading her away from the building. Despite what I'd smelled, there wasn't a single tear track down her cheek, and her breathing had returned to a more regular rhythm. Either the woman could process emotions insanely fast or was masking them to an impressive level.



But I didn't like that she had to do either. It didn't seem fair, even if I wasn't privy to the whole situation.

"I'm sorry for being such an inconvenience," she grouched as soon as we were in my truck.

I was half surprised that she hadn't commented on my vehicle yet. Most of the other guys in our inner circle had flashy sports cars or motorcycles, which was fine—I wasn't judging—but hotrods weren't my thing. I wanted something reliable that could haul heavy things, like a moose carcass or furniture.

"You're not being inconvenient, Savannah," I said in what I hoped was a convincing tone. "This is what packmates do for each other. Especially when our alpha needs you ASAP."

"Well, thank you, anyway."

"Of course. I'm happy to help."

She was quiet as I pulled out and headed down the road. It was tempting to speed, but considering we were in the heart of the city, that would do more harm than good. I didn't want to hit someone or get pulled over.

Savvy didn't seem much interested in conversation, but I was for once, which was not the norm. But my tongue felt heavy in my mouth whenever I tried to start a topic. Apparently, I was even rustier than I'd thought.

"What happened to the woman you were with?" Savannah asked finally, giving me an in.

"I told her there was a pack emergency, and we agreed to reschedule."

She nodded absently, her eyes out the window. I wished I could hear her thoughts, although that was quite invasive. As an alma, Savvy didn't have a wolf form, so I'd never heard her internal voice like I could hear Mahlan's, Lyssa's, and everyone else in our pack.

"It's nice that she was so understanding."

"Of course she was. She's a wolf, after all, and one whose pack might be entering crisis mode. She gets it."

"It seems she does..." There was something wistful in Savvy's voice that I couldn't put my finger on. But before I could pry further, she asked, "Did you get a call from Mahlan, too?"

"No, I just saw his message in our group text that there was an emergency. I wasn't on his list of required people, but you were, and that's when I overheard your call with him."

"Ah, so that's why you came over?"

“Yup. Once you said you were too buzzed to drive, I figured you might need a hand. It’s easy for us to forget that you can get drunk since most of us shifters can’t.”

“Yes. Unfortunately, being an alma doesn’t come with all those special abilities you and your friends enjoy.”

Was there a hint of bitterness there? Perhaps. It was hard to tell. Savvy was good at containing herself and her reactions.

I imagined she felt left out that she couldn’t shift, didn’t have accelerated healing, or any of the normal shifter abilities. She could heal others with her blood, but she had to recover like a regular human. Though she wasn’t weakened by wolfsbane or other shifter-specific poisons, that still didn’t seem like much of a tradeoff to me. Wolfsbane wasn’t the lethal tonic it was in legend. It *could* be, if distilled correctly and applied in large enough amounts, but it wasn’t like the average shifter could get their hands on that product.

As far as I could tell, it seemed like almas got the short end of the stick. Why had I never thought of that before? It wasn’t like she was the first alma I’d dealt with. After my mother’s...disappearance, the previous alma had done weekly checks on me. Eventually, those checks became monthly and then yearly until the old woman passed away around the age of 107.

Despite all that, I’d never *really* thought about the reality of alma lives. While they tended to live exceedingly long lives, they never retired—and never even really rested. They were always expected to care for the pack, who, in turn, cared for them.

Huh.

“But you don’t have any more info on what’s happening?” she asked.

“Sorry, no. Don’t know a drop more than you do.”

“I suppose we will find out soon enough.”

“Yeah, we’re almost there. I guess it’s lucky that your date ended up being so close to the coordinates.”

“Yeah...lucky.” Her tone gave the slightest hiccup, which was probably biggest tell I would get that she was upset.

“Look, I know it’s none of my business, but why were you out with that jerk?” I asked.

“He’s not a jerk!” she protested quickly—too quickly. I wondered if the relationship wasn’t as new as I’d assumed. “He’s just had it rough lately.”

“While I understand there are hard times and good times in relationships, I don’t think either of those describes his attitude. I mean... he’s human, right? Not that I’m against human-fae relationships, but are you sure that’s a complication you can mess with right now?”

Ugh, I sounded like a xenophobic parent, but that wasn’t what I meant. It was just that anyone we interacted with had a target on their backs, given the witches hunting us. And a human, especially if they weren’t warned ahead of time, was no match for a witch. Heck, most of us shifters had a hard time with a witch one-on-one. I survived my fight with three witches because they assumed I had backup and wanted to high-tail it out of there. Though I was a good fighter and had managed to survive the first two minutes of our battle, I wouldn’t have lasted much longer. As it was, I’d walked away from the fight badly wounded and needed three days to get back on my feet.

“He’s...he’s a healer, too. I need someone who can understand me in that way.” She looked to me, and I was surprised I didn’t swerve off the road from the sheer emotion in her eyes. “Look, I love all of you, but you’re warriors first and foremost. There are certain things you’ll never get, and he does.” Her voice warbled, and once again, she was looking out the window, depriving me of that captivating gaze.

Truly, how had I gone so many meals without noticing her? Without diving into the deepest conversations with her? I had locked myself away from too much of the world.

Then again, hadn’t Parker been telling me that since college? I knew he loved me, but I could tell he was frustrated with how uninterested I was in so many things. He insisted Emma was in love with me before she’d been mated with Theo, but that was silly. Surely if she had been at one point, I would have noticed. He’d also pointed out other women, but when I looked at them, I didn’t feel much of anything.

Or maybe it was that I didn’t *allow* myself to feel anything. Because feeling things was the gateway to so many sensations I feared. Because if I didn’t feel, if I didn’t desire, I could never be depressed about not having something or anxious about losing it.

I could never become my mother.

“Are you alright?” Savvy’s voice was soft, and I felt something cool against my hand on the steering wheel. Blinking, I realized that her hand was slightly resting over my own, a gentle kiss of comfort on a bleak night.

“I should be asking you that,” I replied.

She just shrugged. It almost made me want to shake her and tell her that she could let it go and could be upset around me, but I restrained myself. Even *I* knew better than that.

“It’s fine. I may have an ex now instead of a boyfriend, but it is what it is. I will adapt as I always have.”

While I admired the sentiment, it didn’t *feel* right. It was like I was watching a great injustice unfold right in front of me, and I didn’t know what to do. Give me a battle, and I could hold my own. But the nuances of balancing relationships in and outside a pack while navigating an alma’s heavy responsibilities were beyond me.

“Oh, Mahlan sent me another text!” she exclaimed.

Honestly, I was grateful for the reprieve. These days, everything seemed a little too raw and heavy for me all at once, especially without Parker. I was trying to be more independent and let my best friend live his own life, but it was all about baby steps. Not jumping into the deep end head-first.

“Any updates?” I asked.

“Oh my God! Yeah, there have been.” Savvy said as she scanned the text. “Ashlee, that young girl Lyssa helped rescue. She was with her friends at school when they were jumped by witches!”

“Jumped by witches?” I repeated, not quite believing it. “At a public school?”

“In the parking lot where they were hanging out after a game. That’s all the text says.”

I let out a long breath. While Jacobian and Hannah had handed a big defeat to the witches by killing the brothers who were behind things, and Emma, Sam, and Theo had killed another high-powered leader, we’d all known this couldn’t be the end. This the calm before the storm, and it seemed the witches were moving to strike again.

How disappointing.

But still, attacking children? One of them a girl we’d already rescued from their clutches? That was low, even for them.

Maybe it would be prudent to speed a little more than I was already.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this development killed the conversation, and we rode in a tense silence the rest of the way. I wanted to comfort Savannah, but I wasn’t sure what to say. Even if I came up with the perfect

line, she would be thrown back into chaos the moment she stepped out of my truck.

How exhausting for her.

“You gonna be okay?” I asked as we pulled up. I couldn’t let her out of my truck without saying *something*.

“Yeah. I always am. I’m just worried about Ashlee. She’s been through so much already, you know?”

I nodded. “She has.”

But then something strange happened. As I parked my truck, a visible change came over Savvy. She straightened, her face morphing into a comforting but restrained expression, and then exited my vehicle with her back straight.

I followed, curious, as she practically marched up to Mahlan.

“Permission to begin treatment, Alpha?”

“Permission granted,” Mahlan replied.

Without missing a beat, Savvy began to pull things from her purse and tend to the children. If I had to guess, I was witnessing the woman shift seamlessly into alma mode. I’d seen her as alma before, but it was quite the jolt to see her go from her more informal personality to her on-duty one.

Staring at her seemed a bit invasive, so I crossed to Theo. He was one of the people the text had required.

“Kaleb, what are you doing here?” Theo asked.

“Savvy was out on the town and wasn’t safe to drive, so I offered her a ride.”

“Wasn’t safe to drive?” he repeated.

“Yeah, a bit tipsy, you know?”

Realization crossed his face, and he nodded. “Right. She can get drunk. I’d forgotten.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “It’s a crazy coincidence that we crossed paths at the perfect time. Makes me feel a bit like luck is on our side.”

“Something needs to be,” Theo remarked, running a hand through his blond hair. “Because I thought things were improving until tonight.”

“You wanna give me the lowdown on what happened?”

“Sure, yeah. From what I’ve been told, Ashlee and her friends are a mix of cheerleaders, football players, and marching band kids. They were all planning on going to a fifth-quarter party, so they changed in their respective locker rooms and planned to meet behind the gym in this parking

lot. They were going to divvy everyone up among the cars of the three eighteen-year-olds.”

That was more information than I’d expected him to have, which was a good sign. That meant the kids were conscious enough to give pretty detailed reports.

“While they were deciding who was going with who, they were jumped.”

“That’s what I’m not getting. They were attacked by witches and survived?” I asked.

“Yes. You’re as surprised as I am, but it turns out that four football players, two cheerleaders, and two marching band members were shifters.”

“Whoa, eight of them?” I let out a light chuckle. “Well, that explains what band geeks and jocks are doing going to a party together.”

Theo shot me a look. “Weren’t you and Parker band geeks growing up?”

“No,” I corrected sharply. “*Parker* was a band geek. I just joined so I wouldn’t have to be separated from him for large chunks of the day.”

“I...you realize that doesn’t make it sound any better.”

“Maybe it does, maybe it doesn’t. But I believe we were talking about witches attacking innocent children?”

“Right. Well, there were only two witches, and they clearly weren’t ready for five pubescent wolves, two cougars, and an impundulu.”

I paused for a minute at that one, my brain ticking through most of the shifters I knew. “Wait, an impundulu? Like the shapeshifting African lightning bird? How did a shifter like that get here?”

“Foreign transfer program.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t know if you’re aware of this, but impundulus used to be known as witches’ familiars back in the day. Not the case anymore, but there still seems to be some sort of connection because the girl could sense the witches right before they appeared and knocked Ashlee away from a pretty powerful blast.”

He pointed to a Jeep that was on its side and up in flames, filling the air with an acrid smoke that had to be noticeable for several city blocks. I hoped our guys in the fire department were the ones who answered the call. Otherwise, there would be even more explaining to do.

“Wow. We need to send the impundulu and her host family the biggest gift basket we can manage.” I paused for a moment, considering. “Her host

family are shifters, right?”

“Yeah, they are. You remember Amanda Ryder, right? She’s a counselor here at the school and made sure to match foreign fae students with fae families here.”

“Word.” I nodded, feeling a bit sheepish that I hadn’t known that. While I was in the inner circle of our pack, I was terrible at paying attention to anything outside of fights and witches. I needed to do better.

“So, what are the injuries?” I asked.

“Honestly, not bad. Not nearly as horrendous as they’d be if it weren’t for the surprise shifters. There are some electrical burns from something the witches did with the cars—I think one of them cursed the lamp post to be their golem. And a few scrapes and bruises.”

“Wow, that isn’t bad at all. Maybe we should recruit these kids to fight the witches. They’re doing a better job than us.”

“Hah!” It was rare to hear Theo chuckle, especially at one of my jokes. It seemed his relationship with Emma was helping the guy loosen up. Ice Prince no more, that was for sure.

Now that I thought about it, everyone in the inner circle was pretty much matched up. Mahlan had Lyssa, the two of them newly married. Theo had Emma, and they were set to marry soon. Jacobian had Hannah, which had been a wild surprise to me. I hadn’t even known they were dating when BOOM, it came out that they were mated. And Parker, my best friend and non-biological sibling, might have Sam. That one was a wee bit up in the air, but the chemistry was undeniable.

“Hey, Kaleb!”

Speaking of Parker, his voice yanked my attention away. I jerked my head to see him jogging towards me.

“Oh, hey!” I shot right back. “What are you doing here?”

“Sam got called in to help with some memory-wiping of human kids. I didn’t really wanna stick around his place all alone.”

“You were at Sam’s place?” Theo asked. It was clear that he was aiming for a casual tone, but he didn’t pull it off by a long shot. It seemed even the stoic soon-to-be-official beta of our pack could be a Nosy Nelly.

Parker shot a wry look to our second-in-command. “Yes, Theo, I was. What of it?”

“Oh, nothing,” Theo said, making it clear that it wasn’t nothing. “How was the moped ride?”



“It was just fine, thank you for asking. The night air was actually rather crisp.”

“I’m sure it was.”

“Are you all done here?” Sam asked, practically waltzing over while swishing his iced coffee. How he’d carried that while driving a moped, I had no idea, but I assumed it was a witch thing. “Or should I let you two do whatever it is you’re doing and give the human kids’ memories a chance to solidify?”

“Right,” Theo said, clearing his throat. “The story we’re going with is that a transformer fell on the Jeep and exploded.”

“Oof, you sure on that one?” Sam asked, looking dubious. “It’s gonna cause trouble for the school.”

“We’re going to find a way for it to be a freak accident, thanks to our guys on the fire department. Then a mysterious donation will be made to the school to cover the costs.”

“That sounds groovy, then,” Sam said with a nod. “This is one of the few good schools in the poorer area of the city. It would be a shame if my own kind shut it down.” He wrinkled his nose. “Although they’re barely my kind. These witches you’re dealing with are...something else.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I remarked.

“Well, it’s easier to say than egotistical, xenophobic, bigoted assholes.”

His vehemence surprised me, and I snorted without intending to. Sam seemed like an alright guy for being a witch, but I’d always been confused about why he was so willing to be on our side rather than the witches attacking us. I supposed I had my answer.

“You’re right—that is easier to say,” I replied.

Sam winked and clicked his tongue at me, shooting a finger gun with his free hand before walking back to tend to the kids.

“You know,” I murmured, approaching Theo’s side, “if we’ve got such a high fae population in this school, maybe we should beef up the security. I don’t think we can surprise these witches twice if they decide to attack, and this place is a pretty easy target.”

“Huh,” Theo said. “You’re right about that, Kaleb.”

What was that—direct praise from Theo? It wasn’t that the guy disliked me; it was just that...well, I wasn’t an idea guy. I felt proud of myself that I hadn’t just fixated on Parker the moment he arrived and managed to stay a

part of the conversation. The urge was still there—to glom onto him. But I knew I should resist it. At least for now.

It was pretty sad that a twenty-nine-year-old man had to think about such things, but we all had our flaws. Mine just happened to be birthed out of some extreme trauma from childhood.

“I’ll see what we can do,” Theo said. “Maybe post some incognito guards around the perimeter. But given all that we’re guarding and the sheer size of this place, I don’t think we can do something comprehensive.”

“What about a volunteer force?” I ventured. “If there are a lot of fae here, there’s bound to be a lot of fae families who have a vested interest in protecting their children.”

“Yeah!” Parker added, full of enthusiasm as he clapped me on my back. “I think it’s been proven that the best way to fight these witches is variety. They can only handle so much at once. So if we’ve got fairies, succubae, shifters, druids, and the like involved, those witches will probably avoid this place.”

“That’s certainly a thought,” Theo said, rubbing his chin. “I need to talk to Amanda, but I think I recall her saying that a young banshee had just come into her own in the middle of a gym class. If she’s got family, a banshee matriarch could likely ward this entire place off.”

I let out a whistle. “We have a banshee clan in this city?”

“Unless I’m mistaken, yeah.”

Banshees were one of the oldest fae, known as sirens in ancient Greece. They were a powerful fae, and I’d never met one in person. I wasn’t keen on changing that. I was still too new at this whole socialization thing to potentially get on an ancient fae’s bad side.

“That would certainly do the trick, I think,” I remarked.

There was a lull in our conversation as the fire department arrived. Theo drifted off for a bit to talk to two of them. I assumed the firefighters were from our pack, but I couldn’t smell them through their thick clothing and suppressants. I wasn’t a fan of those little pills, but I understood why some of our number needed to take them. Firefighters had to run into all sorts of insane situations, and I imagined having their senses medically dulled to a tolerable level ensured they didn’t pass out amid raging fires.

Sam and Savvy were almost done healing by the time Theo returned, but I must have been on a roll because I’d had another thought in Theo’s absence.

“Hey, I got a question for you,” I said as the future beta approached. I tried not to be insulted when a surprised expression crossed his features. We all knew it wasn’t like me to volunteer information at a scene like this. Hell, it wasn’t usual for me to show up when I wasn’t requested to be there.

“What’s that?”

“This girl is the one Lyssa rescued, right? So, she was already on the witches’ radar?”

“Yeah, she was. We thought maybe might have written her off as a loss, considering they’ve made no attempt at retribution.”

“Until tonight.”

“Yeah, until tonight.”

“Alright...” I said, buying myself some time to order my words correctly. I *felt* like I had an important point to make, but my brain stuttered on mapping it all out. “So, we have this very important child who we were worried was a target of our enemy, but she was being allowed to go to a party as a *minor* without a single guard or any of us in the inner circle knowing?”

Not for the first time in the past hour, Theo froze, his eyes widening as he processed what I was saying. “I...holy shit.”

“I didn’t even think of that!” Parker exclaimed, his shock much more apparent. I’d always loved that about my best friend. While I was the more reserved one, afraid to show my emotions or be ruled by them, he always felt so sincerely and deeply. Maybe if I didn’t have the constant fear of becoming sick like my mother, I could feel freely, too.

But science or magic needed to come a long way for that to happen.

“I realize I’m not a childcare expert and that teens will be teens,” I said. “Maybe we allow her to go to this party so she can have a normal childhood, but maybe we also, I dunno, make sure there are some guards at the game. Or even her guardian.” I looked around. “Because I’m pretty sure whoever they are, they ain’t here.”

“She’s been staying with an older woman in our pack who had a spare room. We figured it would be safer than one of our houses. Her name was... was...Mary Graham, I think?”

“I could be wrong, but isn’t that her bright purple car pulling in right now?” Parker pointed, and I followed his finger’s direction to see an obnoxiously painted vehicle squealing into the parking lot. “Yeah, that’s her. I’d never forget a car that old and that ugly.”

“I’m sure there’s some collector somewhere who would drop-kick you for that,” Theo said wryly, stepping toward the car and holding his hand up in greeting.

Thankfully, the old biddy had the sense to slam on the breaks before colliding with our future beta.

But before Theo could address her, she was out of the car and stomping towards Ashlee, who was standing beside Savvy and watching worriedly as one of her friends got bandaged up. The old woman moved impressively fast, though that was part of being a shifter.

“I told you to be home before sundown!” she shouted at Ashlee. “Do you have any idea how stup-”

“That’s quite enough,” Sam said, standing up from the youngster he’d been helping. “There’s no need to speak like that to anyone here.”

The woman sniffed. I didn’t like the expression that crossed her wrinkled features. “And who are you, exactly?”

“You’d best change the way you ask that question, or you won’t like the answer.”

“I know a witch when I smell one!”

“Too bad you don’t know manners as intimately.”

Oof, Sam was so quick with the quips, never skipping a beat. It was pretty impressive, although not exactly productive.

Thankfully, things were interrupted by a honk at the other end of the parking lot, and Mahlan’s car came peeling in. It was pretty surprising that it had taken him so long to arrive, but maybe he’d been at the edge of the city on a date or other pack business.

He pulled up behind Mary’s car. While I’d expected him to stride out with his usual gravitas, it was Lyssa who came whipping out.

“What the hell is going on here?” she snarled in a way I’d never heard her do before. For a moment, I wasn’t sure who she was talking to until she marched up to Mary.

“What’s going on is this brat has no respect for-” Mary began.

“No!” Lyssa snapped again. Although she was young herself, there was plenty of command to her tone. She was an alpha’s mate through and through. “You do *not* get to talk about her like that.”

Lyssa’s gaze softened as she looked at Ashlee, the poor pup looking stressed as all get out. Ashlee was what...fourteen? Fifteen? I couldn’t

imagine going through some of the things she'd gone through, and I hadn't exactly had an easy childhood. "Ashlee, why don't you come over here?"

The girl nodded and ran to Lyssa's side, hugging her tightly. I was struck again by just how *young* they were. They'd lived so little, yet most of their lives had been filled with pain and things that no one should have to experience.

"Mary," Lyssa began, sounding much calmer but no less steely, "I don't think this arrangement is working out. We thank you for your time, but I will have full custody of Ashlee from now on."

"I...you...she!" The woman let out sounds that could only be described as bluster. "Fine! I'm done wasting my energy on this! Don't ask anything of my family ever again."

That was when Mahlan stepped forward, towering over the older woman. "Is that really how you wish to speak to my mate?"

At that, the woman finally seemed to realize who she was barking at. Her face went pale, and she muttered something.

"What was that?" Mahlan asked, his voice flat and commanding at the same time.

"Apologies for my outburst. It's been a very stressful night. I'd like to go home now, if that's alright."

"You may take your leave," Mahlan said. "However, perhaps you should think about your position in this pack and the responsibility that you asked for. I will make sure you still receive this month's payment for fostering Ashlee, so you won't have to worry about upsetting your budget."

"Yes, Alpha. Thank you, Alpha."

She hurried off, much to my relief.

"The humans have all been dealt with," Sam said, waltzing up to Mahlan and Lyssa. "Once I say the spell trigger, they'll all have the same memory that Theo coached me on. Y'all should tell the shifter kids what it is, though. Figured they were probably a bit too stressed to learn it right now."

That made sense. The poor things had already been through a major battle, and most of them didn't even have chest hair yet.

Savvy approached us, her face just as serious as when I had left her. "My suggestion is that we clear out the humans first, but we should have a talk with all the fae parents and set up a contact list in case of future

troubles or needs. These kids seem to be doing alright, but they've experienced a trauma, so they're going to deal with it in different ways."

She sounded so assured, so calmly confident, that I couldn't help but be impressed. Had I been underestimating Savvy ever since she joined our pack, or was I just stupid? Hard to say, because while I was proud of all I'd suggested since arriving, it wasn't like any of my comments were genius-level plays.

"Thank you for that advice, Savannah," Mahlan said. "I'll relay it to Theo and make sure he enforces it."

"You're welcome, Alpha."

"Sooooo," Sam said, draining the last of his iced coffee. "I realize I'm not a part of your pack, but I think it's time we bring the council in on this. Or at least contact them."

That didn't sound like a half-bad idea, but Mahlan shook his head. "That we can discuss at family dinner. For now, let's clean up this shitshow."

I was confused by his reasoning. But hey, he was the alpha, and I was one of his bruisers. I was all about the tearing and shredding, less about the strategy.

There was a chorus of "'Yes, Alpha," and everyone dispersed to finish their various tasks. Sam approached the kids who were most likely to say the trigger word for the spell, Savvy was doing final checks on all the injured teens, and Theo went back to the firefighters, EMTs, and every other official person who was assembled.

I was sure there would be *so* much bureaucracy for Theo to deal with in the next few days. I did not envy him that. I could do a lot of things, but I wasn't remotely interested in paperwork.

Really, the only reason I was part of the inner circle and enjoyed the wealth all our investments brought in was that Parker had dragged me along. Not that I'd resisted much. After all, I'd spent more than a decade following him because that was what felt safest.

It took quite a while for things to be handled, and it was late into the night by the time the contact group was set up, and everyone was briefed. But I was proud of how warm and soothing Mahlan was as he addressed the terrified fae parents who'd shown up fearing the worst. I'd heard horror stories of other abusive or distant alphas, but we certainly had one of the good ones.

“You need a ride?” I asked Savvy, crossing to her.

“Oh, I’m plenty sober now. You don’t need to worry about me.”

For someone whose job was taking care of people, Savvy seemed to have trouble accepting help for herself. That wasn’t a bad thing if she liked being independent, but it didn’t come across that way to me. In fact, it seemed to me that she didn’t feel like she *deserved* help.

And that was a right shame.

“Sober or not, I was your ride over here, so I should at least return you to your car.”

“Actually,” Mahlan said, coming up behind us. “I want a full inner circle meeting at my place. I know it’s a bit of a drive, but it’s more than necessary.”

“Of course, alpha,” Savvy said quickly, but I felt bad for her. She was still dressed like she was on a fancy date, but there was dirt on her knees and palms from where she’d knelt while taking care of the kids.

She didn’t seem to mind, though, and we said our temporary goodbyes and promises to meet up at Mahlan’s house. I wasn’t worried about getting to Mahlan’s too early, as I needed to get gas. It always amused me to do something so mundane after dealing with things that went bump in the night, but such was the life of a Silent Ridge shifter.

“May I ask you a question?” Savannah asked once we pulled out of the lot. I noticed the others getting into their cars in my rearview mirror.

“What’s that?” I noticed her voice was low, as if she was worried about someone overhearing us.

“What’s all this about the council? It felt like there was...tension.”

Tension was one way to put it. “I don’t know why, but Theo and Mahlan have been at odds about bringing in the council for a while.”

“Why are they disagreeing?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not going to lie—we found out some pretty upsetting stuff while visiting Lyssa’s original pack. The one she was stolen from.”

“You did? Like what?”

I probably wasn’t supposed to tell her; inner circle business was inner circle business. But Savvy had just spent what was supposed to be her date night tending to terrified children, using her blood to heal them. How could I say no to her? It just wouldn’t be right.

“Well, the council really dropped the ball with them,” I began. “The pack asked for help several times with the random disappearances—begged

them really—and they sent investigators who did nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yeah, nothing. Poked around, asked invasive questions, then cleared out with so much as a kiss on their boobos. They weren’t exactly useful back when Alpha Sawyer died, either. They arrived at his funeral, gave some advice, money, and food, then bye-bye again.”

I saw Savvy’s frown in the corner of my eye, and I hated that expression on her. She already had so much on her plate, and I felt like she deserved to have an easier life. But as far as I knew, she worked full-time as a nurse and was always going. Was that by choice, or was she forced to in order to pay bills? I wasn’t a leader or an alpha, but that just seemed wrong to me.

“That’s nothing like the council I was raised believing in,” she murmured. “Have there been significant changes, or was the pack I was raised in particularly fundamental?”

“Well, I can’t really comment on the social stance of your birth pack, but I think there have been a couple of deaths and retirements on the council. There are more of your standard European witches on it than before. Usually, it’s balanced between many different fae from all over the world.”

“Do you think some of the imbalance we’re experiencing is because of that shift in the council?”

“What? No, that wouldn’t make sense. Especially considering that the Lyssa thing was several years ago. Way before some of the deaths happened.”

“Huh.” Savvy seemed to think for a long moment, and I let the conversation drop. Which was pretty good timing since we reached the gas station. I pulled in, throwing my truck into park at one of the further pumps.

“You want anything from inside?” I asked.

Savvy licked her lips, and I couldn’t help but watch the motion of her tongue as she did. I knew she wasn’t doing it on purpose, but it was an awfully appealing sight.

*Focus, Kaleb, focus!*

I didn’t need to be ogling our alma after she’d had an extremely stressful night. She deserved my respect. Sure, I was attracted to a beautiful woman as much as the next guy, but I only did hook-ups. And Savvy? She deserved more than just a wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am.



Why was I even thinking of her in that way? She was our *alma* and a successful nurse. She had better options than a wolf like me, a ticking timebomb who never learned to regulate my emotions and relied on my best friend as my permanent emotional crutch.

Yeah. A winner, I was not.

“I wouldn’t say no to a giant bottle of cold water. Alma blood magic works up quite a thirst.”

“Alright then. I can do that.”

Hurrying in, I got myself an energy drink—not that it worked on me, but it was a habit of mine—and then Savvy’s water. I paid, pumped the gas, then got back into my truck.

“Here you are,” I said, handing the water to her.

She took it gratefully, shooting me a grin that looked genuinely grateful. “Thanks a million. I appreciate it.”

“Sure, any time.”

With that, we were on the road again. I almost headed to Mahlan’s old place, his high-end condo, but I caught myself and headed toward his new house on the lake. Emma and Theo were still working on their house, but since their place needed some serious renovations, they were bouncing between their three properties.

It was strange that two of the five of us in the circle seemed to be moving on to the next chapter in their lives, becoming real adults (™), while I still lived in an apartment with a roommate. But considering how things were going with Sam and Parker, who knew how much longer I’d have a roommate?

That thought saddened me. I knew it shouldn’t, that I should be happy that my best friend and brother was experiencing a healthy, supportive relationship. But the idea made me feel so...*alone*, which made me feel ashamed. I was an adept warrior in the middle of a guerilla conflict with a group of rogue witches, not a newly moved-out college kid worried about losing his security blanket.

Ugh.

Thankfully, Savvy didn’t seem to notice my bad mood. She mostly gazed out the window again as she sipped her water.

“I have another question,” she broke the silence.

“Yes?”

“If the council is so useless, why call them at all? Seems like they just create a bunch of red tape and leave.”

“That’s pretty much what they do. But Theo thinks we should call them because they’ll be mighty pissed if they think the situation is serious enough to tell them, and we didn’t. It could even make them suspicious of us, which is not what we want.”

“That’s...complicated.”

“Yeah, exactly. So you can understand why Mahlan’s pretty reticent to call them. And it’s really his decision, no one else’s.”

“He is our alpha,” she said. “But what would you do if you were in charge?”

Me in charge? Ha, a laughable idea. I wasn’t cut out for such things. “I dunno. I hate being on the defensive, so I would probably contact them, guns blazing, full truth, full opinion.”

“Really? You’d tell them you think they’re full of shit and cause more trouble than they help?”

“Whoa, whoa, I don’t know if I would say it like *that*,” I said with a laugh. “I don’t have much defense, but I’ve got enough to know that’s not the way to go about things. You know, not unless I want our pack wiped off the face of the earth.”

Savvy chuckled, and I found I liked the sound. She had a sweet laugh, one that made me feel clever.

“Well, I suppose it’s a good thing neither of us are alphas, then,” she said, leaning her head against the seat and settling in a little.

“Yeah, definitely. Not my bag at all.”

I’d always been glad I never had an alpha’s responsibilities. I had way too much I was dealing with on my own. But as I drove Savvy along, thinking about that dick she’d been dating and how much she gave to our pack, I was beginning to think I understood an alpha’s whole protective thing. Maybe I was relatively new to noticing things outside Parker and myself, but I noticed Savvy.

How could I not?

## Chapter 3

---

## *Savannah*

I settled in for a fairly lengthy ride to Mahlan and Lyssa's lake house, which only made me think of my conversation with Jamie. I'd been surprised when he'd been so negative about having kids, as we'd both mentioned little things in the past about future progeny. He'd even said that he wanted to name his firstborn son after his father and that he would never force his children to go through med school unless they wanted to.

Frankly, having a family was incredibly important to me.

Even if I didn't love children and want them, I had a duty as an alma to reproduce. I knew no one in the pack would ever, *ever* force me to have kids, but the truth was that there just weren't enough almas to go around. We were a dying breed, so to speak. The alma trait was carried on the X chromosome, so usually, only daughters could inherit it. There were exceptions, of course, like sons with Klinefelter syndrome, trans folks, children with conflicting androgen sensitivity, and any other variant that came with fae sex markers. Still, the vast majority of almas were cis-women.

Also, not every daughter I could have was guaranteed to be an alma. It was like being left-handed, in a way. Was it likely my daughters would be almas? Yes. But it wasn't guaranteed.

So that was the crux of it. I wanted and felt like I *needed* to have biological children—and as many as my heart and mental health could handle. I never would have gotten involved with Jamie if I'd thought he was anti-children.

But I acknowledged that he *was* having a really bad night. He probably didn't mean what he'd said. And I *had* been exceptionally flaky lately, so it

wasn't unreasonable for him to fear I wasn't responsible or present enough to be a mother.

But how could I have kids with someone to whom I couldn't reveal the truth of my life?

I was putting the cart before the horse. He was absolutely right about that and had every right to dismiss that idea.

Didn't he?

"Is that a deer up the road?" Kaleb asked, leaning forward and squinting. A deer wouldn't be nonsensical, considering we were in the suburbs and about to go onto the country road that would lead to the lake community our pack was building.

"Is it?" I asked, putting thoughts of Jamie to the side and scanning the rode as well.

"*Holy shit!* That's not a deer!"

Kaleb slammed on the brakes. I was very grateful that I always put my seatbelt on. It locked tight as I was thrown forward, digging into my chest but keeping me safe as we screeched to a stop.

I shook my head and looked to the road to see none other than Sam sitting on his moped in the middle of the road.

"What the hell!" Kaleb yelled, rolling down his window. I didn't think I'd ever heard so many words from him in one day, especially without his partner in crime. He and Parker were inseparable, yet here I was, witnessing them be *separated*. "You nearly gave me a heart attack! What are you doing just sitting out here like roadkill?"

"Whoa, calm your vibe there, Wolfenstein," Sam shot back, already walking his moped to the back of the truck. "I'm here because it's freakin' cold out, and I wasn't planning on zooming out to the lake house while freezing my ass off."

"What happened to Parker?" Kaleb's head swiveled this way and that, his nostrils flaring slightly. I couldn't blame him for his concern, considering everything our pack had gone through lately, but surely Sam would be much more upset if something had happened to the youngest member of the inner circle.

"He did what you wolves always do—decided to run around like a damn animal with some of those shifter kids to mellow them out." Through the rearview mirror, I saw Sam use his magic to lift his moped and lay it down in the bed of Kaleb's truck. Despite the witch's grouching, I heard a

subtle fondness in his voice. Despite all his bluster and too-cool-for-school attitude, he really seemed to care for Parker. “I always warned myself to never get involved with someone who was into cardio, and yet here I am!”

With his moped secured, Sam marched up to the side of the car, threw open the back passenger, and climbed into the second seat of the extended cab. I couldn’t help but wonder if he would have climbed over me to sit in the middle if Kaleb had a smaller truck. Sam was such an interesting mix of socially adept, inept, entitled, and jaded. I often wondered about his full story and what tragedies had led him to be the way he was. All I knew was that he was quick as a whip and had helped Lyssa learn enough to survive on her own after she’d been abandoned.

“Can I help you?” Kaleb asked somewhat tersely.

Although I was still exhausted from the day, I sensed an odd tension between the two. Or maybe it was just from Kaleb’s side. Was there something going on I didn’t know about? A lover’s triangle?

As far as I knew, Kaleb wasn’t gay. He had a deep brotherly bond with Parker borne out of some pretty horrific trauma.

“Now that you mention it, we’re not completely off the main drag, and most of your pack is still running like it’s fun or something,” the green witch said, either ignoring Kaleb’s obvious sarcasm or not picking up on it. It was hard to tell with him. “If you want to stop for coffee and liquor, I would not object.”

Kaleb looked to me, and I almost blushed for some reason. It certainly wasn’t the first time I’d interacted with the guy. I’d patched him back together after he was attacked by witches, after all, but it felt like he was seeing me in a new way.

I knew my fellow packmates didn’t mean it, but so many times, they didn’t perceive me as anything else than their mystical alma. I wasn’t *Savvy*, and I wasn’t a shifter with no animal form; I was just a part of their pack they depended on but didn’t really understand.

But not Kaleb. At least not since he’d rescued me from my failing date. Or maybe it was all in my head. Maybe I was making it up to ease loneliness and guilt.

“Do you want to grab anything before we head to Mahlan’s?” Kaleb asked me. “I don’t know what food he has there.”

That made sense. Because naturally, there *would* be food—he and Lyssa were shifters, after all, and had high caloric needs from the wild beasts

living inside them. But there was no guarantee they'd have things I'd like or even be able to eat. A fridge full of cow livers would be amazing for a pack of hungry werewolves but wouldn't do much for me.

"Yeah, it would probably be wise to pick up some snacks."

"If you don't mind turning around a bit, that one grocery store with the coffee shop is about five minutes away from here," Sam offered. "You know, the richy-rich one that's not on any bus lines so they don't have to worry about poor people disgracing their door."

"What about the liquor store?" Kaleb asked.

"They've got wine there. That'll do."

Kaleb nodded, seeming to relax now that he knew nothing was wrong with Parker and Sam's sudden appearance was due to irritation, not an emergency. "Yeah, that's fine, then."

The mood seemed to quickly recover as we drove, with Kaleb's tone much less terse when he addressed the witch again.

"By the way, thank you for coming in to help, Sam."

I couldn't help but agree. Despite not being part of our pack, Sam had been vital in helping us get through these tough times. I knew it was mostly out of loyalty for Lyssa, but I was still very grateful.

"Oh, you know me," Sam said with a grin. "I'm a sucker for kicked puppies. I couldn't not help the younglings."

Kaleb snorted. "You're barely older than them."

"*Excuse you.* Despite this baby face, I am a grown man, and those are children. I realize if you weren't a shifter, you'd age like mayonnaise, but you better come correct for me."

Kaleb chuckled. "You're gonna be one of those witches who looks the same age until they're a hundred, aren't you?"

"You better believe it. This face is art and needs time to be truly appreciated."

"Well, Parker seems to appreciate it well enough," Kaleb said, grinning wickedly.

Wait, was Kaleb playing wingman for his best friend? I couldn't tell if he was for the Sam and Parker getting together or against it. Maybe... maybe it was something we could talk about in the future.

"He certainly does," Sam said primly but smiling cheekily.

Awww, how cute.

The sweetness of new love made me think of my failing one. Against my better judgment, I pulled out my phone and turned it on.

As it booted up, I winced at the notifications loading one right after another. Oh, dear...

Dreading what I was going to see but knowing I had to, I went through them. Missed call. Missed Call. Missed call x 10. Yikes.

Naturally, all of them were from Jamie. That was certainly intimidating, but my dread only worsened when I saw text message after text message notification flit across my screen, one right after the other.

Fuck.

I was tempted to turn my phone back off—maybe chuck it out the window while I was at it—but I couldn't. For one, Mahlan needed to get a hold of me at all times. And I was the one who ditched Jamie on our date, not vice versa. I was the one in the wrong.

So, holding my breath, I opened the first message.

*You're unbelievable, you know that?*

*This is insane! Answer your phone!*

*Your stuff is on the fucking curb. Come get it if you don't want it to be snatched up.*

*I can't believe you turned out to be a cheating liar. Running off with some dude in the middle of our date?! I never would have thought you were capable of that!*

It was so much worse than I'd thought. Jamie thought I was *cheating* on him? I would *never*! That wasn't me, and I was hurt that he would ever think such a thing.



Then again...how could he not jump to that conclusion, given my actions? The random ditching, the family emergencies, the not wanting him to meet my family and most of my friends. Looking back, I had been acting suspiciously.

Despite my better judgment, I started to reply, trying to think of what I could say to fix the awful situation I'd gotten myself into.

*I didn't cheat on you, I swear it! I'm so sorry I've been flaky lately, but I really was out helping friends. I need to make you a priority, and I'm sorry I haven't, but I promise I can be better. I can DO better.*

I sent the text and held my breath. I didn't expect a reply right away, sure that Jamie had either turned off his phone in anger or was sleeping. But to my surprise, I got a text a few minutes later.

*You must think I'm a fucking moron.*

*Are you really so narcissistic that you think I'd fall for your shit?*

*You're something else, aren't you?*

The vitriol in his words stabbed right through my heart. I felt myself tear up again. I didn't want to cry in front of Sam, but Kaleb immediately noticed the change in my demeanor. Damn wolf senses.

Jamie had always been my biggest shot at normalcy. Sure, some part of my existence would always be filled with horror, adventure, and craziness; that was just the life of an *alma*. But Jamie represented peace, stability, and a partner who understood me. Though I felt plenty respected in our pack, I knew not a single one of them saw me as a romantic prospect. I was an *alma*, after all. Something different. Something set apart. Not a woman or a possible mate.

Ugh, my thoughts were spiraling. But how could they not when everything I'd worked for was slipping through my fingers?

*How are you going to show your face at work? Did you think of that?*  
*I deserve so much better than this.*  
*You're so fucking selfish!*

Breath hitching, I put the phone face-down in my lap. It was clear Jamie needed more time. But we could work through it. Sure, he was being kind of a jerk, but it was mostly my fault. He was such a sweetheart, really. I was just bringing out the worst in him.

As I breathed in through my nose to calm myself, I noticed the truck had slowed to a crawl. We'd reached the grocery store. Had five minutes already passed?

It had, but thankfully, I used the time it took Kaleb to find a parking spot to pull myself together. I didn't need to let everyone in on my little personal drama; it would make me look so unprofessional. I'd only started to get closer to some of the inner circle. I didn't want to ruin it by appearing dramatic.

Besides, if they knew I was dating a human, they would have lots of questions—questions I didn't want to answer. Was that selfish of me? Probably.

Together, we headed into the store, but as soon as we were inside, Sam split off from us. "Meet y'all at the cash registers."

I nodded, and Kaleb guided me to what I guessed was the bakery and dessert section. I had never been to this store—it was indeed high-end and ritzy—but it was clear that he had.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked once Sam was out of earshot. We were tucked between a shelf and an overly large display for some sort of organic kombucha, which gave us as much privacy as one could expect in a grocery store.

I didn't want to cry, but the hot tears welled up on their own. I felt them carve their burning, stinging tracks down my cheeks.

"Aww, come on now," Kaleb said softly, sounding so concerned for someone who was essentially a stranger. "Is all this over a human?"

“Yes, it’s over a human,” I said bitingly. “He was one of the few people who always seemed to get me. And he *wanted* me. You know I’ve been single my entire life up until him? And he’s a doctor! He’s smart, and skilled, and he saves lives!”

“I’m having a hard time believing that,” he said gently, pulling a pack of tissues from his pocket. “I’m sure a beautiful woman like you has had guys chasing you for ages.”

He thought I was beautiful? He’d said it so matter-of-factly. I...I had never thought of myself that way.

But at the same time, he was dead wrong, and I felt anger bubbling over that he was telling me what my lived experience was.

“No, they haven’t, Kaleb. I think I would know that better than you. At best, maybe a guy or two has been curious, but only with me as an oddity.”

“What? How?”

While I appreciated how incredulous he sounded, I wasn’t sure what he wasn’t getting. “I’m an *alma*, Kaleb! I can’t shift like the rest of the pack. I work all the time, and I have to be ready at a moment’s notice to give my blood.” I felt myself picking up speed, but I wasn’t policing my tone like I usually did. “I can’t go on pack runs; I’m just expected to stand there with my guards, all alone. Lyssa’s first run was the only time I haven’t been alone since I joined your pack.”

Kaleb opened his mouth as if he was going to speak, but I wasn’t done talking. I’d had such a bad day, with this night going completely off the rails. I was tired of bottling things up.

“When was the last time you ever heard of someone in your pack dating an alma, huh? The last alma was a widow, right? And wasn’t her husband a human she’d fallen in love with back in the twenties, and she outlived him by a huge margin? But not a single one of your pack tried to court her.”

Finally, I petered out, feeling silly instead of vindicated. I was in the middle of a grocery store complaining that no one wanted to date me while members of our pack had been kidnapped to have their blood drained to heal a human madman.

“I...” Kaleb swallowed hard, and I braced myself for him to tell me I was being ridiculous.

But instead, he gently pulled me into a hug. “I’m sorry, Savvy. I didn’t realize how lonely being an alma could be.”

He was...acknowledging my situation? He wasn't telling me I was stupid or that my priorities were messed up? That I shouldn't be focusing on something that didn't matter in the grand scheme of things?

I let myself melt into his hug for a minute. I hadn't realized how starved I was for physical contact. I touched my patients a lot—that was a big part of the alma process—but laying healing hands on a patient was far different than receiving a genuinely comforting hug.

“Don't get me wrong,” I murmured wetly. “Being an alma is a blessing. But it's also so isolating. Growing up, I didn't know whether I would ever get a wolf or healing powers, and once I got healing powers, I was handed a future full of responsibility and bleeding to save others' lives.

“And I understand I've only been a part of your pack for a few years and that I joined during a time of incredible stress with the death of your former alma and then Sawyer, but...” I heaved a sigh, my voice trembling despite my efforts to stop it. “It's just so much sometimes.”

“It sounds like it. It really does.” Kaleb gave me a deep, comforting squeeze, then took a step back, his large, warm hands remaining on my arms. The simple action was strangely assuring, like a reminder that I wasn't alone, that I was connected to him and, by extension, the pack, even if it sometimes felt like there was so much space between us. “I may not ever be in your exact situation, but trust me, Savvy. I understand a lot of where you're coming from.”

Once again, I found myself marveling at his easy acceptance. I'd always assumed that anyone I ever confided would tell me to suck it up or judge me for whining. But Kaleb acted like he understood.

Was...was it the trauma he'd been through when he was so young? I didn't know all of it, just that his mother had lost a long fight with mental illness. There was obviously a lot I wasn't privy to, but when I looked into his eyes while we stood in the overpriced grocery store, I saw someone who knew how I felt.

Maybe I didn't have to be as alone as I thought.

“Hey, I know I can't fix this right now,” he continued, his voice still so soft and tender. “But I can distract you until you get home and process. So, how about some cookies and maybe one of those rotisserie chickens they have here?”

My stomach growled like he'd been speaking directly to it, and we broke into laughter. My spiraling depression dissipated, at least for the

moment. It was nice to share a chuckle with him, and I found myself nodding.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Alright then.”

In a move I never expected from him, Kaleb gently took the hanky from me. For a moment, I thought he wanted it back, but then his large, warm hand was gently cupping my chin, tilting my face up to his so his other hand blot at my cheeks with the hanky.

*Holy shit!*

I froze, and his face filled my vision, the store falling away. I wasn't even breathing, just experiencing the moment as he tenderly wiped away any evidence of my tears. He didn't even seem to realize what he was doing, so maybe it wasn't even that big of a deal. Maybe it was all in my head. But even if it was, the moment felt so incredibly intimate. More than making out or flirting. More than sending cheeky glances across the room.

I felt *cherished*.

Heat rose up my neck, then to my cheeks, and I found myself looking at Kaleb in an entirely different light. I'd always known he was handsome, but he was just an attachment to the much more personable Parker.

But now?

Now it was like I was perceiving him for the first time as his own person. How had I missed such a sweet and caring man? He was-

*I can't believe you turned out to be a cheating liar. Running off with some dude in the middle of our date?! I never would have thought you were capable of that!*

Jamie's words seared through my mind, and it took all my willpower not to recoil from Kaleb. What was I doing? There was no reason for me to feel so intensely about someone just wiping my face, especially when I had a partner.

I needed to get a grip.

Somehow, I managed to control myself until he finished dabbing at my face, then I quickly turned away. “I believe you mentioned cookies?”

He let out a low chuckle, but it still sent chills up my spine. “Yeah, I did. This way.”

We ended up filling Kaleb’s arms with far too much stuff, but every time I mentioned something looked good, he would scoop it up and give me a cheeky grin. Naturally, I told him he was getting too much, but my complaints sounded hollow even to me. Especially when I was eyeing the passionfruit custard tart he was holding.

By the time we got to the rotisserie chickens, I had given up on pretending I wasn’t ridiculously excited to stuff my face. While I couldn’t eat like my wolf brethren, my diet was still more caloric than the average human woman’s. I generally needed three to four thousand calories on a work day, and more if I had to use healing magic.

“What are you doing?” Kaleb asked as I happily grabbed a plastic container for the delicious, slow-cooked chicken.

“Um...” I murmured, at a loss for words. Was I being too greedy? Had I crossed some invisible threshold I didn’t know about?

*You’re so fucking selfish!*

I swore my body wanted to throw itself into a full-on convulsion atop the floor, but somehow I managed to grit my teeth and appear almost normal. Thankfully, if Kaleb noticed my little glitch, he didn’t mention it. Instead, he just affixed me with his cheeky, devilish grin.

“Get two.”

Oh. *Oh, goodness.* I blushed, embarrassed by my visceral reaction, but I played it off like I was amused as we headed to the cashier.

The look on her face as Kaleb dumped an ungodly amount of expensive sweets, treats, and other aperitifs was hilarious. I wished I had a way to record her reaction and show the others. But filming a random woman at her work would be creepy, so I settled for memorizing everything about her hilarious expression.

Despite the insane amount of food, the cashier got through them relatively fast, and we met up with Sam by the little bench by the door. I always liked to call it the “daddy bench,” where I imagined fathers would

sit and play on their phones while mothers got caught in a Sunday conversation by the door with someone from their church or job.

“I don’t know how you’re functional without any sort of stimulant in you,” Sam said before sucking down an impressive stream of coffee through his straw. I wasn’t judging, but I spotted another empty coffee cup beside him. “That was my warm coffee,” he said, noticing where my eyes fell before shaking the iced drink in his hand. “This is my dessert.”

“How are you not having a heart attack?” Kaleb asked, sounding genuinely concerned. “Witches aren’t resistant to caffeine like shifters, right?”

“No, we’re not,” Sam answered. “But we’re not really supposed to stay conscious after a lot of magic work. We need to slumber and reconnect our energy to the earth, or something like that. So, if Mr. Alpha Big Boy Sir wants me conscious at his place,” Sam raised his iced coffee, “then stimulants it is.”

“Hmmm.” Kaleb didn’t seem pleased by the answer but didn’t argue. He pulled out his keys, shifting the impressive bundle of bags he was holding into a single hand. “Ready to head out?”

“Please,” Sam said, heaving a sigh. “Get me off my feet, my wolfy friend!”

“Ha, I can do that.”

“You’re doing the Lord’s work!”

We headed out together, Kaleb unlocking the car doors so Sam could hustle in. I felt like Kaleb wanted to open my door for me, but he had to load all our grocery bags into the crate in the back.

Climbing in, I buckled up and turned in my seat to ask Sam what snacks he’d gotten in his lone bag. But the witch’s eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling in a sluggish rhythm.

Wow, he really was tired. I was also exhausted from healing and needed some calories in me ASAP, but I wasn’t quite instantly-falling-asleep- in-the-back-of-a-truck-tired.

“Snack?” Kaleb asked as he slid into the driver’s seat, passing me a brownie. Was it nutritionally dense? No. But did I want it? Abso-fucking-lutely.

“Yes!” I said happily, practically snatching it from him. For a fleeting moment, I was worried he would think I was rude or be put off by my enthusiasm, but he just chuckled.

“We’ll have to get some healthy food in you at Mahlan’s. For now, I figured the sugar would help.”

“You’re not wrong about that.”

I took a huge bite as he started the car and exited the parking lot. We were much quieter on the rest of the ride—me working on my moist and thick brownie; Sam snoring softly, only to jerk away every so often, take another long sip of his coffee, and pass out again. All the while, Kaleb seemed lost in his thoughts.

I couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking about. Was it the woman from the bar? He’d said she was a contact from another pack, so I didn’t think they’d been on a date, but I couldn’t help but wonder why they’d met at such a nice place and why she’d been dressed up. Maybe they were pulling double duty? Or maybe they had their own secret relationship going on.

After all, wasn’t I doing the same thing?

That thought didn’t sit well with me, so I decided to focus on my brownie and recover my energy. Who knew how long the meeting at Mahlan’s would go?

I shoved the last bite into my mouth as we pulled up to Mahlan and Lyssa’s lake house. It had really come together since their wedding, with Lyssa planting a flowerbed in the front yard and a small garden in the back. I was impressed that she’d had the time between school, her job, and getting used to life as a fully realized shifter, but whenever I brought it up, she would just look at me and say something about pots and kettles. She was a cheeky one, that Lyssa.

I swallowed and washed the brownie down with a bottle of water I’d grabbed at the store, draining it as Kaleb parked. Either Sam was lingering at the edge of sleep, or the sudden cut-off of the engine roused him, because he yawned from the back.

“Thanks for the ride, Kaleberino,” he said, barely decipherable through his yawning. “I’ll get the moped out of the back when I leave.”

“No problem,” Kaleb said with that mischievous smile. “Maybe next time, don’t forget your broom.”

Sam paused as he exited the truck, which looked pretty hilarious, and tilted his head back until it was almost upside down to glare at Kaleb. Boy, the *look* he gave the shifter could melt steel beams.



“You think you’re clever, but would someone clever antagonize someone who has access to where you sleep and an open invitation from your roommate?”

Kaleb’s grin only grew wider, and I realized I was seeing how the two bantered with each other. “Noted.”

“That’s what I thought.”

With a very prim sniff, Sam returned his head to its upright position and got out of the truck, heading inside with his bag in hand.

Once he was out of sight, Kaleb turned to me, and I suddenly found myself seen again. How could he look at me like that and make me feel more visible than I’d been in years?

“Are you alright to go in?”

Not if he kept looking at me like *that*. But I didn’t say that. Instead, I took a deep breath, centered myself, and nodded.

“I am, thank you.”

“Are you sure? We don’t have to hurry in. You can tell by the cars that we’re still waiting for folks.”

“I’m still a bit hungry, so I’d love to go in and tear into one of those rotisserie chickens. I’m not gonna lie—it smelled heavenly in the store.”

“Oh, yeah,” Kaleb agreed. “I can smell them even from the crate, and they’re mouthwatering.”

“Wait...you can pick that up even from back there, outside of the trunk?!”

“Yeah, they’re seasoned pretty heavily. That and the fat dripping over the whole bird during the slow-cooking process is a pretty heady combination.”

I shook my head, baffled. “Even though I’ve been around shifters my entire life, your senses can still boggle my mind.”

He sent me one of his impish grins I was really starting to enjoy. “It’s a blessing and a curse.”

“Right. I’d hate to have to walk by a smoker with your senses.”

“Honestly, I usually just hold my breath.”

I nodded, my mind going through about a dozen situations where having a very keen sense of smell wouldn’t be a great thing. Most of them were pretty comical, and thinking of them shook the last vestiges of negativity from my mind. I knew the misery and guilt would come back later, but they could wait until I was alone and in the comfort of my home.

“Well, the chicken’s not gonna smell any less delicious if we dawdle,” I said, opening the door. “Let’s head in.”

“Sounds good. You head in—I’ll grab the bag.”

“Okies.”

I slid out of the truck and headed up the pretty wraparound porch to the front door. It was unlocked, so I let myself in.

Thankfully, there wasn’t a grim mood when I entered. Most of the inner circle was there, chatting casually. I didn’t see Parker or any of the shifter parents who’d arrived in the parking lot, so I was willing to bet they were still on their run. It was truly amazing what sliding into their wolf forms and sprinting could do for the shifters’ morale of the shifters, and it was hard not to feel a bit jealous.

I desperately wished I could feel that same rush, that exhilaration. To feel the wind across my face and the dirt beneath my paws as I raced through the woods, power pumping through my every vein. It seemed like it would be so freeing to burst out of my shell and be the wolf I was always meant to be.

I didn’t verbalize any of that, of course. Talk about a mood killer. Instead, I started scanning everyone who was there. While my magic didn’t really extend to mental-health healing, it never hurt to let people know they had someone to listen to them without judgment.

The only person missing was Lyssa, but when I asked where she was, I was told that she was upstairs with Ashlee, the two of them having a little slumber party in the guest room. I thought that was the cutest thing and figured I could check on the young girl in the morning. She’d had a hard enough night, and considering that I’d already checked her over and healed her once, I didn’t need to interrupt her bonding time with our alpha’s wife.

After perhaps fifteen minutes or so, even the stragglers arrived, and Mahlan cleared his throat. We all gathered in their rather impressive living room and dining room, the open concept giving us plenty of room to settle in.

“This night has definitely not gone how any of us planned,” Mahlan said, eliciting a dry chuckle from a few shifters. “But I think it’s clear that the break we’ve been enjoying from the witches is most likely over. I want to remind everyone to be incredibly vigilant and avoid being alone after dark as much as you can. I’m going to assign an area of our pack to each of

you. I want you all to check in with our members in those areas and make sure they feel safe, and arrange security patrols along that area.”

I nodded, and there was a series of affirmative sounds before the expression on our alpha’s face lightened.

“Now, on a completely different note, my future beta has an announcement.”

Theo stepped to Mahlan’s side, looking uncharacteristically nervous. Intrigued, I shuffled forward a little.

“I just wanted to tell you, my closest friends and family, that Emma and I have chosen a date for our wedding! And naturally, we would like for all of you to be in our wedding party.” A throat cleared from the back of the room, followed by ice rattling in a plastic cup. “Yes, that means even you, Sam. We couldn’t imagine a better ring bearer.”

Another rattle of ice, but it somehow sounded positive? I didn’t know how Sam did it, but I assumed it was more magic.

“Yes, you’re welcome,” Theo continued. “We’ll send out more information and invites soon, so keep an eye on your mailboxes! Emma wanted to make this very official. You know, since a lot of our courtship has been a bit...*unorthodox*.”

That was one way to put it. The inner circle shared a laugh at that then everyone crowded around Theo to congratulate him and ask questions. Emma was absent—I believed she was seeing a play with her parents—but I was sure her inbox would be plenty full come morning.

As for me, however, I didn’t even get close to the circle of congratulations before my phone buzzed several times in my pocket. They hit like a hammer to my chest every time they went off.

I knew I shouldn’t answer. I *knew* that. But after the fourth insistent buzz, I pulled it out.

I never learned.

*God, I wasted so much time on this non-relationship.*

*You know people warned me about you.*

*But I thought your flakiness was just because you were a transplant trying to fit in and make friends.*

*Guess I was wrong. You only care about you, and it’s always been that way.*

It hurt, watching my relationship collapse before my very eyes. That same sadness began to leech into my soul. But I shoved it behind a mental barrier and told myself to deal with it later. For now, I was going to be happy for my friends and packmate.

Yes, it felt lonely that pretty much everyone in the inner circle seemed paired up, but I refused to be jealous. Emma had been nothing but kind to me and had gone out of her way to make me feel welcome. If it weren't for her and Lyssa, I was pretty sure Hannah would still be the only person I talked to outside of official alma duties.

Oh my God...*Hannah!* I needed to connect with her and tell her so much. But I knew that would need to wait until morning since she and Jacobian were off on their own thing, no doubt doing something important or intimate. Ever since she'd had to stop pretending at Mr. Bronson's stupid company, Hannah was put on increasingly important missions, some of which she couldn't disclose to me. I respected that, but it sometimes made contacting her more difficult.

But holding back all that bitterness was exhausting, and after about an hour and a half of socializing, congratulating, and being supportive, I was seriously beginning to flag. And that was after eating a rotisserie chicken nearly to the bone, a fruit tart, eight macarons, even more macaroons, and some *dolmas*.

When I pulled out my phone again, I had the good sense to swipe away my texting notifications and go straight to my Uber app. But I didn't even get to order before Kaleb sidled up next to me.

"I think things are winding down here. Do you need me to drive you to your car?"

The part of me so used to dealing with things on my own almost said no, but then I caught myself. How could I complain about being lonely if I cut off opportunities for friendship and communication?

"Sure, I'd appreciate that. But we better tell Sam so he can get his moped out of the back."

"I've got it," Parker said, appearing out of nowhere and nearly giving me a heart attack. *Man*, what I wouldn't do for the insane hearing of shifters. I would at least have fewer jump scares in my life. "Let him rest for a bit. He's been using his magic a lot and needs the rest."

“Has he? But I thought he broke Emma’s curse, and that was the main draw of his magic,” Kaleb replied, always at ease with his best friend. No wonder they were by each other’s side so much.

“Yeah, at the time. But he’s upped his warding and is working on some more stuff I don’t quite understand.”

“Ah. Well, I’ll see you back at our place tonight?” Kaleb asked.

“Yeah, but probably not until the witching hour, ironically. Imma let Sam sleep for at least a couple hours, take him home, tuck him into bed, then head back to our place.”

“Okay. See you then.”

The two shared a nod, and then Kaleb gently guided me out the door sans the bags. We’d destroyed most of what we’d bought and shared the rest with everyone else. It hadn’t quite been a family dinner, but a nice approximation. At least now that I was most likely broken up with Jamie, I didn’t have to worry about scheduling conflicts anymore.

This time, Kaleb opened the passenger door for me. I almost began to tell him it wasn’t necessary, but what was the point of arguing? It was okay to let someone take care of me, even something as simple as opening a car’s door. He was my packmate, and we were supposed to look after each other.

Getting into the car, I buckled myself up, musing about how a car accident wouldn’t end up too badly for Kaleb but could spell the end for me. There was some irony about being the pack’s healer but unable to heal myself. Whatever mythical spirit or enchantment that had created almas millennia ago must have been a sadist.

Unlike before, we didn’t dive into conversation. Instead, Kaleb turned the radio on low, and we sat in comfortable quiet. This situation would normally be awkward, but after today, the lack of stimulation was nice. For a small sliver of my day, it was just me, a friend, and the sound of tires along an open road.

Naturally, the peaceful, contemplative atmosphere faded a bit as we got to the city, banished by the bright lights and sounds of urban traffic. But it didn’t disappear entirely. I closed my eyes, resting my head against the seat as I enjoyed the last moments of quiet before addressing the storm that was still occasionally going off in my pocket.

What could Jamie even be saying at this point? I was sure he could pour out only so much vitriol before getting bored or tired. Maybe he had

questions and was opening a dialogue for repairing our broken situation, but I was too weary and hurt to check.

All too soon, we reached the fancy bar where I'd left my vehicle. The date seemed like a week ago instead of a handful of hours. But time was always like that as an alma—never enough of it and flying by far too quickly.

"Thanks for everything tonight," I said as Kaleb pulled up beside my car. I'd been half worried it was towed away before remembering the bar was open until 2 am, so there were plenty of patrons left.

"Of course, any time."

I sent him a small smile as I clambered out of his oversized truck, but before I could shut the door, he spoke again. "Just...don't lose too much sleep over people who aren't worth it. Your time is too valuable, you know?"

Oh, I was well aware that my time was at a premium, worth more than its weight in gold.

It was just *me*—the person—who wasn't.

"Thanks, Kaleb. You have a good night."

"You too."

With a jaunty little wave that was more enthusiastic than I felt, I climbed into my car and started it up. I just needed to hold myself together until I got home.

Then I could finally fall apart.

\* \* \*

I headed into my skill lab the next day, utterly exhausted. As a nurse and an alma, I was used to running on mere hours of sleep. But the sheer emotional strain of the previous night had taken a big toll on me, especially since Jamie had met me after my labs to ask what I thought and how everything went.

I'd always felt so respected that such an established doctor cared about my opinions and continuing education—treating me like I mattered. So his absence today burned my soul like a brand when I walked into an empty hall.

I had known this would happen—especially since I still hadn't gotten around to reading or replying to the twenty text messages I had waiting for me—but I supposed that some small part of me had hoped to see him waiting there, willing to forgive me, asking for forgiveness himself, and ready to talk things out.

At least I had work to keep me busy. Until I took my lunch eight hours into my twelve-hour shift and ended up sitting by myself to enjoy the cold banh mi I'd ordered two hours earlier.

It was unusual for me to get through an entire sandwich without being interrupted—such was the life of a nurse—so I knew it wasn't a good time to look at my phone. But when my screen lit up with another text from Jamie, I had to stop myself from immediately opening it.

Whatever he said was going to be bad. He was certain that I'd cheated on him and brazenly ditched him in the middle of a date with the guy I was cheating with. I'd be a moron to think that he'd be over that in just one night.

Then again, it had been more than twelve hours since his last text. Surely that meant he'd had enough time to calm down, right? Or was I just delusional?

Definitely delusional, because I hastily opened the text. I should have known better, I really should have, because instead of a scathing text, I was greeted by a picture.

A picture of Jamie in bed. And a pillow beside him with long auburn hair spread across it.

What the fuck?

*What the actual fuck?!*

I stared in horror, as if the *Kill Bill* siren was playing at full volume between my ears. What I was seeing couldn't be happening, yet the picture remained no matter how much I looked daggers at it.

Then came the text.

*You thought you were special.*

I gritted my teeth, unprepared for the deluge of feelings. I'd known that our relationship was pretty much over, but it was one thing to break up, and it was another thing for my new ex-boyfriend to jump into bed with someone else less than twenty-four hours later.

Did I mean so little to him? Was I...was I...

*You thought you were special.*

I had thought I was special, hadn't I? I'd thought Jamie and I had bonded as healers who did so much for everyone around us and asked for so little in return. I'd thought he understood me, despite all my flaws.

Clearly not.

I felt my heart crumble within me. I wanted to fall apart, to throw myself on the ground and weep, but I couldn't. My coworkers—and more importantly, my patients—were depending on me.

I had to hold it together for four more hours. Then, I could go home and try to mend myself the hard way.

It wouldn't be easy, but what about being an alma was? I had to suck it up and continue to do my duty.

Because without that, who the fuck was Savannah Baladran?



## Chapter 4

---

## *Kaleb*

“So I noticed you have five different homesteads on the edge of your territory with no straight path to safety. If I’m being honest, these homesteads practically have a neon sign asking for the witches to target them.”

The beta I was talking to clicked her tongue and ran a hand through her thick red hair. Perhaps I was playing into stereotypes, but her thick curls were so ginger that when I first met her, I’d thought she was a fox shifter who had been adopted into the pack. But nope, she was a wolf through and through, judging by her scent that I picked up on once we were standing side by side.

And we had been standing side by side for quite a while as we pored over my physical security notes on her pack’s layout. Apparently, Patricia had been impressed by our preliminary meeting. She’d sent word to another pack to the north.

Technically, that pack was in another state, a bit farther than where the witches seemed to be targeting. But Mahlan, Theo, and I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. Now that we kind of knew what the witches were up to and putting up a better defense, we considered that those sorry sonsofbitches would cast their nets a little wider.

I supposed it also helped that Jacobian was with me, although he was having his own meeting with the pack’s tech guru in another room, who happened to be a young man who barely looked older than twenty. But from the moment the two met, they’d begun to talk in another language, or at least that was how it sounded to me. Something about specs, bandwidth,

proxy servers, VPNs, and a bunch of other stuff that sounded like it came out of a *Star Trek* episode.

“Hmm, should this be some sort of covert path or a general one?” Patricia asked.

Before I could answer, my phone alarm went off. A shrill sound, especially for a shifter’s notification.

“Expecting someone?” the beta asked, raising one of her orange eyebrows. Seriously, did she dye them that color? I didn’t know a lot about such things, but I knew Hannah almost always had wildly colored hair. It had been a stunning emerald green before Mahlan and Lyssa’s wedding, but now it was electric pink and neon yellow.

“It’s an alarm. It reminds me when we should start wrapping things up and head out.”

“Right. It’s a long drive back to your pack’s territory.”

“It is, and I’m supposed to meet a couple of my packmates for a late dinner.”

“Well, you’ve been a huge help. We really appreciate you driving in yesterday and spending the night. I know it’s not a time when you want to be away from your pack.”

I nodded, already running calculations in my head. We were about four hours north—three if we sped like Jacobian. If we headed out in the next half-hour, we would still arrive at a reasonable time.

“Do you want to collect your friend before he completely nerds out with Tom?”

“We’ve got a few more minutes. Let’s go over some things I noticed by the gulch over by the bridge leading into your territory.”

“Sure, if you’ve got time.”

“I do.”

As I watched the clock, we went over most everything. I had more notes I was going to send to Patricia, but that could wait until I got home and wrote up a full report.

It felt good to be useful to my fellow shifters, even ones not in my pack, but I missed Parker. Ever since the attack on the school, we’d all started ramping up our defenses. My best friend had been organizing patrol paths, guard shifts, and volunteers to make sure no student traveled to or from school, sporting events, or anywhere else without an escort.

So, Parker and I hardly saw each other, especially since I was traveling around helping other packs. I hated how busy we were, but it was important to get it done. Better to be proactive than reactive, after all. The best way to subvert witches may have been the element of surprise, but the second best was preparedness.

I hadn't even had a chance to touch base with Savvy, which was a real travesty. I couldn't lie—I had been half-hoping she would text me with updates on how she was doing. But it wasn't fair to expect that from someone who was going through a lot right now.

A breakup was never easy, even if it was with a jerkwad of a human. I wasn't quite sure what Jamie had been texting Savvy all night, but it was clear that each and every one of his texts had upset her. Part of me wanted to recall his scent so I could hunt him down and teach him how to treat a lady, but I knew that would be crossing boundaries.

Still, I resolved to message Savvy after dinner. Maybe we could catch up the next day or maybe even the weekend. I didn't know her work schedule, but I knew that as a nurse, she tended to work three or four days a week. The rest was reserved for her alma duties.

"Hey, Jacobian, you ready to go?" I asked, ducking my head into the room where he and the other tech guy had been sequestered for over a day. Had they even slept?

"Yeah, just one moment," he answered absently, and I knew that tone. Quickly, I shot off a text to Parker and Hannah that we would probably be half an hour late. Nerds were gonna nerd, as it were.

But still, I wasn't content to stand around and wait forever, so I headed to the bathroom, said my other polite goodbyes, and went to collect my packmate more insistently.

Despite being my elder and having a higher ranking in our inner circle, Jacobian let me guide him to the van we'd brought. It wasn't either of our vehicles but a van we used whenever we needed to haul Jacobian's tech and other large equipment across large distances.

"I...I think I'm gonna take a nap for a bit, if that's alright," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes as we walked out of the pack's community center and towards our vehicle.

"Yeah, of course. Do you want to lie down in the back? We didn't have to put down the middle seat, so you could probably stretch out. I even

thought ahead and packed a blanket in there. It's not very comfy, but it's better than nothing, right?"

"Yeah, absolutely," Jacobian said, yawning. I wasn't used to seeing the guy so rundown. Ever since he and Hannah had become a thing, he'd had a much better work-life balance. "Yeah, a nap sounds like a good idea."

I was tired myself, but at least I'd slept overnight in the guest room of the pack's alma. She was an older woman with salt-and-pepper hair, a round belly, and a broad smile. I'd found myself studying her a bit in the short time we spent together, thinking of Savvy.

But unlike Savannah, Mrs. Bauldevair, as she was called, was not single. Her husband was a tall, willowy fellow who didn't speak much. He smelled...off too, and for the first hour there, he'd made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I put two and two together when the alma had cheerily explained that her husband was a *drekavac*, a fae that was largely mute, as using their voice could be quite deadly.

At that point, the man's persistent silence made more sense, and I noticed how physically affectionate he was with his wife. And their children more than made up for the quiet patriarch. All of them were older teenagers, the eldest being a freshman in college, and two of the five smelled of shifters. One, the middle daughter, smelled almost exactly like Savvy, while the younger two had their father's icy sharpness to their scent.

That ratio boggled my mind. No wonder almas were so rare when only one kid had inherited the alma designation out of five. At the same time, I couldn't help but wonder why Mrs. Bauldevair had married a mute Slavic fae versus a shifter from her pack.

But considering that we'd only had a very late dinner together and an early breakfast, I couldn't exactly ask that question, leaving me to ponder it in silence while I drove along, Jacobian's soft snores drifting from the back of the van.

Normally, I would listen to music, but the quiet was nice. It allowed me to slow down and think for a moment.

Not that I thought anything new, just the same recurring thoughts I'd had in the back of my mind for a while. Man, if I had it half as bad as Savvy, I wouldn't be able to survive.

I really needed to call her.

But first, I had a dinner to attend. After I woke Jacobian when we were about a half-hour away, I told him to text Hannah and Parker our ETA.

By the time we arrived at the bar we'd agreed on, I was ready to get out and stretch my legs. Time permitting, maybe I could go for a run before collapsing in my own bed. It had been over a week since I'd been in wolf form, and I could feel my inner guy going a little stir-crazy.

"Jacobian!"

As we stepped out of the van, Hannah popped out of her car and ran toward her beau, throwing her arms around his neck despite their height difference. A moment later, they were sharing a tender kiss as I looked the other way. I felt like a third wheel, and I couldn't help but wonder where Parker was. He'd always been the timely sort, so I hadn't expected to beat him there.

Thankfully, Jacobian and Hannah weren't willing to make out in the middle of the parking lot, so a moment later, they separated.

"You let someone else drive for once?" she teased him. It was no secret that Jacobian and Mahlan were the only two in our pack who enjoyed long, *long* drives, so most field trips fell to the chauffeuring skills of our resident tech head.

"Only because he needed to pass out in the back for a bit," I answered conspiratorially. "Your boy pulled an all-nighter."

Hannah narrowed her eyes at Jacobian while he glared at me for ratting him out. "You found another tech guy there, didn't you?"

"Maybe," Jacobian admitted.

But Hannah just rolled her eyes. "Well, at least pulled yourself out of the rabbit hole without an entire search and rescue team. But you're definitely taking a shower and getting a full night's sleep later."

Jacobian gave her a sarcastic salute and a wink. "As you wish."

"What I wish for is for you not to be a butt, and yet here we are."

"Yeah, but you *like* that I'm a butt."

Where was Parker again?

Not that I resented my packmates for having a lovely, healthy relationship. It was just that me standing there awkwardly while they had their lover's reunion was, well, *awkward*.

My answer came in the familiar rumble of Parker's hot rod. Unlike me, he was into muscle cars and collectible vehicles. But hey, we had the money, so why shouldn't he enjoy it?

Turning around, I saw one of his cars rolling in. I could tell Parker spotted us almost immediately, his vehicle turning sharply to slide into the

parking spot beside us. But what I didn't expect was for Sam to pop out of the passenger's side once the car came to a stop.

Oh.

It wasn't like I didn't want Sam to be there, but I figured Parker would have mentioned him coming. It wasn't like he had anything to hide. While Sam had never officially come out to our pack or inner circle, everyone knew the two were practically a couple, orbiting each other like two celestial objects that weren't sure if they could touch.

"Hey there, wolfies," Sam said, draining the last of another iced coffee before throwing the cup into the air. I was about to tell him not to litter—we shifters had enough issues without Starbucks covering the forest floor—only for the cup to disappear mid-air.

Huh. Magic sure was something.

"Hey, Sam," I said, giving him a nod. "Good to see you."

"Same here. I hope you don't mind me crashing, but there's this huge drama going on with my plants at home. If I didn't get out of there, I swore I was gonna go crazy."

*Sorry*, Parker mouthed to me behind Sam, and my irritation faded. It wasn't like Sam to admit weakness, and it wasn't like Parker to spring things on me, so it must have been a pretty intense situation.

"I'm sorry," Hannah began, "did you say there was plant drama?"

"My succulents do *not* like some of the crystals I bought for channeling energy, and my philodendrons are accusing me of favoring my pothos. Meanwhile, my monstera and my alocasia have absorbed waaaaaay too much negative energy for me, and I've gotta nurse them back to health."

I blinked at all this information. I knew Sam was a green witch but was that really what life was like for him? Were plants conscious beings with opinions and interpersonal issues?

That seemed utterly wild. Maybe Sam and I could have a one-on-one sometime and get to know each other better. After all, if he was dating my best friend and brother from another mother, it wouldn't hurt for us to be more acquainted.

Trust Jacobian to be entirely unfazed, however. "So, are we goin' in or what?"

"Brilliant idea!" Hannah said, turning on her heel. "I'm *starving*."

Once inside, we were seated quickly and became embroiled in conversation. For a moment, I'd was a touch worried that things would be

thrown off since Sam was there, but somehow he managed to fit in like a glove despite being his extra self. Together, we talked about the upcoming wedding, work, the lake properties Theo had snatched up—everything, really.

“I still can’t believe that,” Parker mused as he started on his second rack of ribs. “That’s so very beta of Theo. I could never be so organized.”

“That’s true,” I pointed out. It didn’t matter how many laundry baskets I planted around our condo—Parker’s clothes always ended up in bizarre places. I could organize and alphabetize our spices until I was blue in the face, but the next time Parker cooked, they would be jumbled and not properly sealed. “It makes me wonder what you’re going to do once you finally give in and claim your property.”

“Ugh,” Parker groaned, dropping his head into his hands that covered in barbeque sauce. It was such a quintessentially Parker thing that I couldn’t help but chuckle as I passed him a few wet wipes.

“Please don’t remind me,” Parker said. “I have so much going on right now that my wolf and I might both explode if you tack that on.”

“Wait,” Sam said, pausing as he picked out every bit of tomato from his quesadilla. Why he didn’t ask for a new one was beyond me, considering he had ordered it without the pico de gallo, but it seemed like he didn’t want to bug our waitress or use his magic in public. “You have a whole-ass house on a lake just being handed to you, and you’re complaining?”

I suddenly remembered that Sam had been a homeless kid, just like Lyssa. He had a place now, but as far as I knew, it was a studio he could barely afford, though I figured whatever Mahlan was paying him had to be helping him save up if he wanted to move somewhere else. From what I knew of Lyssa and Hannah’s contract work, our pack paid a pretty penny to everyone who risked life and limb for the pack.

Not that I knew the specifics of payroll. That was Theo’s thing, and Jacobian’s, in a pinch. I was not the numbers guy and never had been.

I was the quiet muscle.

Well, less quiet lately.

“It’s, uh, complicated,” Parker sputtered, his cheeks quickly turning pink. As fun as it could be to watch my best friend get mildly flustered every now and then, this was not one of those times.

“What’s complicated?” Sam asked. “Does the house require your firstborn child? Because honestly, in this economy, it might be worth it.”



“Forgive him,” I said, cutting in and feeling surprise radiate off everyone. I forced myself to continue. “He’s been rich for so long, he’s forgotten what it was like in the before times.”

“The before times?” Sam repeated with a huff. “*My* before times consisted of being a homeless orphan. What were yours? Living in a mansion and vacationing in the Alps?” Sam paused as the rest of us shared wry grins. “Wait, what’s going on? Why are all of you giving me that look?”

“I don’t think any of us has ever been on a true vacation,” Hannah mused. “Maybe camping trips or road trips, but not a single shifter in our pack has been to the Alps.”

“Or the Caribbean,” I added wistfully. I’d always wanted to go to those places. I heard that the pull of the moon and the ocean was like no other there, and the resident fae were some of the least colonized in the modern world.

“Mahlan’s family has gone to Mexico a couple of times. And didn’t Emma go to France once or twice for school?” Hannah asked.

“Huh,” Sam said. “For being filthy rich, I expected more of you living the high life.”

“Don’t get us wrong—we’re plenty well-off,” Jacobian said. “Most of us have nice cars.”

His eyes flicked to me as he said that, but I didn’t take an ounce of offense. I knew my truck was older and the opposite of flashy, but that was the way I liked it.

“And lake houses,” Sam added.

“Yeah, and lake houses,” Jacobian agreed.

Sam shook his head, chuckling. “Man, I can’t imagine what it was like for Lyssa when she started running with y’all. Must have blown her mind.”

I chuckled, remembering a few instances I’d witnessed. “It wasn’t always the smoothest ride. You and Lyssa should talk about it sometime. Maybe have a whole spa day or something to catch up.”

While I didn’t know Lyssa and Sam’s whole story, I knew they’d met when they were young and had no one. I couldn’t be sure, but I’d heard that Sam had been the one to show Lyssa the ropes before suddenly disappearing. I didn’t know why or when that had happened, but it seemed too personal to ask.

“God, that would be amazeballs,” Sam said. “I haven’t really been able to spend time with my girl one-on-one. Between that whole curse thing, and then Emma’s curse thing, and then the witches, and then the wedding, it feels like we haven’t had much time to even look at each other, let alone have an entire catch-up session.”

“Hopefully, things will be slowing down soon,” Parker said, his voice back to being full of all the optimism and sunshine he always seemed to emanate. I didn’t correct him, but I couldn’t help but feel the opposite. I had a feeling that things were about to escalate to new levels.

Maybe I was wrong. That wouldn’t be a bad thing.

The three lads continued their conversation, but a new curiosity rose in me. Leaning towards Hannah, I lowered my voice. It wasn’t that I was afraid of being overheard or anything—I was at a table with three other shifters and a witch. I just wanted to be polite and not interrupt the conversation.

“Hey, have you heard from Savannah at all?” I asked her.

I tried to sound nonchalant, but I wasn’t quite sure if I pulled it off. Still, I kept my expression neutral as I awaited an answer.

“Eh, not really. Like once every other day, maybe.”

“Really?” That didn’t sound right at all. Although I didn’t know Savvy like the back of my hand, I was pretty sure that she and Hannah were BFFs. The young pink-and-yellow-haired woman was the first friend Savvy had made in the pack. “Is that by choice?”

“I mean, probably. When I do get a text, it’s usually one-word answers. I’ve asked if she’s alright or wants company, and she’ll just say that she’s amassing healing supplies in case we need them.”

“Oh. Okay, thank you. Would you tell her hi for me?”

Hannah raised one of her eyebrows. “What, you don’t know how to text?”

She had a point. I *did* have Savvy’s number. Everyone in our pack had the alma’s contact info drilled into them. But just because I had her contact info didn’t mean I felt comfortable texting her randomly. I was still getting used to the whole socializing thing, after all.

“I dunno. I don’t wanna intrude.”

Hannah’s expression softened, and she gave me a knowing sort of nod. “I got you. I’ll make sure to let her know you said hi and were thinking of her.”

“Thanks.”

There was more I wanted to say and ask, but Jacobian was calling my name.

“Kaleb, I’ve got this new cybersecurity project I want to start in a couple of months, but it involves a lot of lifting equipment and moving things around. You’re one of the few people I trust with our pack’s shit. Wanna help?”

“Sure, why not?” I replied.

I didn’t mind being a pack mule, especially when I was chosen because I was a careful, considerate pack mule. While I didn’t know a ton about Jacobian’s equipment, I knew he worked hard to optimize and organize everything, so I would rather take my time and not mess it up.

The conversation once again drifted off without me. Maybe I should have been insulted, but I wasn’t. I’d spent so many years barely contributing to any talks going on around me, I couldn’t exactly blame my friends for getting used to carrying the conversation on their own.

Instead, my mind went to Savannah. I couldn’t say 100%, but I was pretty sure that she was shutting everyone out of her life instead of relying on her support circle to get her through the breakup. Did Hannah even know Savvy had broken up with the guy she was dating?

Now that I thought about it, did Hannah even know Savvy was dating someone?

Our alma had never mentioned it to me, but I was pretty sure she was keeping him a secret from the rest of the pack. I wished she didn’t feel like she had to do that, though I wanted to know *why* she felt she had to. But those were not conversations one had with a casual acquaintance.

Because that’s what Savvy and I were. Casual acquaintances. Distant packmates. I’d helped her out once on a really bad night in her life, and that was it. I was basically a glorified chauffeur.

Depressing.

But that didn’t mean we couldn’t change that. I was slowly becoming a real social butterfly, or at least I was trying to. I felt like a liquified caterpillar trying to pull my new form together from the primordial goo I’d let myself melt into.

“Have *you* talked to Savvy lately?” Hannah asked suddenly, her voice as hushed as mine.

I shook my head. “No, haven’t heard from her since the school attack.”

“Ah.”

Somehow, I could tell that there was something Hannah wasn't telling me. There was nothing I could point to specifically, like a look in her eyes or a twitch of her lips, and yet I just knew. Which was pretty impressive, given how oblivious I could be about people outside of the inner circle.

Well, Hannah was part of the inner circle now, wasn't she? Being Jacobian's mate surely meant that. So maybe I had subconsciously observed more about her than I'd thought.

Stranger things had happened.

But that strange feeling lingered, even when our meal ended and we started heading to our vehicles to head home. But when Jacobian decided to make a last-minute trip to the bathroom, I found my opportunity to talk to Hannah outside while we waited, the din of the restaurant likely enough to dull our voices from reaching her mate.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” I said.

“What's that?”

“Did you know that Savvy was seeing someone?”

The look on Hannah's face gave her away immediately. Okay, so she did know. That was a relief. I would have felt bad if she'd been completely in the dark, and I'd accidentally blown it.

“I wasn't aware she was telling people,” Hannah said cautiously.

“Well, she isn't—uh, wasn't—I guess.” I paused, wondering what I should ask next and if it would even be appropriate. “Did she actually like the guy?”

“I...” Hannah's look went from surprised to outright confused. “I'm not really sure what you're playing at.”

It was my turn to be mystified. “What do you mean?”

“Uh, I'm beginning to think I was completely wrong. But given that you're the only single guy in our circle and she was so hush-hush about it, I kinda assumed her mysterious beau was *you*.”

“What, me?” It was a struggle to keep my voice down. “You thought I was dating Savvy?”

“Well, yeah. She's really private about this stuff, you know, and I figured it was because she didn't want to make a fuss. And you never showed a wink of interest in Emma despite her chasing you for years, so I figured that was because you were already taken, but you couldn't say so out loud without risking your secret relationship.”

I couldn't help but stare at her for several long moments, my brain trying to rationalize what Hannah had just dumped on me.

She thought I was dating Savvy? Her best friend? That seemed like quite the compliment, but I was also baffled. Before I'd whisked Savvy away from that shit guy, we hadn't really had a solid conversation unless she was healing me.

"But if you're not dating her, what's with all these questions? And how do you know she was seeing anyone at all?"

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. If Hannah weren't Savvy's best friend, I wouldn't feel comfortable talking about it, but since they *were* BFFs, that was okay in girl code...right?

"I just happened to run into her while she was out on a date with her boyfriend. Well, her ex-boyfriend, I guess I should say. He was a total ass, and they broke up that night."

So many emotions went across Hannah's face, and I couldn't blame her. I hadn't even let slip that he was a human yet. But as I watched her expressions play out, I thought maybe that revelation wasn't necessary.

"Wait, I gotta catch up for a second." Hannah let out a long breath, looking over her shoulder as if she were checking if Jacobian was coming. It wasn't like we were trying to keep a secret from him, but it felt wrong to spread Savvy's private information. Especially since she was so particular about it herself. "So the guy was a real asshole?"

I nodded, a low growl trying to force its way up my throat. My inner wolf did *not* like that guy and still had to be convinced pretty regularly to not hunt him down and teach him a lesson.

Maybe the conversation could have gone on further, as I was sure that Hannah had plenty more questions. But then I spotted Jacobian in the window, and we cut our talk. Thankfully, Parker and Sam had already left, the green witch in a rush after hearing about a BOGO sale at his local botanical shop. Or something like that.

"So I'll text you the specs for my project after the weekend, okay?" Jacobian said as he looped his arm through Hannah's.

"Sure, sounds good to me."

"Great. And you don't mind taking the van back to our office's garage?"

"Nah. I left my truck there, anyway, so I might as well."

"Thanks, Kaleb. We appreciate you doing that. Gives us an extra hour or so together."

“You’re very sweet,” Hannah said to me, stepping forward and giving me a hug. Was I nailing this socializing thing? Because I was beginning to feel like I was nailing it. “Thank you for doing this.”

To anyone else, it probably sounded like she was grateful that I was taking the van back. But I knew what she was really saying. She was thanking me for being there for her friend, for doing my best to keep Savvy’s secrets. After all, they weren’t mine to tell.

Getting into the van, I pulled out my phone, fully intending to text Savvy. I started with a general greeting, because that’s how conversations began, but then it sounded hokey, so I deleted it.

I tried again, then again, and then one more time before deleting it all and deciding I would just surprise her the next day. Maybe ask her to lunch or do something to get her out of the house.

But first, I needed to return the van. I drove to our office and punched in the code to get into the garage where all our permanent work vehicles lived. It didn’t take long to ensure everything was locked up correctly, so I got into my truck and headed back to my apartment.

My very empty apartment.

That wasn’t something I was used to. Sure, I’d been on my own a lot when I was younger. When my mother was around, she was amazing. But between hospitalizations and her occasional wandering off, there were plenty of times when I’d had to fend for myself.

But all of that had changed once Parker and his family had taken me in after my mom lost her fight with everything she was grappling with. From then on, it was always me and him, the two of us never far from each other without solid planning.

That had continued into college. Despite my being older than Parker, I decided to take a gap year so that we could go at the same time. After our freshman year, we decided that dorm life wasn’t for us and got our apartment together. We’d been in it ever since. Him and me, the two of us living and flourishing and struggling along with our pack.

Parker and Kaleb. Brothers in soul, if not in blood.

I hung my keys on the wall and walked into our quiet apartment. Funny how it seemed less *ours* lately and more just mine.

I knew I was being sensitive about Parker staying at Sam’s a couple of nights a week, but it felt like he was gone so often. I missed him, I really did.

Despite that awful churning in my gut, I wanted Parker to be happy. I wanted him to have a great relationship with someone who admired him, even if Sam was...well, *Sam*. I was well aware that Parker had been denied many of the typical milestones most people experienced, not because he was gay but because he was basically my emotional support wolf throughout most of our lives.

I really owed him the world.

Heading to the kitchen, I made myself a nutritional shake, drained it, then went to bed. But not before texting Parker to make he was good.

Some habits were hard to break.

\* \* \*

The apartment was just as empty when I woke up the next morning, that feeling sitting heavy in my gut. Checking my phone, I saw that Parker had texted me shortly after I'd fallen asleep. Apparently, he and Sam had gone to the secret midnight plant sale, then took his rather sizable haul back to the witch's studio. Then they went to a warehouse rave where Parker got to experience his very first magic bar.

I kind of wished I was there, and I kind of didn't. One, because a magic bar sounded like an experience and a half. But also, the idea of being around such loud music and so many dancing, pulsing bodies was incredibly unappealing.

Not to mention the *smells*. That was one thing I struggled with around party areas. Between thick perfume, cigarettes, hair-styling products, and pot smoke, it was enough to make my eyes water and my stomach churn. I was sure if I was in those spaces more, I could get used to them, but I had no desire to do that.

Getting out of bed, I shot Parker a text that I hoped sounded interested and sincere. I wasn't always the best with the written word, but I usually never had to worry about Parker misunderstanding me.

*You'll have to tell me all about it.*

Tossing my phone on the bed, I headed towards the shower. I hadn't washed since before heading out to the other pack's territory, so between that and my inner wolf growing restless, I was increasingly on edge. I needed to go for a run soon, but first, I wanted a nice, boiling shower.

I spent an ungodly amount of time in the bathroom, fully utilizing the insanely nice water heater our expensive apartment building had. It wasn't like I had to worry about the utility bill, after all. Not like when I was a kid. My mom and I had been flat broke after my dad was gone. I remembered a couple of times when our gas and electricity were turned off, leaving me to rely on sleepovers to have any sort of hot washing.

About an hour later, I finally stepped out. I felt quite a bit more refreshed, bathed in steam as I was, and wrapped a towel around my waist to head back to my room.

I only got about halfway there before I heard someone rustling around in the kitchen. Confused, I tried to scent the air, but all I could smell were my musky bathing products. Hmm, that was less than ideal.

Tensing my hand, I felt my nails lengthen and harden into almost claw-like tips. I wasn't in the mood for a fight, but if a witch was in my home, they were about to get one.

Except it turned out not to be a witch at all. It was Parker, who froze while he was halfway bent into the fridge, looking at me with wide eyes.

"Oh, hey. I didn't notice the shower turn off," he said before grabbing some leftovers and throwing them into the microwave.

"Couldn't hear it over your growling stomach, huh?" I asked, leaning against the counter.

"Pretty much. Magic bars, while super fun, aren't all that filling. At least not for a wolf."

"What, all those European witches don't have hardy food that would ruin their model waistlines?"

Parker rolled his eyes. "That's just a stereotype, ya know." A broad grin broke out across his features. "And yes. I've never seen so much fashion and so little body fat."

"Jacobian would die, I'm sure."

"A man starved, yes. Of both food and the type of beautiful woman he's into."

I chuckled, imagining Jacobian desperately searching the dance floor for anyone above size 16. His love of plus-sized women had never been a



spoken-about thing, but I had eyes. I saw the type of lady he gravitated to. I didn't get why it was a big deal, but some people could be bizarrely obsessed with who and what other people were attracted to. As long as everyone was a consenting adult, who cared?

I, for one, was attracted to women of all body types, races, and personalities. It just...never really went beyond that. Other than the occasional hook-up, I'd never been interested in pursuing anything else.

But considering that I was trying to grow as a person, trying to stop my codependency, maybe that would change as well.

"Oooh, are we spilling tea?" Sam said, opening our door and waltzing in like he lived here.

Wait, *what*?

"Hello?" I said, feeling my defensiveness flare up. I was trying to be an understanding and supportive friend, but that didn't mean I wanted people helping themselves to my home.

"Hello!" Sam said, holding up a tray of steaming coffees. "I got some coffee since the canned stuff you have here is practically philistine."

I looked at the bulk-sized coffee can on the counter next to the blender we used to make shakes. While the caffeine in coffee didn't do much for us, we liked making the beverage and adding it to the nutritional shakes we drank when we couldn't keep up with our diet. The coffee really helped cover the taste of the prenatal vitamins. Mahlan swore the supplements didn't have a taste, but I thought they did—chalky, slightly fishy, and full of iron.

"What's wrong with our coffee?" I asked.

"I do *not* have the time to try to impart all the wisdom and good taste that goes into finding good coffee," Sam said primly, setting the drink tray on our kitchen island. We didn't have one originally, but after having several family dinners at Mahlan's old apartment, Parker and I decided we wanted one and hired a contractor to put one in.

I remembered when we only recently became affluent. It had been particularly exciting to me—our first big splurge. Funny how times had changed, with Parker and I entering a new stratosphere of income. All thanks to the investments Mahlan had convinced us to make.

He really was a great alpha, even before he was one.

"Maybe we can schedule a hangout sometime, and you can tutor me on it," I said, reaching for the cup with my name on it. I was interested in what

flavor Sam thought I would like, considering I'd never told him my coffee order.

"Sure, I'll just pencil that in right after saving your pack's ass for the dozenth time."

He was snarky, alright, but I was quickly figuring out exactly how to spar with the quick-witted witch.

"You mean staring at Parker's ass, right?"

Sam grinned wickedly at me. "Oh, believe me, we are *way* past the dozenth time on that."

"Sam!" Parker objected, blushing.

"What? It's not my fault you're standing there, double-cheeked up outta your Levi's. It's not my fault you walk into the kitchen, and that booty enters a minute later. It's not--"

"If you keep talking about my butt to my best friend, I swear to the good Lord on high, I will stop doing squats."

Sam gasped, his hand going to his chest in mock horror. "You wouldn't!"

Oh yes, I was definitely getting how the younger fae's mind worked. Humor was his defense mechanism but also his love language. I could understand that.

But Parker, my beloved Parker, affixed his date with the most deadpan gaze I'd ever seen in my life. It wasn't often when my brother called on the lower tone of his voice, but when he did, it was always impactful.

"Try me."

Whew, that note struck a chord, and I was thoroughly amused by watching a deep flush rise along Sam's umber skin. It was rare to see him blush, as brazen as he was.

"Um...you're not allowed to talk like that in public if you want me to behave myself."

Parker took an easy stride around the counter, stopping a bit away from Sam but looking down at the short man. "What if I don't want you to behave?"

That was when I cleared my throat.

Both jumped, which was pretty hilarious, and then *both* of them were blushing hard. It was probably too soon to say, but I could see myself getting used to having Sam around more often. Joking together and

playfully needling each other about our food or drink preferences, making Parker blush or get overly excited about things.

Maybe working on this codependency thing didn't have to be a daunting struggle.

"Sorry, Kaleb," Parker muttered, his face deep red.

"Don't worry about it. But if you two get up to anything where we prepare our food, you better disinfect the whole room." I didn't think it was possible, but Parker turned even redder. "I'm gonna get dressed for work."

"No, you're not," Sam said, surprising me.

"Look, Sam, I like you, but you can't tell me when I can get dressed."

"As much as I appreciate the beefcake view, that's not what I meant," he shot back. "What I meant was that we are going on an adventure today."

"An adventure?"

"Yeah! It'll be just like something out of *Teen Wolf*, except we aren't teenagers."

"I'm pretty sure there were no actual teenagers on that show," Parker murmured, returning to the microwave to take out his leftovers.

"Right, so like I said, it'll be something out of *Teen Wolf*!"

I wasn't opposed to the idea, but I did have a lot of important stuff to catch up on at the office. "Is this approved by Mahlan?"

"It was ordered by Mahlan, actually. And by ordered by Mahlan, I mean Lyssa told him to do it, and he did." Sam chuckled. "Gosh, I love my girl Lyssa so much. Did I ever tell you that?"

If any other man had said that, I might have felt defensive on Mahlan's behalf. But there was something so incredibly *genuine* about the affection and admiration in Sam's voice. He and Lyssa had a special connection, and I hoped they finally got their private time to catch up.

"You might have mentioned it once before," Parker said, laughing gently as well.

"Well, I don't mention it enough because she's literally the oldest friend I have, even if we lost touch for a while." Sam took a breath, addressing me again. "Anyway, you and I are gonna roll right out to the lake and talk to Ashlee. See what we can get out of her and try to trace magic on her, like we did with Emma. Except she's not actually cursed, so the whole process is completely different."

"And why am I going with you?" Again, not that I minded, but it didn't sound like I would be particularly useful. And wouldn't he want to spend

that time with Parker by his side instead?

Sam affixed that mock-shocked look on his face, but it was less effective the second time. “What, I can’t want to spend some bonding time with my second-favorite wolfy-wolf?”

I looked to Parker, whose lips were pressed together like he was struggling not to grin. That was when I remembered that Parker had three meetings today with parent volunteers who wanted to work escort shifts on the kids’ field trips and other special events.

“You don’t want to drive out to the lake on your moped, and Parker is booked.”

Sam huffed. “It’s no fun when you figure me out so fast!”

“Then don’t make it obvious.”

“You know, I’m beginning to think you being Parker’s silent shadow was just a trick to lull people into a false sense of security.”

“That certainly is a charitable interpretation,” I shot right back.

“That’s me! I’m a regularly magnanimous individual.” Sam drained the rest of his coffee in an impressive series of gulps, then tossed it into our garbage can like he was shooting a hoop. “Now, you ready to go?”

I looked down at my body, covered only by a towel, then back to the witch.

He just rolled his eyes. “Right, whatever. Go cover up so we can hit the road.”

“Didn’t I already tell you that you can’t tell me how to dress?”

Sam didn’t say anything for a moment before picking up another cup of coffee and tipping it slightly in my direction. “I’ve got my eye on you, sir. You’re too clever for your own good.”

“Am I?” I shot back with a wink, but the witch just shook his head.

“I will not be fooled any longer! Parker, how long have you known that your brother is comprised of at least fifty-percent sass?”

“Uh, I suppose since I met him,” Parker answered around a mouthful of chicken quesadilla. “He just doesn’t show it to people unless he likes them.”

And Sam was back to his over-the-top expression, but this time it looked sweeter. “Awww, you like me, Kaleb? I gotta admit, this is a lot nicer than a dog pissing on my leg.”

“That went out of style in the eighties,” I retorted before heading back to my room. “But don’t tempt me.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior. Promise!”

I doubted that, but I just shook my head instead of continuing the banter. I got the feeling that if I didn't put a stop to it, Parker, Sam, and I would keep bantering until we were ridiculously late.

Which would be kind of nice. I'd been thinking so much that I would struggle with being social without Parker. But it seemed all I had to do was try, and I did just fine.

It was a shame I'd spent so many years thinking I couldn't or that it wasn't safe. But fear was like that—pervasive and inescapable.

But I didn't want to fall down that introspective rabbit hole, so I quickly got dressed, brushed my hair in the bathroom, and headed back into our kitchen, where Sam was happily munching on the rest of Parker's quesadilla while Parker seemed to have moved onto the burgers he'd made the day before.

"Ready?" I asked, grabbing my keys.

Sam hurriedly chewed, swallowed, then kissed Parker before hopping off his stool. "Let's hit the road, shall we?"

Together, the two of us headed out, Sam whistling as we went. He was decidedly less chirpy as we got into the truck, seeming contemplative as I drove along.

It was a side of Sam I hadn't seen before, at least not without him being unconscious. And unlike most other times, I was the one to break the silence after about ten minutes.

"Is something wrong?"

"What? No. I'm just thinking about how to go about this."

"Is there something different about Ashlee?"

"Yeah. She's a kid who's been orphaned, kidnapped, shoved into a cage, and traumatized. She knows me, of course, but even if she knows me, that doesn't mean that being around a witch is gonna be easy or comfortable for her."

"Ah..." I didn't want to say anything stupid, so I thought on it for a long moment, though I didn't come up with any sage advice. "Have...have you thought of asking Savannah along?"

"Savannah, as in your alma?" The witch seemed to pause and consider. "You know, that's not the worst idea. If anyone can help calm a kid or put off a panic attack, it'd be her. You got her number, right?"

"Yeah, let me pull over and call her."

“Pull over? Awww, isn’t that cute—you practicing road safety when a semi-truck is the one getting hurt if it crashes into you.”

“It’s precisely the other people I’m worried about,” I replied as I pulled to the curb. “I can walk away from a lot of shit. A single mother and her kids? A grandma on her way to church? A young kid on his way to college? Not so much.”

“Bleak. True, but bleak.”

“So is most of our history.”

Sam was polite enough to end the conversation as I dialed Savvy up. I wondered if she would be asleep, considering how early it was. Didn’t she work overnights at the hospital most of the time?

Despite my doubts, she answered on the second ring, sounding thoroughly exhausted. “Hey, Kaleb,” she said, weariness evident in every syllable. “What’s up? Did something happen?”

“No, not specifically,” I said, feeling guilty for calling her. “Sam and I are on our way to talk to Ashlee for a bit, and he was wondering if you’d be willing to tag-team and help her with any panic attacks or other PTSD issues that might flare up?”

“Well, my alma abilities can’t really heal mental health stuff, but I can lessen physical responses, like accelerated heart rate and, yes, panic attacks. I could also help her sleep if that would ease things.”

“Yeah, that would be a huge help if you’re free.”

She started to answer, then interrupted herself with an impressive yawn.

“I’m sorry, did you just come off work?” I asked.

“I did indeed.” There was a strange emptiness to her words, one I wasn’t used to hearing from someone who was normally so warm and optimistic. She really was struggling, wasn’t she?

The thought made me mad. Did that douche from the bar even realize what he’d done? How he’d hurt someone who always gave her everything to help everyone around her and never thought about herself? Probably not.

*Rip throat?* My inner wolf offered, practically licking its chops.

*Not now...but maybe later.*

It let out an approving growl that echoed in the back of my head. At least some things never changed.

“Hey, if you’re too exhausted, that’s-”

“No, I can be there.” Savvy let out a long sigh. “I would prefer to be on hand. Ashlee’s been through enough.”

I worried I was just enforcing Savvy's hectic lifestyle, but then an idea came to me. "Hey, if you just got home, why don't you take a shower and get some food into you, and I can pick you up so you don't have to drive?"

"Yeah, that sounds great. Are you far?"

"No, but Sam and I can stop and pick up some breakfast food. You want anything?"

"Honestly? I wouldn't say no to a steak, egg, and cheese bagel."

"Your wish is my command. Be there in a half hour or so?"

"Sure, I'll unlock the door."

My brow furrowed. "Uh, is that safe?"

"Don't worry. I have about six guards in various places around my house and two inside. I'll tell them you're on your way."

"Okay, sounds like a plan."

"See you soon!"

She hung up, and I put my phone back in my pocket.

"Sooooo," Sam drawled from the passenger's seat. "Am I chaperoning another impromptu date between you two?"

"No. And don't joke about that in front of Savvy," I said, completely serious. "She's kind of going through some things right now."

"Shit, really? I had no idea."

"She was practically crying in the truck when we were last together."

"What, she was?" Sam's eyes widened, and I could tell his surprise was genuine. "I couldn't tell. I just thought she was really exhausted."

It was then that I realized Sam didn't have enhanced hearing, sight, or the ability to smell. So to him, the acrid salt of Savvy's tears didn't exist. He couldn't hear the little hitches in her breath or stutters in her heartbeat. He couldn't even sense her extremely stressed pheromones.

Huh, we really experienced the world in different ways. It was so easy to forget. No wonder Savvy often felt isolated. Not only did most of our pack not understand her daily lived experience, but we didn't even realize she had one that was different from our own.

"Anyway, I heard you mention breakfast?" Sam asked.

That startled me into a laugh, and I threw my blinker on to pull onto the road. "Yeah, let's get you your coffee."

"How did you know?"

Sam was more talkative after that, and about twenty minutes later, we were being handed our food through the drive-thru window. Sam

immediately pulled his meal out and started chowing down, but I figured I could wait for Savvy until I ate. It wouldn't help her feel less lonely if she was forking food during Ashlee's session while the rest of us had eaten.

It wasn't far to her house, either. Most of us in the city tried to stay within twenty minutes of each other for safety's sake. If I remembered right, Savvy's house was about fifteen minutes away.

I made it in twelve, only speeding a little. Leaving Sam in the car, I went up to her door, which was indeed locked. But just like she said, I could smell fellow pack members all around the place, their scent strong and pheromones exuding protectiveness. Good. If the witches somehow managed to take out our alma...well, it would cut us off at the knees.

Heading in, I nodded to the guards sitting at her kitchen table, then scented around for her. A few moments later, Savvy was coming down the stairs, hair still damp.

She was wearing standard leggings and a tunic-like top, the fabric clinging to her slightly from her shower. It was...appealing, to say the least, but I tried not to stare.

"Food's in the car. Do you need more time to get ready?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm good to go," she said, giving the guards a salute. "I'm off on alma duty with Kaleb. I'll be at Mahlan's house, so you lot can stay here if you like. Kaleb and Sam will be my escorts on the way there and back."

They nodded formally, like they didn't know Savvy at all. From what I'd seen, Emma's guards were plenty conversational with her.

Huh.

I was beginning to think Savvy was being generous in describing her experience with our pack. Maybe later, I could chat with some of our guards and encourage them to be a little more social with her.

That was rich, coming from me.

"So, how was work?" I asked as we headed to the truck.

Savvy let out yet another sigh, and for a moment, I thought that was her answer. But she launched into a story about a rude doctor who got into an argument with a senior nurse. And she didn't stop once she got into the truck, continuing to explain the drama that had erupted on her entire floor.

Well, I'd gotten her talking. That was step one. I wasn't sure what step two was, but I could figure it out while we were at Lyssa's.



## Chapter 5

---

## *Savannah*

“And then our newest nurse, who is clearly sleeping with one of the head attendings, tried to ‘call out’ Esperanza, and everything started up again!”

“OMG, yes! *Grey’s Anatomy* IRL,” Sam said gleefully from the back. “I am *living!*”

I burst into laughter at Sam’s enthusiasm. “Yeah, I guess it is kind of like that.”

“It’s certainly a lot to follow,” Kaleb said, a wry grin on his handsome face.

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, it is.”

Despite my heated, nearly ten-minute story, I was feeling refreshed after my shower and venting to Kaleb. It could have been my imagination, but I swore he smelled extra delicious from where he’d driven, something woodsy and undeniably masculine.

I should have been sleeping, but whatever. I’d managed to catch two full-hour naps before and in the middle of my shift, which was basically enough to get me through another full day.

The only consequence was that I would be completely out of it the next day and probably need to sleep a whole ten hours. Otherwise, I’d start to get real hazy. And sometimes outright aggressive in a way that wasn’t me.

But it was worth it if I ended up helping Ashlee. The young girl had been through so much, and she deserved the best we could give her. She’d worked so hard since recovering, even testing a grade higher in school! That was one impressive shifter. So if I needed to be a little sleep-deprived for a while, well, I would just be sleep-deprived.

At least I had my food and orange juice to distract me from Kaleb's alluring scent and refuel a bit. Normally, I would never eat breakfast stuff right after a shift, but I hoped eating it now would trick my body into thinking it was right after I had woken up and was fresh-eyed.

There were worse ways I'd tried to stay awake before.

And it kind of worked. I finished the food right about when we pulled up to Mahlan's drive. Thankfully, I didn't descend into a food coma and even felt more energized as I followed the guys out of Kaleb's truck.

While I sipped on the last of my OJ through my straw, my eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the broad span of Kaleb's strong shoulders. He certainly had an impressive frame. How had I never noticed that before?

I didn't have an answer to that, and Sam brought up a great question as we headed toward the front door.

"I just realized—it's a school day, right? We're not, like, interfering with Ashlee's education, right?"

"Since when do you care about scholastic achievement?" Kaleb shot back. Maybe it was my imagination, but he and Sam seemed to be getting along better. Not that they were at each other's throats before, but there seemed to be a synergetic vibe between the two that wasn't there before.

"*Excuse you.* I was on the dean's list every semester of my schooling since I was thirteen. School was my haven."

"Haven? Really?"

Sam stopped in his tracks, hands on his hips. "Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Because he's forgotten what it's like to depend on a school's lunch program in order to eat," I said, walking past the two.

The look on Kaleb's face turned contemplative for a moment. "Huh...I guess I did forget about that. I was on their breakfast and lunch programs." His expression shifted again, one that was bittersweet and full of melancholy. "Honestly, I didn't go hungry very often. My mother worked really, really hard to make sure I was fed, even when we were flat broke."

Oh, right. His mother. I felt bad about how easily I'd forgotten what little I knew about Kaleb's past, but he carried his trauma well. He didn't seem to have any anger issues or lash out at people. He was just *really* attached to his packmate and best friend.

Which I got. While my magic couldn't heal PTSD at its root, I had studied it in nursing and my traditional alma healing. Despite shifters'

resilience, it wasn't uncommon for us to have that particular mental struggle. After all, we tended to see many more horrific things than the average human. It was one thing that an accelerated ability to mend's oneself didn't solve.

"That's a real credit to her," I said, wanting him to know that it was okay for him to talk about his mother but that he could also move right along if he wanted to.

I watched his face carefully as several emotions flitted across it. Fondness, sadness, the subtle melancholy of nostalgia mixed with the faint echo of grief. Affection. Admiration.

I'd never lost a parent, and my grandparents were alive. They weren't a huge part of my life, as we were scattered all over the world and taking care of our packs, but we texted often enough. I loved them and knew when it was eventually their time to pass, I would mourn them.

But that was different than Kaleb's loss. The burn of a loved one gone too soon by something they couldn't help, beaten by a battle they shouldn't have had to fight.

"I-" I began.

"Oh, there you are!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin as Lyssa opened the door and called out to us. Geez, how I wished I had their hearing skills.

"Here we are!" Sam said, skirting around us to hurry up to his longtime friend. "Girl, this alpha thing is *working* for you! You look good!"

"One, I'm not an alpha; my mate is," the young woman answered with a smile. "Secondly, it's all the good food. You'd be amazed what proper nutrition does for your skin and hair."

"I see. So I take it you're chugging down a lot of those weird shakes you wolves love and eating a solid six square meals a day."

"Something like that," Lyssa answered, chuckling before she looked to us. "Savvy! I thought you would have been too busy to come!"

"I'm never too busy for Ashlee," I answered, stepping onto the porch and hugging her. It was a quick show of affection, but Lyssa embraced me like there was nothing unusual about it. Which, naturally, made me feel better. "Is she ready?"

"Yeah. I briefed her on everything that was going to happen and made her a green tea with honey and chamomile. She's as relaxed and mentally prepared as she can be."

While I appreciated that, my professional side required me to ask more questions. “And we’re absolutely sure she *wants* to do this? She doesn’t have to, even if it would be helpful.”

“Oh, trust me, I wouldn’t let any of you touch a hair on her head if she didn’t want it,” Lyssa said firmly, and I believed her. Although Lyssa was young, not even twenty herself, she was fiercely protective of the thirteen-year-old girl. “This was her idea, actually.”

I nodded, feeling much more assured. “Thank you, Lyssa. She’s lucky to have someone like you.”

“If she was lucky, she’d be with her family and wouldn’t need me at all. But I’m happy we found each other, even if the circumstances weren’t the best.”

I couldn’t agree more. I realized it was far too soon to call Lyssa a mother or anything like that, but the connection between her and Ashlee was undeniable.

“Not to change the subject,” Lyssa continued. “Uh, Kaleb, it’s good to see you, but why are you here?”

“Sam didn’t wanna drive.”

Kaleb’s matter-of-fact answer startled a chuckle out of Lyssa, and she shook her head at her witchy friend. “Lazy bones.”

“Hey, I needed to conserve my energy for your not-daughter, who is totally your daughter. Don’t blame me for being efficient.”

“Uh-huh,” Lyssa droned sarcastically while walking back in, giving us room to follow her. It seemed like she’d done even more work on the house lately, taking out a couple of the darker cabinets and replacing them with open-concept ones with plants and what looked like a collectible tea set on them.

“My aunt sent me those,” Lyssa murmured, noticing where my eyes had landed.

“Oh?” I tried to keep my tone neutral, as I wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. I figured if Lyssa had them on display, it was probably good, but I didn’t want to assume.

“Yeah. She and my grandparents were at the wedding, remember?”

I squinted, trying to recall. I’d had a bit much to drink, not realizing how strong shifters tended to make their cocktails. I vaguely remembered dancing with Parker, Kaleb, Emma, and pretty much every elder in the pack who was up for it, but that was about it.

“Ah, it was such a busy day! It all kind of blends together.”

Lyssa laughed at that, and it was so good to see her smile without hesitation or uncertainty. While I might not have been able to recall everything that had happened at her wedding, I *did* remember just how on edge she’d been when she’d first joined our pack. She was practically a different woman now.

“You mean you got sloshed, and your memories are all drunk-fuzzy?” she teased.

“You say potato, I say potahto,” I answered, grinning wickedly.

Goodness, why had I locked myself away from my friends when I was hurting? I’d been with the three of them for a total of five minutes, and I was already feeling so much better.

Sometimes, I could be so stupid.

“So, where’s the runt?” Sam asked, surprisingly down to business. I even felt some nervousness from him, which was interesting.

“She’s upstairs, reading. I can call her down once you’re set up, if that’s alright.”

“Actually, that’s what I was wondering. Did I spy that y’all set up a gazebo by the lake?”

“Oh, yeah. Just got finished a few days ago. Why?”

“I think it would be nice to set up out there. The sun’s shining, and the new plants you put there are like...really excited about life right now.”

“Sure! I think Ashlee would like that better anyway. We’ve had a picnic by the lake almost every time she visited.”

“Perfect! I’ll start getting set up. Kaleb, you should introduce yourself to Ashlee and ask if she’s okay to start. Lyssa, if you wouldn’t mind escorting him?”

“I don’t mind at all!”

With a satisfied nod, Sam grabbed my hand and started tugging me out of the house. I hadn’t expected that, but let him pull me along. It wasn’t like he was rough or that I was mad about it. It was just a surprising level of familiar touch between us. Did that mean Sam trusted me? It seemed so.

“Yeah, this will be perfect,” he said as we reached the gazebo, which was bordered by vibrant, leafy coleus plants and some flowers. I knew it was too cold at night for them to be in bloom, but I was sure they would open soon. “Man, this place is really coming together!”

“It is, isn’t it?” I mused, looking around with fresh eyes. While there were leftover tracks from landscaping vehicles and materials still lying around in some spots, those were the only signs that changes were going on. “I have no idea how they’ve had time to do all that.”

Lyssa and Mahlan had also planted a cute little herb garden outside their kitchen window. It wasn’t huge, but it was lovely, with a dozen or so plants she could harvest as she learned to cook. They’d also set up a flower bed on the opposite side of the house and a cobblestone path from the front door to the long driveway. The driveway had a turnaround now, which was convenient, considering how often the pack’s inner circle met at their alpha’s new home.

“Right? I feel like I’ve barely had enough time to remember to brush my teeth, and they’re playing Martha Stewart and Bob the Builder over here.”

*Ha!* I chuckled at the image of Mahlan as Martha and Lyssa as Bob.

My laugh seemed to satisfy Sam, and he began to draw symbols on the gazebo’s floor and pull an impossible number of candles out of his bag. For a moment, I let my mind drift, imagining what it would be like to live in such a place. To be the owner of a large lake house I’d designed myself, with a kitchen full of kids and plenty of extra rooms to take care of my patients.

“Hey, you got a lighter? I seem to have forgotten mine,” Sam said.

“Of course I do! An alma wouldn’t be caught dead without one.”

“Really? I thought you guys used blood magic for the most part, not any spells that needed fire.”

He’d looked up how our magic worked? I was faintly flattered by that, especially since I hadn’t done anything to study his type of magic. Sam was really doing right by us, and sometimes I felt like I treated him the same way my pack treated me.

I had to fix that.

“It’s not for spells,” I answered. “But working with rapid healing can be tricky, especially if a wolf’s body tries to swallow a projectile.”

Sam stopped what he was doing and looked at me with eyes as wide as saucers. “Uh, does that happen a lot?”

“No,” I said with a laugh. “The usual response is for the body to push intrusions *out*, but sometimes the wires get crossed, so to speak, and it tries

to pull it into the body to surround it with scar tissue. This is usually when poison is involved.”

“Alright, so that’s horrifying. But where does the lighter come in?”

“Well, wolf healing has a sort of order of operations-”

“Are you about to go into PEMDAS right now?”

I laughed again. Goodness, Sam was a funny one. Would it be insulting if we invited him to girls’ night? I realized that his being gay didn’t mean he was any less of a man, so I would need to feel it out.

But perhaps after we were out of the woods with the witches, the wedding, and everything else that was happening.

“Kind of. But also kind of not. You see, most shifters with accelerated healing abilities follow similar patterns. Their healing will always tend to what it deems the most dangerous injury first. So if you’re bleeding out from a stomach wound and have a headache, it’ll go for the stomach wound first. If you’ve got frostbite and your appendix is also bursting, it’ll go after the frostbite.”

“Man, that would be one unlucky sonofabitch.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, it would.”

“I don’t mean to be petulant, Savvy, but I’m still not getting what the lighter is for.”

“Oh, right! Okay, so if the body is having that weird error and pulling something into it that it shouldn’t, we use the lighter against the skin just above it. Burning almost always supersedes any other type of injury, so the body focuses on healing that wound, which allows us to pull whatever foreign body we need out.

“And there are other instances where cauterization is needed,” I continued. “Like I said, if the wolf is suffering a grave injury *and* bleeding out, the body might decide to focus on the injury, and more manual strategies are needed.”

Sam whistled, shaking his head as he returned to lighting his candles. “That’s kinda metal, you know?”

“Metal? I can’t say I’ve ever been called that before.”

“Probably because people are fooled by that pretty face of yours.” He gestured from his eyes to me, his fingers in a V. “But I see you, Miss Thing. You’re real fierce under all that ‘mamma will take care of you’ energy.”

Now I was immensely flattered. It was kind of wild how Sam could go from haughty and somewhat unapproachable to so utterly charming. It was



clear that he had some solid walls built around him. It meant quite a bit that he was beginning to lower them around me.

Maybe...maybe if I had a few more people like Sam in my life, I wouldn't have to be so lonely.

"Shhhh, it's a secret," I said conspiratorially.

"Ha! I got you, girl. I like these doggies, but we magical folks got to stick together."

I didn't bother correcting him that I was a shifter. It was an easy enough mistake to assume I was a different species, and I didn't need to waste time explaining it now. Maybe at one of those future girls' nights.

But for the moment, I contented myself with watching Sam work. After he finished setting up the candles, he sat in the center, reaching out with his hands on either side of him. I may not have been a witch, but I could feel his power as it spread out around him.

It wasn't the violent whipcrack I'd felt before with other European-based witches—the bright pop of power followed by reality rapidly rending itself to fit the caster's will. No, Sam's magic was something else entirely.

It spread itself around us almost like a fog, simmering and very much present but barely a mist against my senses. As it pooled on the ground, the plants began to respond, pinging with an energy I'd never sensed from plants before. Was that how Sam always perceived them as a green witch? I couldn't say. I wished I knew more about his magic, but I didn't even know if it was Celtic, indigenous, or even Greek in origin.

But whatever it was, the entire area around the gazebo began to respond to him, resonating with the same frequency of his magic, some of the plants gently reaching out with leaves or tendrils to brush against his hands.

Suddenly, I remembered when Emma and Theo had faced down one of the lead witches terrorizing her. She'd said that Sam had essentially saved the day, appearing out of nowhere in a rush of vines and wiping out the powerful witch.

I'd honestly doubted the veracity of that before, assuming that Emma was discounting her own help. After all, I'd never heard of a green witch going on the offensive beyond brewing poisons or curses. But now that I was seeing and feeling Sam work from start to finish, Emma's tale became a lot more believable.

"Alright, I'm almost done out here," Sam said. "Like I said, this is gonna be a little different for Ashlee since she's not cursed like Emma, but I

figured the quicker we can make the process for her, the better.”

“I agree. It’s amazing that she’s willing to do this.”

Sam stood, reaching into his bag for what looked like a few crystals. “That’s Lyssa for you. She brings out the best in everyone.”

I thought back to all the changes in the pack since Lyssa’s arrival and how I’d gone from being on the fringe to feeling mostly like one of the girls. “Yeah, she really does.”

With a warm feeling building in my stomach, I headed inside. After a brief conversation with Lyssa, she went to fetch Ashlee, who came down the stairs in surprisingly good spirits.

“Hello, Savvy!” she greeted warmly, giving me an excited wave that only kids could do. It was good to see that she hadn’t become too cool for such things, despite being almost halfway through her teenage years. I had worried about regression when I’d first met her, as the trauma she’d experienced had been prolonged and severe. Still, she seemed to be recovering beautifully and hitting her milestone markers at a good pace. “I bet it’s nice to be called somewhere with no blood or guts.”

“It most certainly is!” I admitted. “It helps that I get to see one of my favorite patients.”

Ashlee laughed and rushed down the rest of the stairs. “I bet you say that to everyone.”

“Believe it or not, I don’t.”

“Yeah, just to me and Emma,” Lyssa said, blowing my cover. I blew a raspberry at her, but she batted her eyes at me. *Brat!*

“I’m in good company, then!” Ashlee said, apparently more mature than either of us. “Are you coming, Mr. Kaleb?”

“You can call me Kaleb,” the wolf in question said from the kitchen. I hadn’t even noticed him there. He was standing at the windows in front of the breakfast nook, looking out at the yard with what I assumed was a nutritional shake Lyssa had made for him. Sun spilled over his face, casting his skin in the warm, buttery glow that came from early mornings full of promise.

He looked so striking. An artist’s portrait come into being. Life breathed into paint itself to create a sentient vision.

My cheeks quickly started to heat, so I excused myself and hurried outside, saying something about checking on Sam.

I managed to pull myself together by the time everyone else came out, and things got started. I stood at the ready but out of the way, watching Sam as he went through the ritual.

Since he'd warned me multiple times, I didn't expect the ritual to go like Emma's, but after a few minutes of him and Ashlee sitting in the middle of the circle and nothing happening, I began to feel a bit uneasy.

I could feel Sam's magic pool and churn, but it wasn't going anywhere. Which I was pretty sure wasn't supposed to happen.

After a few more minutes, Lyssa, Kaleb, and I began to exchange uncertain glances as the smell of Sam's acrid frustrations filled the air.

In the end, it was Ashlee who spoke first, opening her eyes and glancing around. "Uh, something is supposed to be happening, right?"

Sam let go of her hands and let out a flustered breath. "Yeah, it is. I don't get what's going on."

"Are you not able to reach her magic?" I asked.

"No, that's the thing!" Sam said, chewing his lip. "I *did* reach it! She didn't have a curse like Emma, but I found little threads of their magic buried deep inside her. But every time I try to yank on them, they activate but won't let me pull them to the surface."

"Activate them? What does that even mean?" I asked.

"It means there's magic in her, and it's reacting like it has a purpose, but it's not doing anything or leading me anywhere."

"Sounds frustrating," Kaleb remarked, trying his hand as the king of understatement.

"I... 'm feeling kind of nauseous," Ashlee said, a slow flush creeping up her cheeks.

"Really?" I said, straightening. "Here, let me check."

"Savvy, wait!"

But I was already stepping over the circle, my hand cupping the young girl's cheek.

And then the world cracked in two.

Thunder and lightning, cataclysm and apocalypse. Brimstone, fire, churning, burning *power*. It filled my mind and body, throwing me off my feet, through one of the gazebo pillars, and across the lawn.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. I knew I should be in pain, but my brain couldn't even compute pain over the maelstrom blooming in my chest.

*The blood! The blood! Her blood! It's her blood! We need it!*  
*Destroy the blood, destroy the pack.*  
*Destroy her, destroy the pack!*

Voices that were not my own shouted in my head, drowning out everything else. I was awash in an unending deluge of chaos, sending my consciousness spilling this way and that.

I was vaguely aware of what sounded like lightning cracking in several places around me. I didn't know if it was real or part of the cacophony in my mind until I heard Kaleb's voice rise above the din.

"Witches! Lyssa, get Ashlee out of here!"

Wait, witches were here? But that wasn't possible! We were inside wards. Wards that were so thick, my hair practically stood on end every time we passed through them. There was no way...

But that debate fled from my mind as I heard Kaleb shift and Sam launch to his feet, already speaking spells. I needed to help. I knew I'd heard more than two lightning cracks, and considering these witches had gotten the drop on us, we needed all the help we could get.

Even if that help was an injured alma.

I tried to move and shake off the storm consuming me, but I couldn't. Looking down, I realized that part of that wooden pillar was sticking out of my side, pinning me to the ground.

Okay, so that was horrific.

Almost immediately, all my nursing and healing knowledge began to line up in my head, walking me through what I needed to do if I was treating a patient. Except I wasn't treating a patient at all.

I was triaging *myself*.

First, I needed to stay calm. Well, as calm as one could be with a splintered chunk of wood sticking out of me. An accelerated heart rate meant I would bleed out faster and could speed my descent into shock. I needed to control my breathing and focus what little healing powers I had toward myself.

Ever so slowly and painfully, I managed to sit up, concentrating on my breathing. Which was difficult, considering I felt the energy within me trying to pull me into pieces and keep me pinned.

I must have inadvertently activated some sort of trap when I touched Ashlee, but the details could be sussed out later. At the moment, I knew my help was needed.

I couldn't make it to my feet, though I hadn't expected to do so. Not with what was going on in my body and my very soul. But I managed to get onto my hands and knees so I could crawl towards Sam. I could help him, I knew that much.

The details of the battle around me were fuzzy, barely registering in my head, but I could see huge vines surging out of the ground, stopping the witches from following Lyssa and Ashlee while trying to defend Sam and Kaleb. But I could also tell that Sam was bone-tired from his ritual, and no doubt, all the other magic he'd done for the pack lately.

We couldn't have that.

I have no idea how I made it over to Sam, how one of the witches didn't swoop in and end me. I was pretty sure they were the ones I was hearing in my head, their wicked words overlapping in a vicious crescendo of madness.

*The special blood. Her blood. It is required!*

*We take the blood, and the rest wither.*

*Death to them, death to all, until only we are left!*

*The blood! We need her blood!*

I wanted to scream for them to stop, to clamp my hands over my ears and curl into a ball where I couldn't be touched. But I also knew I couldn't give in to such temptations as they might very well result in my death and others.

A snarl from Kaleb drew me out of the screeching, and I flopped onto my uninjured side next to Sam, ignoring how it drove the breath out of me. With the last of my strength, I reached out, my hand managing to grip his ankle.

And then, I gave him everything I had.

Maybe it was foolish. Well, this was probably one of the riskiest things I'd ever done. But desperate times called for desperate measures, so I opened the floodgates within me and let all of it flow into Sam.

That was the funny thing about alma magic. It couldn't do a whole lot to help me. But everyone else around me, even a witch who used a different type of magic? Well, it could be quite the boon. I supposed it was nature's way of making almas need packs. Otherwise, why wouldn't we just go off on our own and live our immortal, self-healing lives? By making it so packs needed almas for healing and almas needed packs for protection, it ensured their codependency.

I wasn't sure that was a healthy thing.

But it wasn't a quandary I could puzzle out while impaled, bleeding, under attack, and giving away all the magic I could to an ally. The edges of my vision began to go fuzzy, but the results were almost instantaneous. I could feel Sam strengthen and see the vines increase in number, with smaller, thinner ones trying to grip the attackers' feet and clothes.

There were...four of them? Five? I couldn't tell. While the malevolent symphony in my head dimmed, it wasn't because the trap lessened but because I was losing consciousness. I could feel my awareness slipping away from me as I grew cold. My medical mind was all too happy to supply why that was a bad thing.

I was dying.

I was dying, and if the battle didn't end soon, I would die. Part of me was pretty certain that was exactly the witches' goal. Destroy the alma, destroy the pack, right? For whatever reason, they wanted us gone.

And it wasn't because of the brothers.

Not this time.

The color began to drain from the world, leaving me lying in the middle of the gray. Part of me found it funny that I was lying on my side in the middle of the battle, but it was only a very small part. The rest of me was caught up in the curse devouring me, and the blood trickling from my wound.

My vision began to wink out entirely, the world plunging into darkness over and over again, and each time it returned, it was fuzzier than the last. Time lost all meaning, and I wasn't sure if I'd been there for a few seconds, a few minutes, or a hundred years.

"Is it over?"

Someone's voice—I couldn't tell whose—broke through the tempest spinning in my mind. The battle was over? That was a far better outcome than I'd hoped.

"Where's Savannah?"

"Savvy? Savvy!"

That was Sam, and I felt his warm hands on me. Almost instantly, his warm, fizzing magic tried to sink into my skin. It didn't get far, but the insane thrall of voices inside me settled to a dull roar.

"Hey, can you hear me? Was that you who gave me that boost?" Sam asked.

Wait, he hadn't even known? I knew battle could narrow someone's perception, but if I'd had my head on straight, I might have been insulted.

"What's going on?" That was Kaleb, followed closely by Lyssa, who let out a ragged gasp.

"Oh my God! The wood i-i-is..."

She couldn't finish, and I didn't blame her. I knew that I had to be a grisly sight. As hard as it was to think, I couldn't help but hope that Ashlee wasn't around. She'd seen enough.

Oh, God...if I died, would the young girl blame herself? It wasn't her fault! But considering all I knew about psychology, she would harbor guilt over it.

Well, that did it. I couldn't die.

I tried to steel myself, to hold onto the tender tendril of life within me. I gripped the few pieces of me riddled with witch magic and told them that we *would* survive, that we had no other options.

That, along with Sam's magic, helped my eyes flicker open—I hadn't even realized I'd closed them—but I still couldn't speak, and I still couldn't breathe. It still felt like acidic, inky lightning was frying my every cell, seeking to scour everything that was *me* from the face of the earth.

"Sam, help her!" Kaleb shouted.

"I'm trying!" he snapped, and then something was being poured into my mouth. I couldn't move to swallow it, but the green witch pinched my nose with one hand and rubbed my throat up and down with the other. "That's it, Savvy. You drink up. I gotchu, okay? You're not going anywhere on this here day, you got me?"

A lovely sentiment, and one I agreed with. Whatever Sam had forced me to swallow hit my stomach, and a slow, syrupy warmth tried to spread out from it.

For a moment, an oh-so-fleeting moment, I felt an iota of relief. But it was like the malevolent force within me grew hands that surged towards my stomach, ripping apart every bit of fizzing peace starting to build there.

"Dammit! Whatever magic is in her is bad!"

"I don't even understand how magic got into her!" Lyssa cried, sounding utterly distraught. I was traumatizing everyone, wasn't I? If I weren't barely clinging to life, I might have felt bad about that.

"Ashlee was rigged with a booby trap," Sam said.

“What? A booby trap? Like she’s a fucking temple from *Indiana Jones*?”

“Not quite like that, but the why and how don’t matter if we can’t stop it!” Even with everything, I could hear the panic in Sam’s voice. Did he really care about me so much? Maybe my priorities were skewed, but I couldn’t help but find that rather...sweet. “Can we call another pack’s alma? Get their blood into her? There are other packs in this city, right?”

“Alma blood doesn’t work on almas,” Kaleb said roughly, his voice garbled like he was speaking through fangs. Given the battle he’d just fought, I couldn’t blame him for being unable to fully assume his human form.

“What?! Who designed that system?”

“Sam, focus!” That was Lyssa, her voice suddenly firmer. Ah, so that was what she was like in a crisis. Goodness knew we could use it, because the power within me had a stranglehold around my throat, and the world started to wink in and out again.

“...that way forever.”

“...need help!”

“...no, time.”

“...what...do?”

I felt like I should be present for a conversation about how to save me. That somehow, I could give advice on how to save me. But I couldn’t quite claw myself back up to the surface.

At least not until I heard Sam say, “Mate her!”

I could have winked out again, or the group descended into silence at his suggestion. It was impossible to tell, especially as I fell further and further from the light.

I was so *cold*. I didn’t think I’d ever been so cold in my life. Although I didn’t have abilities like most of my pack members, I could keep myself much warmer than the average human.

“Excuse me?” Kaleb asked finally.

“Your mating process creates a bond that shares lifeforce and energy and all that shit, right? If you bite her, that’ll give me enough time to break this trap and save her!”

“I can’t do that!” Kaleb objected, sounding horrified. And hey, I got it was a stressful situation, but geez, was it such a bad thing, being mated to



me? “She’s unconscious! She can’t consent! You should *never* mate someone without their express permission!”

Okay, I wasn’t insulted anymore. That was actually quite sweet. Who knew Kaleb was such a romantic?

“Kaleb, look, I get that...but if you don’t...it...die!”

The argument faded, and for a moment, I was floating there in the black. The greedy hands of the evil within me grabbed at my body, fingers biting into my very soul as they tried to tug me down into the deepest parts of the well.

I tried desperately to resist. I knew there was no coming back from that inevitable pit of nothingness. But I couldn’t move or speak. I couldn’t even hear the people around me anymore.

I was leaving. In moments, I would be gone. Would my pack be able to get another alma before the witches used my death as a good time to attack? Losing two almas in five years was not a good sign of Silent Ridge’s ability to protect their healer.

But then I felt warm, strong arms lifting me into a sitting position. Perhaps ironically, the spike of pain roused me slightly. Enough to crack a single eye open and see a hazy shadow that was vaguely Kaleb-shaped.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmured. Had he been crying? It sounded like he had been crying, but when could that have happened? “Savvy, I hope you can hear me and understand I’m only doing this to save you. I just...I can’t let you die here.”

He sounded so torn up, and I wished I could comfort him, that I could reach up my hand and pat his cheek, telling him everything would be okay.

But if I could do any of that, I wouldn’t have needed him to mate me.

And the crazy thing was...well, I was okay with it. I wanted to *live*. Sure, it wasn’t ideal, but neither was my pack getting wiped out after my death. I needed to warn them about the voices I’d heard and everything I’d felt.

*Don’t fight. Give in. Rest. Sleep. Sleep for us.*

*You can’t save them!*

*Spill the blood. Give it up. It’s not yours anymore.*

*These aren’t your people. They never were.*

*You’re more witch than wolf. You feel it, you feel it.*

*Give us the blood. The blood. The blood!*

Once more, they were building on each other until it was deafening. But just when I thought my mind would shatter under their weight, fire burst against my neck.

*Oh!*

That fire rushed through me immediately, burning in an unchecked inferno. At first, I thought I was dying in a new and more painful way, but then I realized exactly what was happening.

That wasn't a torch at my neck; it was Kaleb biting into my flesh, his teeth sinking ever so deep in a traditional mating bite. And the fire ripping through me was his energy, his life force. Was that how he existed every day? Was that what it was like to be a full shifter?

I didn't know, and I certainly couldn't ask. All I knew was that whenever the fire made contact with the darkness, those oily, onyx hands would retreat, shrinking back against the heat.

My eyelids fluttered, and the cold devouring me began to ease, allowing my grip on life to strengthen. But it wasn't enough, with the curse fighting back and trying to push Kaleb's energy out of me.

That's when I felt his teeth release me. Part of me whined at the loss of contact, wanting more, *needing* more. But then his large hand gently cupped the back of my head, and I felt myself being pressed against something warm that smelled incredible.

"Come on, Savvy. Just bite down, okay? I can help."

Bite?

Oh...*oh!* He wanted me to bite him. To complete our bond and strengthen our exchange of energy. But I didn't have fangs like him. I likely couldn't pierce his shifter skin with my dull, flat teeth.

He said he would help me, though, right?

If he said that, I should trust him.

So...I trusted him.

I didn't know how I summoned the energy or control over my body, but I managed to open my mouth over his mating gland. I could almost feel it pulsing against my tongue, like it was calling to me.

With all the force I could muster, I bit down. But it wasn't enough to even irritate the skin, let alone break it. Not that I was surprised. I was barely breathing—how was I supposed to pierce the dermis of an actual werewolf?

But Kaleb, smooth as ever, changed the position of his hands, pressing firmly on the bottom of my jaw and the top of my head. It was probably awkward-looking as hell, but I didn't care; I was just grateful for the help. Besides, it wasn't like I could feel pain from it with everything going on within me.

But I *did* feel the moment my teeth finally broke through his skin, blood trickling into my mouth. It was as if the inferno within me coalesced into a full-on star. A radiant ball of energy that eradicated every shadow trying to devour me.

Holy shit. The *holiest* of shits. I was immediately flooded with not only energy but also *good*-feeling sensations. They ebbed at the pain, trying to slowly work me down from the precipice I'd been dragged to.

Finally, my eyes flickered open, and I saw Kaleb's face. His teeth were overgrown and sticking over his lips, while his eyes were red with tears. As strange as it was, the sight moved me. Moved me and filled me with a fondness I hadn't expected.

"T-t-thank y-y-you," I whispered, hoping he could hear how sincere I was.

And then, the world winked out entirely.

## Chapter 6

---

## *Kaleb*

*Ring!*

I answered my phone, unable to hide the weariness in my voice as I did.  
“What’s up, Sam?”

“I’m almost done brewing this potion. Any update on your end?” The witch sounded truly frantic, and as dire as the situation was, I really appreciated how much he cared about the situation.

“She’s sleeping still. Hasn’t stirred at all.”

“Can you feel anything through your bond?”

“She’s weak but not quite at death’s doorstep.”

“You sure?”

Oh, yes. I was most *certainly* sure. I could live for a hundred years, and I would never forget how it felt when my teeth sank into her, and her pain sank into *me*. I had no idea how she was still alive, let alone able to bite me back. The force of it had been so intense, so violent. In the hours since, I’d eaten nearly eight thousand calories and still felt hazy and weak.

But even a full stomach and unlimited nutritional shakes couldn’t distract me from what I’d felt when Savannah and I were bonded. She’d been dying, so there were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Except it was more than that. It wasn’t like her body was slowly sinking toward the inevitable end that waited for us all. No, she’d been wrapped up in sticky, malignant webs that were trying to drag her somewhere else. Somewhere she didn’t belong. And they’d been so *hungry*, as if they were going to devour her whole.

I shuddered and got out of my chair, going over to Savvy’s bed to listen to her breathing again. Sometimes it felt like the only comfort that would

get me through the night.

It was still surreal to me that just that morning, we'd been attacked by five witches out of nowhere. I knew I was supposed to be alert at all times, but we were so deep within Sam's wards and our territory that I hadn't even considered a possible ambush. But that was exactly what had happened.

So many things had occurred all at once, and it had taken us hours after to figure out what had happened. Apparently, Ashlee had been a trap the entire time. The witches had always meant for us to find her, bring her home, and have our alma touch her.

But the wild thing was that Savvy had interacted with her several times, even healing her, and nothing had triggered the magical bomb within the young teen. It had taken Sam a bit, but he figured that when Lyssa had killed Sarah, it had broken the biggest ties of the curse, letting it sink into Ashlee when otherwise, it likely would have gone inactivated for her entire life.

Until Sam had put his energy into those tendrils and woke them back up.

None of us could have predicted what would happen, but Sam was beating himself up real bad. That was why I wasn't giving him a hard time for calling every other hour. I could tell he didn't want to be apart from Savvy, but he needed to do things that he could only do around his plants and the ingredients of his apothecary collection.

Besides, it wasn't like I didn't feel the need to get up and check Savvy's breathing every ten minutes, even though I was in the same room as her, mated to her, and had super senses.

Oh, yeah. I was *mated*. That had certainly come out of the blue. It wasn't that I was against the institution, but I was only recently willing to work on my codependent relationship with my best friend and adoptive brother. Talk about putting the horse before the carriage.

But if I had to do it all again, I would if it meant saving Savvy's life. She had been about to die—I could feel that the moment my teeth sank into her. And Savvy couldn't die. Not only would it be disastrous for our pack, but she didn't deserve to. She'd sacrificed everything for everyone else, including her own energy, to give Sam a boost.

It just wasn't *fair*. Why couldn't her healing powers work on her? I knew it was some sort of sick, evolved trait to make sure almas and packs had to rely on each other, but I hated it. I hated watching for hours and

hours as our bond tried to improve her healing from a slow crawl to something more drastic.

Assured that Savvy's breathing was where it needed to be, I sat down and read the instructions that the other packs' almas had left for me. I didn't know when they were called or who called them, as everything after our mating was a blur, but two older women had shown up with full healing kits and what looked like a surgeon. It had only taken one sniff for me to figure out he was a fae, and not for the first time, I'd wondered if we should take Savvy to the hospital. She was much more human than any shifter, right? She wouldn't accidentally shift or burn through medicine suspiciously fast or have intense reactions to things a human wouldn't.

But the almas ixnayed my concerns, saying there was enough of a difference for doctors to tell, especially if she went under the knife. So instead, Sam magically sterilized the dining room, and they performed surgery on Savvy right then and there.

Someone made me sit, I remembered that much, but I refused to leave Savvy's side, even as they removed that awful wooden post from her. They debrided the splinters as best they could, but they had to leave the wound open, packing it with gauze that I was supposed to change twice a day and wet the area with saline solution.

I'd never heard of just leaving a hole in someone's side. That seemed like the opposite of healing her. But they explained that if they closed it up, the splinters hidden in her body could remain there and fester, causing an infection she was too weak to fight.

Now, my mate was unconscious, packed with gauze, and still in for quite the fight for her life.

The thought made me sick to my stomach. I forced myself to focus on the words.

1. *Eat and drink enough.*

Oh, right. Although my middle felt like lead, I had to make sure I kept up my energy. Partially because I was the one watching over Savvy as she slept

in her bed, but also because our bond—meaning, my energy—was helping her heal faster. If I got too low, that energy would stop flowing, leaving Savvy to suffer. And I wouldn't let this generous woman suffer a moment more than she had to.

That was why I'd stayed at her side all day, despite the surgery, until she was cleared to move. I'd thought we'd have to stay at Mahlan's house the entire time, with Savvy spread out on the dining room table, but no. Apparently, magic could do some wild things, because even if the almas couldn't use their blood on her, they had their herbs and potions, the doctor had his skill, and Sam had plenty of spells to try.

That was probably the only reason Savvy was still alive, and I was grateful for it. I was also grateful I could get her into my truck, take her home, and tuck her into her bed. I didn't know if almas had nests like many female wolves did, but I figured it would do her better to be in her own place of healing than somewhere else. And I could rest easy just watching her, as there were even more guards around than before.

"It's gonna be alright," I murmured. I didn't know if I was assuring Savvy or myself, but either way, I would make sure that statement rang true. Savannah was my mate now, and I was going to be the best mate to her I possibly could.

Starting with number two on the list.

1. *Let her sleep as long as she needs.*

Even if I *really* wished that she would wake up.

\* \* \*

"Hhhh?"

I was in the bathroom when I heard the slightest hitch of breath. I never flushed and washed my hands so quickly. But then I remembered that Savvy had an open wound, so I turned right back around and washed my



hands for the full thirty seconds that the almas had advised me to, and then I poured on a generous amount of hand sanitizer. There was no way I was accidentally giving Savvy an infection. No sepsis allowed.

With that done, I rushed into Savvy's room to see her eyelids fluttering. It was pretty clear that she was rousing, although not fully conscious yet, and I was so glad that I was there for it. It would have been disappointing if I'd been at her side all night and all day, only to be missing the moment she woke.

"Hnnnh?" she murmured again, and finally her eyes opened. Or at least they tried to, but I could tell they were pretty stuck.

"Hey there, it's okay," I soothed. "Let me get a warm washcloth for you."

Her brows furrowed, so I knew she could hear me, but I wasn't sure if she could understand me. Either way, she needed that eye crust gone, so I rushed to the bathroom, dampened a soft cloth with warm water, wrung it out, and raced right back. It was hard to project a calm, soothing energy while trying to be as quick as possible, but I did my best.

"Here you are," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed and gently placing the cloth over her eyelids. "Just let that sit for a minute as you come to the surface, okay?"

She didn't nod but made a positive sort of groan, if such a thing existed. Closing my eyes, I listened to her heart, her breathing, and the blood rushing through her veins. Yeah, she was definitely waking up, but whatever medicines the almas and doctor had given her were keeping her from spiking into a panic attack. Not that I knew if Savvy had panic attacks or not. I supposed that was something I should learn about my future mate.

No, not future mate. Current mate. Still getting used to that.

"Alright, I think that should be long enough." Carefully, I lifted the washcloth, making sure to gently wipe away any remaining crusties.

Setting it to the side, when I straightened, Savvy's eyes were indeed open, those honeyed orbs staring at me somewhere between hazy and entirely too keen.

"Good to see you," I murmured, the sentiment absolutely true. The image of her lying on the ground, curled in the fetal position was burned into my mind, and I hated it. *Hated* it. "How are you feeling?"

She didn't answer right away, or at least not directly. Instead, one of her arms lifted, and her hand shakily pointed to her mouth. It was pretty cute,

but I didn't know what the gesture meant for a couple of beats.

"Uh, are you..." But then it hit me. "Oh! Are you thirsty?"

Her eyelids fluttered, and I could only assume that was a yes.

"Okay, I don't think you're ready to sit up and drink, but I froze some sports drinks and crushed them into ice chips if you want to suck on those?"

Another fluttering of her eyes.

"I'll be right back, then. Don't you worry."

I sprinted to the kitchen, grabbed the Gatorade chips from the freezer, then returned just as fast. If the guards thought anything of me ripping through the house, they didn't say anything. Then again, they probably knew better, considering we were newly mated and how grievously injured Savvy was.

By the time I returned, Savvy had managed to lift both her hands and bring them to a rest above her belly, crossed over each other. Sure, she wasn't performing a ballet performance in the middle of the room, but the sign of movement was incredibly encouraging.

"Alright, I'm back," I said softly, putting my calm demeanor back on. It was a wonder how soothing and collected Savvy always appeared to be whenever she was healing, because I was stressed to the gills. "Let's try one little chip and see where you go from there." I could have been wrong, but it looked like she gave the tiniest of nods. "Okay, here we go."

Picking up one of the smaller chunks, not even the size of half a penny, I brought it to her face. For some reason, that moment seemed to stretch on impossibly long as I waited for her mouth to open.

But it did, and I placed the chip on her tongue. Her chapped lips closed back up, and the look of contentment that crossed her features made everything worth it.

"Would you like me to put some ChapStick on you?" I asked, reaching into the nightstand. I'd spotted it in the bathroom on my very first trip there and had snatched it up, sure I would need it later. And I was right, as Savvy gave one of her tiny nods.

"Alright, let me get that for you."

And so went the next half hour. After applying lip balm to Savvy's mouth, I continued to feed her ice chips one by one. By the time she finished, a lot of them had melted, but that was alright; I could refreeze them, then break them up again. The important thing was that she was drinking on her own.

“Mmmm...tired,” Savvy murmured after some time, her eyelids drooping in a way that was different from her previous fluttering.

“That’s okay. Just go back to sleep. I’ll be right here.”

“...kay...”

And that was all she managed before she slipped back under.

It was an admittedly short interaction, but I was elated. This was huge progress for a bit over twenty-four hours—progress that a human would be incapable of. And I was pretty sure it was an exponential healing process, with her body picking up speed the further from death it got.

Time started to roll forward again, with Sam and the other almas calling me. When I updated them, everyone seemed thrilled, and I couldn’t help but agree. Savannah had a long way to go, at least from a shifter’s point of view, but she was indeed on the mend.

It was still sometime later before she roused again. This time, her eyes weren’t glued shut, and there was more clarity in them when she looked at me.

“Kaleb?” she murmured, her voice so shaky and thin that I probably wouldn’t have heard it if I weren’t a shifter.

“Hey there,” I said, not quite as softly but still much quieter than I would normally speak. For perhaps the hundredth time that day, I sat by her bedside.

“I’m...alive?”

“Yeah, despite those witches’ best efforts.”

She smiled faintly before grimacing. “I’m...in a lot of pain.”

“I’m not surprised. I have pain medicine for you. The almas left it.”

“Almas?”

“Oh, right. We called a couple from other packs, and they brought a doctor along to save you. You had a really nasty wound there.”

Savvy didn’t say anything right away. Although her face was still deathly pale, I could see thoughts flitting behind her eyes. Which was most definitely a welcome difference from the barely-there fluttering from before.

“I was...impaled?”

“Yeah.”

“By the gazebo post?”

“Not the main ones, but the smaller decorative ones that hold up the railing, yeah.” I didn’t know if I wasn’t supposed to tell her, but I figured

lying to her would be stupid since she was a medical professional. “I think Lyssa’s probably gonna tear that whole thing down now.”

I meant it as a joke, but Savvy didn’t laugh. Not that I could blame her. That probably wouldn’t feel too good, considering her injury.

“The splinters?”

“Ah, yes! The almas and doctor took as much out as they could, but they said they couldn’t close you up because it could seal them inside. They packed your wound instead.” I pointed to the setup on her vanity for when I needed to change her dressing. “They walked me through the process of flushing it properly and replacing the gauze.”

The slightest, faintest flicker of pink rose up her neck, pooling in her cheeks.

“Why are you doing this?”

I tilted my head, confused. Had I crossed a line? “What do you mean?”

“This...it’s a lot. You’re not a healer.”

“No, I’m not.” Did she not remember? To any shifter, it was obvious that I was locked to her side because I was her mate. Being far from her while she was injured would have been a living hell. And the more stressed I was, the less effectively our bond could funnel my healing into her.

But I couldn’t lie to her. I couldn’t keep it a secret. She deserved to know what had happened.

At the same time, was it the appropriate moment to tell her? She had just fully come into consciousness, and it clearly took her a great deal of energy to speak. Did I really need to throw her through a loop if she truly had forgotten?

I didn’t know. And unlike changing her dressing, the almas hadn’t left me any written instructions on the matter. So I just went with my gut.

“But I am your mate.”

Savvy’s eyes widened, and that flush to her cheeks grew stronger. Besides that, I couldn’t really read her expression, and I felt my stomach twisting this way and that.

“You bit me...” she murmured, her hand going to her neck. Sure enough, there was a bruise with angry red teeth marks on her tan skin. Normally, a mating bite would already be closed, but her body was dealing with more grievous injuries and would heal the bite later. Just like Savannah had explained before.

“Yes, I did,” I said cautiously, wondering if I was about to be cursed at and kicked out. It would spear me to my very soul, but I would understand if she did. I hadn’t had her consent, and I’d made her bite *me*, too. She hadn’t even had a choice in completing the bond fully.

And strangely enough, it wasn’t even like she was the first in our pack. Mahlan had to bite Lyssa before she even knew what wolf shifters were, and Theo had to bite Emma to stop a witch’s curse from draining her. I was murky on Jacobian and Hannah’s whole thing, but I knew it hadn’t been planned.

Huh, our pack had a bad habit.

But I’d always prided myself on the fact that I was never going to have that issue. After all, when I was attached to Parker at the hip, it wasn’t like I was looking to expand my life and have a family. Yet here I was, explaining to our alma how I’d taken away any chance she had at a genuine romance within our pack.

So I braced myself, hardly even daring to breathe. Because if Savvy cursed me and cast me out, I would listen to her. Sure, I could ignore her and insist that I stay by her side, but I wasn’t into forcing my mate to do anything she didn’t want to. As a warrior, I was supposed to protect people like her, even if it meant hurting myself.

The silence hung heavy between us, and I couldn’t help but listen to all her vitals, searching for any hint of what she was thinking. *Feeling*. But she was already in pain, like she said, so it was hard to tell what was an adrenaline response to me or her needing her meds.

“Thank you,” she said finally, and I was surprised my eyes didn’t pop right out of my head.

“Pardon?”

Another flicker of a smile. “Thank you,” she repeated, reaching over with a shaking hand to rest it atop mine. “You gave up so much to save me. I don’t take that lightly.”

I swore my heart thundered in my chest as my brain slammed on the brakes and did a U-turn to comprehend what she was saying.

She was *thanking* me? For biting her without her permission? Sure, I’d done it to save her, and I hoped she understood that. I hoped she could come to terms with what we’d had to do to keep her alive. But I never dared to dream she would be *grateful* for it.

“You’re...you’re not mad?”

God, I sounded like a teenage boy, but I couldn't help it. My mother, the loving woman she was, had drilled into me the importance of recognizing consent. When I was a kid and people would try to ruffle my hair or pinch my cheeks, she would stop them and tell them they needed to ask my permission. If I told her I was uncomfortable with kisses from older aunties at church, she taught me how to tell them no and backed me up if they didn't listen. I'd always gotten the feeling that someone had taken away her choice when she was younger, which was how she'd ended up with a trauma-spectrum disorder, but she'd never really confirmed. She'd never talked about her old pack, the one she'd married out of with my father, but I put together a couple of things when I realized I'd never met or heard of anyone on my maternal side.

And now that I was a grown man and considered an accomplished warrior, I was proud of my ability to protect those around me. The weaker. The younger. The older. Sure, I was codependent with Parker, but I still cared about my fellow pack members. Even before I realized I needed to be my own person, I would have laid down my life to protect them.

"Mad? No...why...I..." Savvy cut herself off and took a deep breath. "Things are coming back to me...in waves, I guess. I think...I think I remember you crying. I know you didn't take it lightly, either." Her hand squeezed mine, just barely but enough for me to tell. And in her current state, that was probably the most she had the strength for.

Relief flooded me so thickly, I was surprised I didn't pass out. Savvy wasn't mad. She understood and even seemed to feel bad for me. Why, I didn't know. Surely out of the two of us, I'd gotten the better deal.

"I didn't," I admitted. Carefully, I turned my hand over to grip hers, our fingers interlocking. The movement seemed so significant, so intimate, which was almost funny. We were a fully mated pair, and our palms touching was the most skin-on-skin contact we'd had outside of an emergency.

Wild.

"So yeah...I'm sure there will be...uh, bumps in the road. But we will do the best with what we were handed." She paused, her dry tongue coming out to lick her lips. "I don't suppose I can have a drink, can I?"

"Do you think you can sit up?"

She paused, seeming to consider it before shaking her head.

“Well, we can do ice chips then, if you remember that. I can do plain or Gatorade.”

Another tenuous smile. Maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed like she was getting stronger by the second. “*Porque no los dos?*”

I narrowed my eyes for a moment before I remembered that line from an old taco commercial. Talk about a blast from the past. “Okay, both it is, then. I’ll be right back.” With one last squeeze, I disentangled my hand and headed to the kitchen.

I knew Savvy had a long way to go, but man, I was feeling a lot better about the whole situation.

## Chapter 7

---



## *Kaleb*

Things were going surprisingly well, all things considered.

Savvy fell asleep after eating her ice chips but awoke when I changed her dressing. Apparently, she was feeling much more herself because she talked me through the process. Not that I needed the help, as I'd read and reread the instructions about a dozen times, but I still was grateful for her expert guidance. It made me less nervous.

I gave her more ice chips, and then we got ambitious and did a small bit of soup. She had less than half a mug's worth, but I was still quite happy with every bit of broth she managed.

She slept through the entire night. I dozed on and off, jolting awake every so often whenever I heard something my sleeping mind labeled as amiss. Which usually was a cat outside or a branch tapping against the window. Even with all the guards, I still couldn't help my mating instincts to protect my injured mate from anything that might do her harm—a pretty tall order, considering the relentless witches who had a hard-on for our pack.

I was lucky that, as a shifter, I could go much longer than a human on very little sleep. The little half-hour snatches of unconsciousness I were doing weren't all that restful, though I vaguely remembered reading an article about how if someone were woken up repeatedly, their body would skip the preliminary sleep cycles and jump straight to the all-important REM one.

Actually...I was pretty sure that article had mentioned nurses and doctors as most of the observed subjects. Considering what I knew about Savvy's sleep schedule, that made sense. I was pretty sure if she had to go

through the whole sleep cycle from the beginning each time she lay down, she'd be dead. Or insane. Sleep deprivation did strange things to people and even stranger things to fae.

But tiny naps or not, I went bolt upright in my chair the moment her breathing changed from the drowsy crawl of sleepiness to the slowly stirring rhythm of wakefulness.

"Savvy?" I murmured cautiously, not sure how close to reality she was. To my delight, she groaned. Not that I liked hearing her in distress, but it was the loudest sound she'd made since rousing to consciousness.

"I gotta pee," she whined, and goodness, it shouldn't have been so adorable. She was talking about pissing, after all. Yet the way her lower lip stuck out and her eyes looked chagrined got to me. Who knew a fully grown alma could be so cute?

"Do you think you can sit up?" I asked.

The almas had warned me about this. They'd apparently given her something to make her not need to go for a while, but when it wore off, they told me Savvy's urge to relieve herself would be urgent. I had a bedpan available if she couldn't get into an upright position, but I was hoping it didn't come to that.

"I..." She paused for a moment, and I noticed her licking her lips again. I quickly put together that she was thirsty, so I offered her the bottle of somewhat cold water I'd fallen asleep with.

"While I appreciate that, and I *am* thirsty, I think if I drink anything else, I'll burst."

"Okay, we want to avoid that, then." I set it to the side. "Think I can help you up?"

"Yeah, let's try."

"Alright, I'm going to pull the covers down. You're not very dressed—did you want me to put something over you?"

Savvy's eyes were sharp when she looked at me, and if I didn't know that she'd been on death's door the day before, I never would have guessed.

"How exactly not-dressed am I?"

"You're in a set of Lyssa's underwear. Bralette and boxers. Apparently, they make those for women now."

"Oh, so more coverage than a bathing suit. That's fine."

"Okay, here we go."

I slowly folded back the covers and sheets, revealing her battered form. Although her wound was mostly covered by her dressing, I saw that much of her bruising had faded. I wasn't an expert on humans, but it seemed our mating bond, plus the other almas' work, had her healing about one and a half times faster than a default male patient. Not bad at all.

"So I'm gonna lift your arms and circle them around my neck, then I'll slide my arm underneath your shoulders and help you sit, okay? If at any time it's too painful, say 'red' as clearly as you can."

"Look at you and your bedside manner," Savvy said, grinning. And it wasn't the tiny ghost of a grin from before; it was almost the full-fledged thing. "Have you ever considered a career in nursing?"

"Far too demanding and way too difficult."

"You realize your current job is fighting off malevolent witches who are out for shifter blood, right?"

"Yeah, and that's easier than your gig. I'm not gonna be tricked."

She narrowed her eyes at me, and if it weren't for the hole in her side, I would have thought I was hanging out at her house as a friend who was catching up. But if it weren't for the hole in her side, we wouldn't be mated, and I probably wouldn't be in her house at all.

Funny how life worked like that.

"You know too much," she said.

I laughed. "Don't tell anyone. I count on people thinking I'm just the dumb muscle."

"Who on earth would ever think that you're stupid?"

Well, I was flattered by how shocked she sounded by the notion. Honestly, I knew I was relatively bright. Still, up against Theo and Jacobian, who were brilliant in two very different fields, it was hard not to feel like a shifter version of a neanderthal slamming two rocks together.

"Eh, you'd be surprised."

"Apparently. And as much as I'd like to verbally lambast whoever has said that, I think I'll wet the bed if we don't get a move on."

"We should probably speed-run this then."

"Speed-run?"

I picked her, encircling her arms around my neck and sliding mine under her body. "Remember, say 'red' if it hurts too much."

"I-"

And then I was lifting her up, pausing when I straightened fully to see if she was alright. Savvy winced but said nothing.

Once I was sure that she wasn't in severe pain, I strode as smoothly and quickly as I could to the bathroom just down the hall.

"I can walk myself, you know," she grouched.

"Can you?" I challenged knowingly. It wasn't surprising to me that she would protest. Weren't doctors and nurses notorious for being terrible patients? They were the worst of the Type A invalids.

"Maybe not."

There she was, being cute again. If we were a bit more familiar, I would have kissed the top of her head. Instead, I walked sideways into the bathroom and set her on the toilet.

"Don't worry," I said, giving her what I hoped was a comforting grin. "I've got you."

She blushed again, about five times brighter than the previous day. Her blood volume had most certainly had gone up. Maybe I was being especially sappy from mating hormones, but she was too precious for words.

"So you need help with the boxers or...?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. To be honest, I wasn't into watching my mate do any bathroom activities, but I would do whatever was needed to keep her healthy.

"No, I got that much. But would you close the door most of the way and wait outside?"

I nodded, grateful she hadn't asked me to close it completely because that would have made me far too nervous. Especially since one of the almas, to my great horror, had told me that bearing down to use the bathroom could make a recovering person's blood pressure drop and send them to the floor.

"Sure, I'll be right there."

"Okay, thanks." Her voice was soft, contrasting with the vibrant flush on her cheeks. I knew better than to point it out, though, and saw myself out.

Neither of us mentioned how my enhanced senses negated any privacy of a partially closed door. Instead, I waited patiently until Savvy called for me again, and it was back to bed with her.

"Thank you," she murmured again, somehow even redder than before. She was a fairly olive-skinned Latina, so it was interesting to see the

crimson beneath her skin shine through so vividly.

“Anything you need.” And I meant it. I knew our situation was unorthodox and not ideal, but it was what it was. For better or for worse, we were mates, and I was the one who was going to wear the metaphorical scrubs for a bit.

“Do you think I could have some more of that soup?”

“Of course. I’ll go heat it up for you. And maybe a glass of water, too?”

“Coffee?” she asked hopefully.

“You know as well as I do that coffee’s a no-go, considering your wound and the meds you’re on.”

She looked at me through her lashes, and it took all of my willpower not to go and buy her a whole Starbucks. Geez, she had a lethal weapon there!

“I had to try...” she murmured.

“Yeah, yeah. Well, behave yourself while I make you some food.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I hurried down to the kitchen to get her the first full meal she’d had since her injury. Not that a bowl of soup and a glass of water was heavy fare, but it was more than she’d been able to eat before. This was a good thing, considering how many calories she needed. Healing was a very demanding job.

By the time I brought it back, she looked sleepy but managed to eat without passing out. When she was done, her eyes fluttered shut less than a minute after I tucked her in.

And so the next two days went. I was at Savvy’s beck and call, happy to watch her get better in huge strides. By the time day four was halfway over, she could sit up mostly on her own and hobble down the hall to the bathroom. I still usually carried her, as sometimes her bladder wasn’t patient enough for her slow pace.

However, I wouldn’t have been able to be as attentive if I were on my own. But after Savvy’s meal, Parker came by to let me sleep, then Sam, and then Lyssa and Ashlee. I greatly appreciated their efforts, and I was pretty sure Savvy did, too. While the two of us were getting along, I got the feeling that she needed more than me to talk to for days on end.

It was on the fifth day that I finally returned to work. I didn’t want to and didn’t really need to, but Savvy said she wanted some alone time to decompress, and I had security reports I needed to send to a couple of

packs. As reticent as I was to leave Savvy alone, she had enough guards to protect her.

Still, I didn't like it, and my inner wolf paced within me, growling at the slightest provocation. Even though I knew there would be an adjustment period, and it was natural for Savvy to want some time to think now that she was lucid for more of the day, it was still hard to convince my wolf not to chase down her ex for some stress-relieving revenge.

"Come on, Kaleb, compose yourself," I murmured as I sent off the first report and started to catch up on my emails. Thankfully, Mahlan's assistant had messaged all my important contacts, explaining why I was indisposed and warning of the witches being on the attack again. Though I hadn't ghosted them, there were plenty of urgent messages waiting for me.

One was Patricia, who was in contact with an even more rural pack in our state that was tiny and affiliated with the local Amish community. That was about the last thing I expected until she told me that the Amish town consisted of an entire group of dryads with a single *kulam* glamouring them to the outside world. Apparently, they'd heard about our tech and Sam's wards and were hoping to get some help. I hadn't even known that there was a single dryad in our city, let alone a group of them. As some of the earliest recorded fae, they were a rare and aloof bunch, preferring to stick to remote locations where nature ruled, and humans were scarce.

It was as I finished drafting my response that I had a brilliant idea.

I should ask Savannah on a date.

Of course, it would probably be another couple of days before she could handle sitting up and being social, but that would give me plenty of time to plan. I knew we were barely more than strangers or at least faint friends, but she was my mate! What better way to get used to that than to provide for her? To treat her and have a meal that was only for us.

After all, it was guaranteed to be better than her last date with Mr. Asshole.

Excitement began to build in me at the idea, and I rushed through the rest of what I had to do. Part of me wanted to rush back to Savvy's home and burst into her room with my proposal, but she'd requested a couple of hours to herself, and I'd only been gone for an hour and a half. I figured I needed to be gone at least double that time before returning. Even if I didn't want to.

Being a good person was hard.

Being a good mate was even harder.

But I knew I was in a situation where her needs came first. I forced myself to focus and get shit done until about two and a half hours passed, and then I was out the door, in my truck, and off to get some gas and snacks before returning to Savvy's.

When I got in, I found her in her kitchen. At first, I was pretty shocked that she'd managed to get down to the kitchen by herself, and then I was worried. But my brain kicked in before I could say anything stupid, and I noticed she had two guards sitting with her.

Although there was no conversation, it was clear the three were having some social time. Savvy and one of the guards were reading books, hers looking like an herbalist tome and his some footballer biography. The third guard was facing the window, watching the passersby with keen eyes.

Huh, maybe her relationship with the guards was better than I thought.

Then again, I wouldn't mind reading next to Savvy. My mind launched the image, mapping out the scene with a surprising amount of detail: just the two of us in the dead of winter, curled together under a thick blanket on the couch, her head against my chest. She was reading a medical book while I was thumbing through an ebook on my phone, maybe an action-adventure or fantasy book. It had always been baffling to me that out of all the legends in the world, dragons were the one fae that weren't real. Parker always said that they were real and just literary representations of dinosaurs, but that wasn't the same.

"Oh, there you are," Savvy said, smiling at me softly. My mental image dissolved, but I didn't mind when it was interrupted by that sweet face. She had a way of looking at me that made me feel so *wanted*, like my presence affected her day. Usually, I only got that feeling from Parker.

Which probably said more about me than I wanted it to.

"Hey there," I said, crossing the room and placing the snacks on the counter. "How are you feeling?"

"Much restored," she said, and her cheeks began to color again, which made me curious. What could have her blushing so easily? "But I don't think I can make it back up the stairs on my own."

I was more than happy to carry her up the stairs. "Did you want to go up now?"

She nodded, placing her bookmark and closing the book. "If you don't mind?"

“I don’t mind at all.”

Crossing over to her, I slid one arm behind her shoulders and one underneath her knees. As usual, I was exceedingly gentle when I picked her up, making sure not to jostle her this way or that. But as I started up the stairs, I noticed something that wasn’t there before.

*Her scent.*

She’d been drugged up and recovering, so she’d mainly smelled like blood, saline, and immuno-response. But now, as I effortlessly held her in my arms, she smelled...*interested*. And by interested, I meant excited. Not quite aroused, but most certainly headed in that direction.

Well, wasn’t that an interesting development.

But I didn’t mention it. She couldn’t help her body’s natural reaction to being held by her mate, and what service would I do either of us by pointing it out and possibly embarrassing her? I was plenty fine with letting her reaction bolster my ego on the down low.

I got her to her bed without interruption, but I noticed that her bedding had been changed. I needed to thank someone, but I wasn’t sure who.

Although my wolf grew angered at the thought of another male in her bedroom, I mentally dressed it down while tucking Savvy in.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” I asked.

“Oh no, you don’t have to.”

“It’s not that I have to. I want to.”

“Well...”

“Come on, out with it.”

She waffled for a moment, then said, “I have some herbal tea in the cabinet to the left of the oven downstairs,” she said somewhat sheepishly. “Would you mind brewing me some? I made it to help with pain and swelling.”

“It won’t clash with what the almas have you taking, will it?”

She shook her head. “No, it won’t.”

“Alright, I’ll be right back.”

Although I didn’t want to part with her yet, I hurried to do what she asked. Thankfully, the tea was easy to find, and one of the guards told me where she kept her steeper, which was hanging on a little rack screwed to the oven’s backsplash. I boiled water in the kettle and worked my way through the rest.



Thank God Parker was a tea guy; otherwise, I might have been a little lost. I was used to the whole teabag-in-water thing, but steeping loose-leaf tea felt much fancier.

I made it back to Savvy without burning the house down and was treated to watching her contentedly sip what *I* had made her.

“Thank you,” Savvy murmured after several deep swallows. Her voice made goosebumps rise along my arms, and the next thing I knew, my mouth was moving of its own volition.

“Go on a date with me.”

She paused mid-sip. It probably would have been funny if I wasn’t breaking into a cold sweat.

“Huh?”

Clearing my throat, I tried again. “I would like to take you to dinner. You know, once you’re feeling up to it.”

She stared at me for another impossibly long moment. Maybe another time, I could ask her if she did that because she liked dramatic pauses or because it took her that long to figure out what the hell I was asking.

In the end, a slow, kind smile spread across her features.

“Yeah, I’d like that a lot.”

\* \* \*

Walking to Savvy’s door was strangely surreal. I’d spent so much time there in the past two weeks, yet it was suddenly different. Maybe that was because of the bouquet in my hands, or maybe it was because I was finally taking her out on that date.

I still could hardly believe she’d said yes so quickly. I thought I would need to explain myself or come up with an excuse for the cheesy idea but she’d seemed truly excited by it.

I knew that technically, I didn’t have to ask her out. We were mated, and no amount of dates would change that, but I figured if I were going to be emotionally bonded to someone for the rest of my life, I should put in the effort to get closer. Even if we never fell in love and were only the best of friends, I wanted her to know I valued her and had her best interests at heart.

With my heart thumping in my chest, I knocked on her door. I didn't even try the door handle. I figured if I were taking her out on a real date, I wouldn't barge into her house. I could be socially dense sometimes, but not *that* dense.

I heard Savvy's footsteps approaching a moment later, alerting me that she'd been waiting close by. Once again, I was struck by the fact that she appeared to be excited about our little meal together. It was quite flattering.

"Hey there," I started as she opened the door, trying to sound all casual. But then I saw what she was wearing, and all attempts at coolness fled my body.

It wasn't anything indecent or obscene, but *goodness*, she looked amazing. She was wearing something like a sundress but with long, sheer sleeves and a neckline that wasn't as conservative as her scrubs uniform. Her legs were clad in stockings with that black line up the back that looked inexplicably ten times sexier than the regular kind, along with black wedges to offset the deep emerald of her dress. Suddenly, I found myself wishing I had worn something nicer than the suit I'd worn at the office.

"Hey," Savvy said, grinning brightly at me. She was still a little slow-moving, and her posture was careful, but it was so good to see how much she'd improved since that first night. If I were an outsider, I never would have guessed she was an alma who'd been on the verge of death not too long ago. Then again, if she had the same abilities as the shifters around her, she would have been fully healed in three days flat.

"You look good," she said.

"And you look *incredible*," I said, being completely honest. She'd looked a right treat during her date with Mr. Douche-a-lot, but now she was dressed up to go out with *me*: Kaleb, the mute, one half of the young duo in the inner circle, the dumb muscle.

"Thanks," she murmured, flushing in that cute way of hers. Was she not wearing makeup? She couldn't be if I could see her blush, right? I wasn't exactly versed in the art. "You ready to go?"

"That I am," I said before remembering the flowers. "Oh! These are for you."

Her eyes widened, and I couldn't help but wonder if she hadn't noticed them. I knew she was still on some meds, but that didn't seem to have distracted her enough. Maybe she was just being kind and ignoring my blunder.

“Oh, they’re beautiful, thank you. You didn’t have to do that.”

“If getting a lovely woman flowers before a date is ‘all that,’ the bar is even lower than I thought.”

My frank answer startled a laugh out of her, the sound of it easing my nerves. “Yeah, the bar is basically subterranean,” she sighed. “But I’ll put these in a vase. You wanna come in for a moment?”

“Sure,” I said, because what else was I going to do? Linger awkwardly on her front porch?

Actually, that did seem like something I would do. But I was learning more about being a functioning, social adult.

It didn’t take her long to get them arranged how she wanted, and I had to admit the bouquet looked pretty lovely in the sea-glass green vase she put in the center of her kitchen table.

It was stupid, but my pride swelled at knowing she would see it every time she sat to read or drink her tea. It would be a little reminder that she deserved nice things and was valued, even when I wasn’t there to do it.

“Alright, I’m ready!” she said, turning to me with a beaming smile. I knew she was probably excited to be out of the house, but she really knew how to make a guy feel special.

It was a shame, really. If I’d just pulled my head out of my ass earlier and hadn’t been a codependent wolf, maybe I could have asked Savvy out for real. Maybe we could have built something together and mated naturally instead of out of the blue. Maybe, maybe, maybe. But it hadn’t turned out that way, and now we were picking up the pieces of the situation we’d been forced into.

There were worse fates in life, but Savvy needed some ease, some simplicity. Being forcibly mated to save her life from witches didn’t bring her closer to those things.

“Let’s head out, then,” I said, offering her my arm. She took it, and while she was walking pretty steadily, it was nice that she trusted me enough to put some of her weight on me. I was more than happy to support her while she navigated her way down the stairs and out the door. That’s what being a strong mate was all about, right?

“So, are you gonna tell me where we’re going?” she mused.

“I could, but that would ruin the surprise.”

“You’re saying we’re not going to one of the billion restaurants you and the others own?”

“We don’t own a billion restaurants,” I countered, chuckling. “But yeah, we’re going someplace new. I figured you could use the privacy.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, the flush on her face deepening. Goodness, she was so pretty.

The moment hung in the air over us. Not ominously, but with all the weight that significant moments in budding relationships tended to have. Not that we were in a real relationship, but maybe...I mean...was it so ridiculous that I was hoping to cultivate one?

Savvy was smart. Beautiful. Ambitious. Compassionate. And my freaking *mate*. Sure, it hadn’t gone down how I’d pictured a meet-cute to happen, but hey, if we were going to be stuck together for life, I wanted to see if we could make it work. It wasn’t like I’d been mated to a child abuser or wicked witch.

Wait, was “wicked witch” a harmful stereotype? I needed to ask Sam. But it was pretty hard not to have an overly critical view of witches, given the ones attacking our pack relentlessly.

“Wait, that’s not your truck!”

Savvy’s exclamation drew me out of my thoughts as we walked to her driveway.

“Ah,” I said. “I didn’t think that was a date-worthy vehicle, so I borrowed one of Parker’s whips.”

“And he just let you do that? It looks expensive. Sam is always saying that Parker has a torrid love affair with all his vehicles.”

“If there’s one thing Parker loves more than his cars, it’s me.” And Sam, I was beginning to feel. I’d known Parker had developed a crush on the guy almost instantly, but ever since I had encouraged him to pursue the green which, things had gotten much more serious.

“Fair enough,” Savvy said. “From what I’ve heard, you two used to never go anywhere without each other.”

“Yeah, that’s a pretty fair statement. We’re working on it, though.”

“I can tell.”

“Thanks. It means a lot to hear you say that.”

We reached the car, and I opened the door for her, supporting her arm as she carefully lowered herself into the seat. She winced as she settled, and a flare of concern rolled through me.

“Relax,” Savvy said as she noticed my expression, giving me a cheeky grin. “It’s perfectly normal to be sore for a long while, considering what

I've been through."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I have to like seeing you in pain."

"I mean, if you did, it would explain why you stuck around so much during my recovery."

I knew she was joking, yet I couldn't help but feel troubled that Savannah thought someone would nurse her back to health because they enjoyed seeing her in pain. She deserved so much more than she accepted for herself. She really did.

But that wasn't the conversation to have right before a date, let alone our first date, so I shut my mouth and closed her door, heading to the driver's side of the car.

I figured there was a pretty good chance that Savvy would guess where we going before we arrived. There were only so many high-end restaurants in our city that we or another pack didn't own, but I hoped the mystery would add some intrigue to the twenty-minute drive.

It wasn't the most expensive place around—the most expensive restaurants were five-star, high-concept places that served abstract multi-course meals. As much as I appreciated that cooking was an art, I was a wolf shifter, and Savvy was an alma who was healing. We needed to prioritize taste and calorie intake.

So I was taking her to a high-end sort of buffet, as kitschy as that sounded. It was priced at two-hundred bucks per head, but it covered unlimited cuts of different steaks, lobster, scallops, and a bunch of other tasty things.

Much to my delight, Savvy didn't guess the restaurant right until we turned into the parking lot. That was when her jaw dropped.

"Wait, are we going to The Nord?" she asked excitedly, leaning to look out of the windshield. "Are you kidding me?"

"You know this place?" I asked as I pulled up to the valet parking.

"Yeah! I saw a travel video on it. This is the place with unlimited lobster, right?"

"Yup, that's the one."

"But isn't this place mad expensive?"

I shrugged and busied myself with getting out of the car and helping Savvy get to her feet. She waited while I handled the parking, and then we walked in.

“Wow, this place is beautiful,” she breathed, looking around with wonder. If it hadn’t been incredibly awkward, I would have whipped out my phone and taken a picture of her. With life being so grim lately, I wanted to cherish these moments of levity. But at least I had the social wherewithal to realize that wasn’t the best move.

I let the hostess lead us to our table. It wasn’t until my ass was in the surprisingly uncomfortable seat that I realized how nervous I was. I would say it was like I was in high school again, except I’d never been nervous about girls in high school. I had been too preoccupied with learning how to function again after having my entire world destroyed.

“Holy shit, I’m so excited,” she squealed as we took our seats. “Although, why do we have a menu? I thought this was just the world’s most expensive buffet.”

“I mean, that’s basically what it is,” I said, chuckling. “But I’m pretty sure they think it’s classier to order insane amounts of servings via a server versus getting it off a heating line.”

“As long as I’m getting unlimited lobster and scallops, they can do whatever they want.”

“That’s a policy that I can get behind.”

The conversation flowed easily between us while we looked over the one-page menu. And it wasn’t fake polite banter, either, as I could feel how much Savvy was enjoying herself through her bond. Our connection had only grown stronger as she healed, and although I was still getting used to feeling her moods and energy, I liked it.

It was...

It was like I was never alone.

Although I was trying hard to be understanding about Parker wanting to move on and live his own life, to have a fulfilling, romantic relationship for the first time, I still missed him more often than not. And it wasn’t like we never saw each other; he was at our apartment more than he wasn’t, and we still spent plenty of nights catching up while playing video games or cooking at home. But it wasn’t the same.

And that was a good thing. I wanted to be my own person. To grow past my trauma and stop fearing I would end up like my mother if left to my own devices. But even if that was something I very much wanted, that didn’t mean I didn’t feel lonely from time to time.

But having a connection to another in our pack, one that was more intimate and intense than normal comradery, was undoubtedly helping me along. Maybe the whole being mated against our will didn't have to be a bad thing.

"Hello, my name is Marcella. Do you two know what you'll be starting with, or do you need an explanation of how our servings work?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin, whipping my head to see what had to be our server standing beside the table. How had she snuck up so quickly? I must have really been in my head, but still, that was concerning.

"That's alright. I know what I'd like to order. Do you?" I asked Savvy.

Savvy smiled brilliantly. "Oh yeah, I know."

"Very good," our server said. "I do have to let you know that we have a waste fee for excessive, well, waste, so we highly encourage you to only order what you're sure you can eat."

"Don't worry," I said, knowing I was about to blow the staff's mind with how much we were about to consume. "We'll savor every bite."

And that was how Savvy and I ended up with two lobsters each, a little bit of filet mignon, prime rib, tomahawk steaks, crab legs, scallops, shrimp scampi, fresh oysters, tenderloin tips, ribs, coconut shrimp, delicious barbacoa tacos, and several helpings of fresh fruit. We worked our way through it while talking and laughing, time slipping by without notice, punctuated by the increasing expression of disbelief on our server's face.

Technically, I could eat like that any time. Two hundred dollars was a drop in the bucket for me. I could throw that money out the window every day and not even notice a dent in my finances.

But I usually didn't have time. Of course, I always carved out time for family meals and cooking with Parker, but that was it. Especially with the threat of witches looming behind every corner.

Besides that, something about Savvy made the experience all the more impactful. Whether it was because I felt her sheer joy and delight pouring through our bond like gilded light or because of how fun it was to talk to her, I didn't question it. I just let the good times be what they were, storing them in my mind to call upon when things felt dire again.

Nothing could take this moment away from us. It was almost like we were a young couple, newly mated and looking to start a life tog-

*Ring!*

Our phones went off at the same time, our conversation sputtering to a halt.

We grabbed our phones, and sure enough, there was a new group chat waiting for us. Opening it, I saw it was a message from none other than Sam. Normally, I would leave a text to be addressed later, but considering the times we were in and that he'd messaged both of us, postponing my response wasn't the wisest course of action.

*Urgent! Have a breakthrough. Srry to interrupt ur date but I need wolf boy.*

My eyebrows went up to my hairline. "How does he know we're on a date?" I asked, more than a bit confused.

And there was that adorable blush rising on Savvy's face. Would I ever get tired of that?

"I, uh, I may have told the girls so they could help me pick out an outfit, and anything Lyssa knows, Sam eventually knows." But her expression grew guilty. "Why? Was it supposed to be a secret?"

"Secret? No! Why wouldn't I want everyone to know I'm on a date with a beautiful, intelligent woman?" I said. Maybe that was laying it on a bit thick, but it was how I felt. "I just figured you would want some privacy. You know, considering how you were with...uh, with..."

"Jamie?"

"I was going to say Mr. Dickless, but that works, too."

At that, she snorted—full-on snorted—and turned the most brilliant crimson I'd ever seen. She was probably embarrassed, but goodness, if that wasn't the most beguiling thing I'd seen a woman do. It was just so *earnest*. And it made me feel incredibly clever. Like my wit was so powerful, I'd made her forget decorum for a minute.

"Right, well," she said quickly, trying to recover like she hadn't honked at our table. Why was I feeling so drawn in by a snort? Something in my brain had to be wired wrong. "This sounds pretty urgent, so we should probably get a move on."

"Yeah," I said reluctantly. "We probably should. But raincheck on the first date?"



“Oh, definitely,” she said, her eyes sparkling.

Our gazes met, and despite the interruption to our date, I felt something crackle between us. I couldn’t name it—or maybe I didn’t want to name it—but I knew it was there. The potential for something *more*. The flicker of all that was possible beginning to grow between us.

But the moment was shattered as our server asked if we needed the check. I responded by handing her six hundred-dollar bills and telling her to keep the change. I relished her wide-eyed expression of shock, but I didn’t get much time to linger before we were out the door.

Thankfully, it wasn’t that long of a drive to Sam’s studio, or at least that was what my GPS told me. Despite being Parker’s right-hand man, I’d never been to his boyfriend’s place; only heard about it and the plethora of plants that called it home.

Wait, were Parker and Sam officially going out? I didn’t really know. Despite the green witch being one of the most direct people I knew—if I ignored all his sarcastic quips—he and Parker seemed to be engaged in a flirtatious “will they, won’t they” dance.

Whatever. As long as it made Parker happy. The world was hard enough for us shifters without having to worry about being judged for who we fell in love with.

“Are you sure you have the right address?” Savvy asked as we traveled to the poorer side of the city, where apartment buildings were clustered together and the roads took a hit. As destitute as my mother and I had been, we’d always lived in the house my father had left. If it weren’t for that, I was pretty sure we would have ended up in a cramped, overly expensive one-bedroom apartment while my mother grappled with her mental illness.

But that made me wonder, would my mother have survived if we’d had more money? She’d worked so hard to ensure I was always fed and had school supplies, but the stress of always being on the brink of financial ruin had damaged her already tenuous mental health.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I said. “Sam’s a former homeless kid. He’s not exactly loaded.”

“But isn’t Mahlan paying him? Shouldn’t that be enough for a proper living wage?”

“He’s definitely getting paid a pretty penny. I don’t handle the financials, but it’s well over the asking rate for most of the occult

consultations we've had in the past. If I had to guess, he's saving it up like a squirrel."

"A squirrel?"

I nodded as we turned onto a road that was more pothole than tar. "You even been poor, Savvy?"

"Not really. Almas are relatively taken care of financially. The pack I was raised in isn't nearly as affluent as yours, but we were comfortable."

"Ah. So you see, when you've been chronically poor for a lot of your life, you get in the habit of always trying to save up and prepare for the worst. Even if you manage to pull yourself to a better place, you've got all these penny-pinching habits. "On top of all that, there's this pervasive fear that if you mess up, you'll end up right back where you were or worse. Or even that something will completely blindside you once you think you're ahead." I paused. "So yeah, Sam might have made a boatload of money compared to his normal wage these past few months, but it's not nearly enough to make him feel financially secure."

"Oh..." Savvy murmured, seeming to digest what I was saying. I appreciated that she didn't just dismiss me. For some reason, many people liked to believe that poor people were poor due to a personality flaw and not economic disadvantages. Like being a homeless orphan, for example. "Well, I hope once this witch situation is cleared up, he'll have the space and rest to feel secure in his finances."

"Yeah," I agreed. "That would be nice."

Although if Parker and Sam officially ended up together, Sam wouldn't ever have to worry about money again. Parker was just as loaded as I was, with multiple investments and properties as well as a prolific stock portfolio that Theo managed for all of us.

But knowing Sam and even just an ounce of what he'd been through, he probably wouldn't trust that security, either. Relationships ended, shifters died, and terrible things could come out of nowhere. I was very sure that Sam would continue saving for quite a while.

"Here we are," I said, pulling into a grungy-looking apartment building that was quite tall but didn't have the same luster as Mahlan's luxury apartment buildings. It wasn't completely decrepit, but it was worn, with cracks in the stone around the front and blankets over some windows instead of curtains.

“What floor is he on?” Savvy asked, looking at her shoes, and I got the impression she was grateful she hadn’t worn heels. I wasn’t sure why until I realized the building might not have an elevator. I remembered students in college complaining about lugging furniture up multiple flights of stairs.

I wasn’t about to let her strain her healing body, so if I needed to piggy-back her up however many flights, I would. It wasn’t like she was heavy, anyway. As toned as she was, I could probably bench-press her twice over.

“Let me check his text.” Pulling my phone out, I saw he was on the third floor. That wasn’t the worst, but not great for a healing Savvy, either.

“Hmm, I’ll call him and tell him we’re here. Maybe there’s an elevator inside.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Sam picked up on the first ring, sounding breathless but pleased with himself. “Hey! Are you here?”

“I am.”

“Okay, great! I’ll head down to let you in. The elevator is old AF, BTW.”

That was an awful lot of letters right in a row, but I took his meaning. “Okay, great, we’ll meet you at the front door.”

“Perf!”

Now I was outright curious at what had him so frenetic with energy. Maybe he’d had some breakthrough and hadn’t interrupted my date because he had a new record in whatever mobile game app he was obsessed with.

It took a few minutes, but we ended up in his apartment. It was a studio, just as Sam had mentioned several times. Despite his frequent talk of plants, crystals, and ingredients, I still wasn’t prepared for how *packed* it was.

There were narrow spaces about a foot or so wide to walk through the place, but almost every bit of space was taken up by furniture. There was no couch or other living room seats, save for a futon that was currently upright. There was a single coffee table but no official dining room table to sit at and eat. Which made sense, considering that there was no dining room.

What there were, however, were *shelves*.

*So many shelves.*

One solid wall was entirely comprised of bookshelves. Two of them were loaded with tomes that looked to be from all sorts of eras, but the other two had an insane amount of crystals or jars of ingredients on them. It

was like an old-fashioned apothecary condensed into barely a percentage of the space.

And then there were the stars of the show: the *plants*.

There was what looked like an industrial garment bar above the one wide window, loaded with hanging baskets of some truly impressive specimens. There were long beaded vines that looked like those artificial curtains that were popular in the '90s. There were long, *long* leafy things that went halfway across the wall, curling this way and that to follow the sun. There were big bushy plants, succulents, and a whole bunch of others I didn't recognize at all. Who knew—since Sam was a green witch, maybe he'd made some of them up? I didn't really know the scope of his power, although I knew he'd come into a sort of personal renaissance in that regard.

"Wow," Savvy said, stepping forward with no shortage of wonder in her voice. "Your place is teeming with *life*."

"You think so?" Sam asked, grinning. He was the cheeky sort and always had been, but I got the sense that he was genuinely pleased by Savvy's reaction. And I would be, too, if she was impressed with my apartment. But now that I thought about it, I hadn't put much work into decorating Parker's and my place after our first year when all the renovations happened. Maybe I should change that once I had my own life again.

"Yeah! I can totally see why you need to do much of your spellwork here."

"When they're behaving," Sam said before gesturing for me to follow him to where Parker sat on the futon, a look of concentration on his face as he regarded a round mirror in his lap.

"What's this?" I asked, closing the distance and leaning over Parker to look at the mirror in his lap. If I didn't know better, I would assume it was a normal object, or at least one of the more normal objects in the tiny studio. Just about the last thing I expected to see was one of the witches we had fought calmly folding her laundry in a shadowy room, a large dog wagging its tail beside her. "Whoa, what the *hell* is this?!"

"It's a scrying scene," Sam said, breathless all over again. "Things have been completely dead since we took out Elanor. All my tracking spells were attached to her, so once her blood was spilled, that was that. But as I

compared what I'd felt from Lyssa, Emma, Ashlee, and Savannah, I was able to find a common thread."

"And this is where it led you?"

"For the most part."

"What do you mean, for the most part?"

"I mean that I could feel a bunch of threads going in about a thousand different directions, but the further I traveled along them, the weaker they got until they disappeared into this sort of smog. This is the only one I could get a good grip on. I pulled the thread all the way into my scrying mirror."

"What makes her different?" I asked, utterly mystified as I watched the woman. I didn't know what I expected, but it wasn't for our enemy to look so domestic. I suppose I'd half-imagined that the witches were in dark, dank covens, stirring cauldrons and plotting over ancient books. Clearly, I had some stereotypes I needed to work through.

"I dunno."

"Who is she?"

"I dunno."

I narrowed my eyes, trying not to get irritated, and then I realized why I'd been called. "You want me to set up security lines to try to track her and find the others?"

"Basically. I know Jacobian is the camera guy and hacker, but I need you to track her and figure out the best places for him to place them. This is completely out of my depth, and it's not like I can get close to her, as I'm kind of on their watch list."

"Yeah, not exactly thrilled about that," Parker grumbled, not breaking his stare at the woman. He seemed afraid that if he looked away for a moment, she would climb out of the mirror and attack. Then again, given these witches, that was all too possible.

"Alright," I said with a nod, already putting puzzle pieces into place. "I'll see what I can do to case up and set up a security route. Once that's set, I'll brief Jacobian."

"Could I help?"

I turned to Savvy, who was staying well away from the mirror, looking more than a bit stressed. Which made sense, of course. I was sure that after everything she'd been through, she might feel squeamish around witches. I

probably should have thought of that and dropped her off at home before I hauled her into the thick of it.

“Are you sure you want to?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah. I, uh, would like to be useful. It would be better than just sitting around.” She tried to crack a playful smile, but I could see worry pulling at the edges of it. “Either everyone has been very well-behaved, or we’ve put the fear of God into those witches because I haven’t had so much as a house call since I was injured. I know the other almas are covering for me, but when I checked in with them, the most they had to deal with was a couple of dislocations.”

“Oh, is that all?” I mused even though I knew, comparatively speaking, that dislocations were pretty light as far as shifter injuries went. “But yeah, I can get started tomorrow if you want to come by my place?”

She blinked at me, and I wasn’t sure why she looked so confused until she spoke. “We wouldn’t do it at my place?”

“We can,” I said diplomatically. “But I’d have to haul my entire setup to your place. It takes up an entire room and is pretty involved.”

“Huh.” She hesitated a moment before shaking her head. “No, that’s way too much work. I can just head to your house. Text me your address?”

“Can do.” I looked to Parker, who was still staring daggers at the mirror. “Did you wanna head home with me?”

“Nah, I’m gonna spend the night here.”

Damn. After the day I’d had, I was hoping we could chill together. But I didn’t complain, because complaining would be selfish, and I only wanted the best for him.

“Okay, see ya later, then.” I tried not to sound disappointed, but after more than a decade together, Parker could read me like a book in type 22 bold font.

“Hey, Sam, can you watch this mirror? I wanna catch up with my bestie real fast.”

“Do whatever you need, sis.”

They exchanged the mirror, and Parker stood, regarding me with that same smile that always made me feel so safe and loved. “You want some strawberry-basil lemonade? I made a whole pitcher of it.”

“I wanna check out this mirror!” Savvy said quickly, going to Sam’s side. It wasn’t like there was a lot of space in the studio, with the kitchenette about three steps in the other direction, but I couldn’t help but

warm at the thought that she was giving me space to talk to Parker. She was always so considerate.

“I wouldn’t say no to that,” I said, grinning back at my brother from another mother.

Parker crossed to the half fridge and pulled out a pitcher, then filled a glass for each of us before handing one to me. “Hey, wanna chit-chat in the hall for a bit? That way, we don’t disturb the scrying thing.”

“Sure.”

We filed out into the hall, Parker’s lemonade tangy across my tongue. It was easy to feel like it was old times again, the two of us catching up on what happened whenever we had to be apart.

I missed him, but also...I didn’t feel empty without him. Although I didn’t really know when it had happened, I was beginning to be comfortable with whoever Kaleb was on his own...at least some of the time.

“How are you doing?” Parker asked once we were out. Normally, we would need to leave the building if we wanted a private conversation, but neither Savvy nor Sam had enhanced hearing like us. “We haven’t had much of a chance to talk since you went off and got mated.”

Even though we were being quiet, I could hear the concern layering his voice. Considering how many people I knew who went through so much of their lives feeling utterly alone, I was lucky. *Incredibly* lucky.

“I...uh, it’s certainly different,” I said. “Honestly, I thought it would have been you and Sam before me.”

“Me and Sam?” Parker sputtered, flushing even more vibrantly than Savvy. Thank goodness I didn’t turn as red as they did. It seemed pretty inconvenient, as amusing as it was. “W-w-we’re just seeing where things go. Keeping it casual, ya know?”

I leveled him with a look that needed no explanation. “Parker, you and him are working together to defeat an evil cadre of witches who are threatening to wipe our pack off the face of the earth. You’ve fought in battles together, created spells together. There’s nothing casual about your relationship.”

“Okay, well, when you say it that way.”

We shared a chuckle, and he pulled me into a hug, patting my back. “You know that no matter what happens, you will always be my brother?”

“Of course,” I answered honestly. “I know our lives have changed a lot recently, but that’s one thing that’ll always be a constant.”

He seemed so relieved, and I recognized that he was likely also struggling with our journey toward independence. I’d always gotten the feeling that Parker had never pursued romance because he was too scared of being out. I couldn’t blame him or make that decision for him. Some people were so full of hate that even the thought of someone different filled them with violence and revulsion. So for a very long while, we were each other’s crutches.

I was so proud of him for being brave. I hoped he knew that.

Actually, why hope? I should just say it outright.

“You know I’m proud of you, right?”

He flushed again, joshing my shoulder. “No need to be a sap about it.” He seemed to think for a moment, as if he wasn’t done speaking. “I’m proud of you, too.”

“Thanks, brother.”

We exchanged looks that said so much more than our words could. Neither of us were poets, but we got each other, even if we were allowing a more space between us than usual.

“Shall we head in?” I asked finally.

“Yeah, that’d probably be a good idea.”

We returned to the apartment. Turning my attention to Savvy, I gave her a smile I knew was sappy, but I couldn’t help it. I was feeling all sorts of loved from my conversation with my best friend and brother. “Should I take you home, young lady?”

She giggled before gently joshing my arm. “I’m certainly not gonna walk, I’ll tell you that much.”

“As if I’d let you.”

“Glad to see that the two of you are dealing with the whole mated-for-life thing well,” Sam said, ushering us out and making it so much more awkward than it had to be. “I’ll contact you if I find anything else out!”

“Alright, but try not to tip them off.”

“Damn, and here I was planning on sending them a magical manifesto declaring everything we know.”

“I would ixnay that,” Savvy joked before stepping out the door. “We’ve got enough excitement.”



God, what I wouldn't give for life to be boring again. That would be a refreshing change of pace.

"You may have a point there," Sam said.

After a bit more bantering, we headed back to my car, and I drove Savvy home. It was bittersweet dropping her off. Part of me was happy because she was going to rest and was fading fast in the passenger sleep, but part of me was upset that our date had been interrupted. Was it crazy of me to think that our relationship was going somewhere? Probably.

Naturally, I was full of emotions and thoughts as I walked her to the door. I didn't want the night to end, but I also didn't want Sav to over-exert herself.

"Thank you for coming with me tonight," I said as we paused outside her door.

"Thank you for inviting me. It was lovely, and I'm looking forward to our redo sans Sam."

"You are?" I wish I didn't sound so surprised, but apparently, I was even worse than I thought about concealing my emotions.

"Of course!"

The next thing I knew, she was pushing up onto her toes and pressing a kiss to my lips. It wasn't heated, it wasn't anything torrid or sexual, but *holy shit* did it fill me with a wonderful warmth.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Savvy said softly before slipping into her door.

"See ya tomorrow," I confirmed before floating back to my borrowed car. Well, maybe that spark wasn't entirely in my head.

## Chapter 8

---

## *Savannah*

I chewed on my thumbnail as one of my guards drove, taking me to Kaleb and Parker's apartment. It was just after noon, and my mate had just texted that he was ready for me to come over.

God, *my mate*. I didn't think I would ever get used to that. It still felt foreign on my tongue and far too bright in my mind.

But I wasn't entirely opposed to it. It was sudden and nothing like I'd imagined. Yet it was...well, it wasn't that bad.

Actually, I was burying the lede. Maybe it was that I'd spent so much time with Kaleb, or maybe it was because he'd so tenderly taken care of me for days on end as I healed from being at death's door. But I was starting to feel something for him.

What that something was, I wasn't sure. It was fragile and tiny, an ephemeral thing that lingered on the edge of my mind, making my heart and stomach flutter at all sorts of moments.

It was just that he was so *funny*. And he never acted like I was an inconvenience. Instead, he stared at me like I was so impressive to him. Like something bright and valuable that he was lucky to be around.

I suppose it helped how well he'd reacted to giving up his future to save me. I thought he would resent me. After all, I didn't know if he was dating someone or even interested in dating. But he'd acted like he was the one who had to apologize to *me*.

With all that care, all that consideration, and that incredibly handsome face of his, it was only natural I was a bit syrupy about him. So when he asked me out to dinner to ease into our new mating bond and try to make things normal, I jumped at the chance. And I didn't regret it.

“Did you want to stop for anything?” my guard asked.

I shook my head, my mind too full. I’d been disappointed when our date was interrupted, but finding out that Sam had a possibly major lead had been a balm to my displeasure.

Until I figured out that Kaleb being needed meant that we wouldn’t be spending nearly as much time together.

He’d been going to work for the past week, for the most part. And staying over at his place half the time. But we still spent plenty of time together each day. Something inside me screamed sorrowfully at the idea of not seeing him for so long.

So before I’d thought it through, I offered to help.

I had no idea how I could be even remotely useful, yet I was so happy when he accepted my help. And he didn’t act put upon by it, either. As usual, he seemed genuinely pleased about my presence. It was like a drug, almost, and I could see myself quickly becoming an addict.

Which probably wasn’t the best reaction after having my mating choice taken away. But considering it was either that or being dead, I figured I got the better end of the deal.

“We’re here,” my guard said, wresting me from my ponderings for the second time. I wasn’t normally such a space case, but my minders probably thought it was part of my recovery.

Which, by the way, was going incredibly well.

If I had survived such a wound before being mated, I doubted I would even be mobile. The threat of infection and open wound in my side that needed to be re-dressed twice a day would have taken ages to close up and would have left a nasty scar.

But thanks to Kaleb’s bond with me, I was speeding through my healing. I’d heard that there was an exchange of energy with a mating bite was completed, but it was so much more than I’d ever imagined.

No wonder all my packmates could do so much in a single day—they were overflowing with energy! It was like I had a battery pack hooked up to me, supplying me with an extra power source to keep me going when I normally would have been wiped out.

And it felt like my senses were sharper, too. Not anything life-changing, but most definitely...*more*. Food tasted more intensely, and scents were that headier.

*Especially Kaleb’s.*

“Would you like me to grab your bag for you?” my guard asked. I was about to say no but as good as I was feeling, I probably shouldn’t carry stuff that was over ten pounds. I didn’t want to open my only recently healed wound.

“Yes, please.”

With a nod, he threw the car into park and got out, grabbing my bag from the back. It didn’t have much vital stuff, just my medicines and snacks that helped the upset stomach the pain meds sometimes gave me. Not to mention a few of my custom teas in baggies and my steeper. I couldn’t remember if Kaleb and I had talked about it specifically, but I was pretty sure he wasn’t a big tea drinker.

I’d never been to Parker and Kaleb’s place, but I wasn’t surprised when we pulled up to a tall, luxurious-looking building. I didn’t know why every member of the inner circle lived in a needlessly expensive building full of condos, but I didn’t ask. Maybe they all liked their space, or maybe those were all the businesses they owned. I knew each member was ridiculously wealthy, but beyond their restaurants, I didn’t know how.

“Kaleb said we go into the lobby, head to the elevator, and punch in the code,” I explained to my guard. His name was Elton, if I remembered right, but most of his friends called him Eller-boy. I’d thought it was an unusual name when first hearing it, but I found out he was named after Ellibie after she’d helped his mother give birth when she’d gone into labor while getting her oil changed.

Such stories like that were so lovely. They showed the history of the pack and how it was interconnected. I didn’t spend much time with Miss Ellibie, as she was a very busy woman, but all our interactions were pleasant.

Now that I was officially mated into the pack, this was my history, too. More than it ever was before.

And maybe that was why I was reacting so calmly to the situation. I hadn’t exactly planned on being mated, but now I was well and truly one of the pack. I wasn’t on the fringes anymore, friends with only three other pack members. I was a shifter’s version of a wife, and the wife of a high-ranking wolf at that.

It was crazy how my situation had turned on a dime, but I supposed that was life when under attack by a horde of witches with mysterious intent. With the brothers gone, it was clear that they were no longer after our blood

to cure the crazed man. But if they weren't after that, then what could we possibly have that they needed? They were plenty powerful on their own.

Hopefully, we'd figure that out. Considering Jacobian's hacking skills, Kaleb's security skills, Sam's magical skills, and Mahlan's steadfast leadership, I had faith that we would.

And I hoped I could help, too.

Fortunately, Kaleb's instructions turned out to be quite accurate. Elton and I entered his floor without any issues. There were only two doors facing us in the short foyer. It was insane to me that only two condos could take up an entire floor, but I didn't comment on that. Especially since Kaleb seemed to have come from a pretty poor background. If anyone deserved a Cinderella story, it was him.

The left door opened before I could approach either of them, and there was Kaleb. He was dressed in a comfortable-looking red henley and gray sweats. I tried not to let my eyes flick below his waist because I was a lady and respected him as more than just eye candy. But I was still a woman.

So that mission was a failure.

But if Kaleb noticed, he didn't say anything. Instead, he grinned broadly like my arrival was special, stepping to the side to let us in.

"Hey, you made it!" he exclaimed, as if there was any question we'd come. Then again, considering how witches liked to ambush us, that was a valid worry. "You didn't have any trouble getting here, did you?"

"Nope," I answered. "Elton, did you want me to text you later for pick-up?"

"I would appreciate that, yes," the man answered as he placed my bag inside the door. I didn't miss the nod he gave Kaleb, with a slight tilt of his neck to the side. Right, a sign of submission. Although Kaleb was one of the most amiable wolves I knew, Elton was still a male entering his territory at the same time as his mate. We were civilized, so it wasn't like a fight would break out, but it could cause some complicated emotions and pheromone reactions. "Did you need anything else from me before I leave?"

"No, thank you. I'll see you later."

"Of course, Miss Savannah."

He headed out, and Kaleb picked up my bag. I didn't miss how he absently rubbed the scent gland in his wrist along my strap.

Strangely, that didn't bother me. In fact, it was both amusing and a little...flattering? Seeing his inner wolf scent-mark my belongings made my toes curl in my shoes. Made me feel like I was wanted and precious enough to be worried over.

I felt *seen*.

"What's in the travel bag, by the by?" Kaleb asked, leading me deeper into his spacious apartment. I knew people whose houses had less space than his place.

"My meds, some snacks, some tea, and my laptop," I answered, looking this way and that as we went down a small hall and turned right.

I'd expected a typical office, but that wasn't what I was greeted with at all. I entered a room that was bigger than my bedroom, with two different setups in it. I could tell which side was Parker's and which was Kaleb's immediately, as one was littered with cameras and small parts, and the computer setup had three monitors. Meanwhile, Parker's had several plants, figurines, a car calendar, and other bits and bobs that didn't make sense but still painted an accurate picture of the youngest wolf of the inner circle. The two sure were a funny pair, but their friendship was so wholesome.

"Oh, wow," I gushed.

"Sorry I didn't clean," Kaleb said somewhat sheepishly as he grabbed the chair from Parker's desk and rolled it over to his setup for me. I was very flattered when I saw that he'd set up a small table for me, complete with a cold bottle of water. "I was getting things ready when I got hit with a brain blast, and kind of got sucked into it."

"Brain blast?" I asked, trying not to seem too pleased. But then, I didn't know why I would want to hide my joy and smiled broadly, anyway.

"Yeah. So we know this witch's location, but we don't know how many are in her area or even if wherever she is some sort of informal coven. It's too dangerous to throw in a honeypot or other bait, so the usual methods I would use are pretty much out."

Oh, I hadn't even thought of that. My realm was healing, after all, so I was hardly an expert on security measures or espionage. Definitely not a part of the usual alma training.

"That does sound like an issue," I said as I sat down. Kaleb set my bag beside me before returning to his desk, visibly excited. "How'd you solve it?"

“Well, this is gonna sound crazy, but I was contemplating trying to get Sam to use some enchanted drone to sense any magic users, but that was ridiculous and way too complicated. Sam’s already made several unique spells, rituals, and gadgets for our pack, and even though he won’t admit it, I can tell he’s getting frayed at the edges.”

That made sense. I hadn’t known the snarky witch was struggling, but I could believe it. “So drones wouldn’t work, then?”

“No. *But* I realized I was approaching it from way too modern a perspective. Really, all we need is an event with a whole lot of people to work as a distraction to get a few of our number in. So one drone wouldn’t work, but a whole *boatload* of drones and kites would!”

“Wait...so you’re gonna hold some sort of convention?”

“Close—an event! And that’s where you come in.”

“Oh?” I asked, impressed by the plan. I hated drones. I saw way too many stupid injuries from inebriated folks using them and walking themselves off ledges or crashing the machines into themselves and others. It was nice to hear they could be useful.

“Yeah. This is for you.” He handed me a piece of paper that had about ten different pairs of data.

“Okay, cool. And what are these?”

“These are usernames and emails for various dummy accounts we have on Facebook. They’re mostly Jacobian’s for when he needs to do digital undercover stuff, but they’re perfect for this.”

I felt like I was a few steps behind. “Why do I need multiple fake Facebook accounts?”

“This one at the top will make the event page for an aerial get-together, offering a designated kite-flying section and assuring that the proper license has been secured from the city.”

“Has it?”

“Not yet. But Hannah is handling that, so it’ll get done.”

“Alright...so I’m making the event page on this first one and, I’m assuming, sharing it with her friends list. So what are the other nine for?”

“Sharing the event page, commenting on it to increase its rank in the algorithm, and inviting their own friends list. We want a minimum of two hundred people there. Anything less, and we risk the witches magically sussing us out.”



“Considering how long they’ve been after our pack, won’t they have at least a dozen wards around to trip if any of us cross it?”

“I would assume so,” he answered with a nod, which made me feel quite clever. Security may not have been my thing, but at least I was asking good questions. “That’s why Patricia is sending two shifters from her pack, and Ellibie is calling one of her cousins from Ireland to town.”

Wait, what? “Her...cousin?”

Kaleb gave me a curious look before realization seemed to hit him. “Right, you wouldn’t know about that. Ellibie’s older sister—the one who raised her after their parents passed—fell in love and married a changeling from Ireland. They lived here until Ellibie graduated high school, when she gave her sister her blessing to go back to her husband’s homeland. They did and had a bunch of kids together, four shifters and two changelings. I think their oldest is about my age, and their youngest is around Lyssa’s. Very cute family.”

“So a changeling is coming to help?”

“Yeah. Who better to confuse tracking or identifying spells if the area is indeed a witch hotspot?”

Changelings were curious fae, ones I didn’t entirely understand, and neither did most people. It didn’t help that throughout history, many humans had misidentified their autistic or neurodivergent children as these mythical creatures.

They weren’t the rarest fae, not by far, but also not very common, especially in our part of the world. They were often slight, with large eyes and sharp teeth. I believed they were a subset of fairy, but they couldn’t fly or use magic in the same way.

But they could shapeshift, at least limitedly, and that was pretty cool in my book.

“Do you need any help with starting the event page?” Kaleb asked.

I shook my head, opening my laptop and looking at the list. It looked like I would be more useful than I’d thought. “No, but I’ll show you what I’ve got every so often to make sure it’s what you want.”

“Perfect! Let’s get started, then.”

“Yeah,” I said, wondering why I felt more comfortable working in Kaleb’s office than I ever felt in Jamie’s company. “Let’s.”

\* \* \*

It was several hours before we had a break. To be perfectly honest, I wanted to push through and keep on trucking. It was exciting to be so useful in a way that didn't involve blood or injury. I wanted to prove that I was all in.

It was Kaleb who gently but firmly told me we needed to stop and that he could smell the cortisol rising in me. He'd also noticed that I'd had to sit up and stretch in my chair more than three times in the past thirty minutes. Realizing that I was sore and my back was tired, I let him corral me to the living room.

His couch was pretty damn comfy to sink into, so I didn't complain as he brewed my tea for me in the kitchen. The cushions around me felt like a cloud, and my back did that popping thing it always did whenever I lay down after a long day.

Whew, I hadn't realized how exhausted I was. We still had the rest of the day to go, so my body needed to figure itself out. I knew I was still healing, but how could I not be miffed that my body was so cranky about sitting in place and typing on a computer?

Thankfully, I was able to sit up with only a slight groan as Kaleb returned with my tea and some of the snacks I'd brought, grinning sheepishly.

"I didn't realize how much time had passed," he said. "Wanna order some food?"

I shouldn't, and if we were at my place, I would likely refuse. But the idea of cooking a whole meal seemed utterly exhausting, so I nodded.

"Actually, that sounds great."

"Awesome. I'll open my delivery app and see what's available. We're in a pretty primo spot in the city, so I can usually get whatever I want up here." He pulled out his phone and whistled as he lit up the screen. "Whoa, when did it get to be after five?"

"Wait, it's after five?!" I couldn't believe that. I knew we'd been at it for a while, but nearly four and a half hours? No wonder I was sore!

"Crazy, right? I can't go more than a couple of hours without eating when I'm at home."

Out of nowhere, Kaleb lifted my feet, flopped onto the couch, and placed them back in his lap. His hand rested over my ankle, the pressure gentle but firm. He didn't even seem to realize he did it, as he kept talking without missing a beat, but I was not nearly as calm about the interaction.

I didn't mind it, not at all. But it was so blissfully domestic that I couldn't help but react. I'd always been a fan of non-sexual intimacy, and him just putting my feet in his lap, like it was only natural they'd be there, made me feel like I belonged.

And I'd been missing that feeling for a really, really long time.

I felt heat rushing up my legs from where his hand was on me, his thumb beginning to absently stroke my skin. It traveled up my body until I could feel it in my cheeks, cooking just under my skin. Not for the first time, I couldn't help but notice just how ridiculously attractive Kaleb was. How was he single again?

"I'm fine with going four or so hours without a meal in the real world, and I've gone about two days back during the bad fighting days with Alpha Sawyer, but it's really not my jam."

I nodded, swallowing hard to get my mouth and mind back into working order. Geez, what was wrong with me?

"Anyway, I'm thinking Chinese," he said. "You into that? I know a great place, and they deliver here."

"Uh, yeah, sure. Chinese is great. I like Chinese."

"Great! I..." he paused, cocking his head to the side. "You alright?"

"I'm totally fine," I said quickly, my brain finally seeming to catch up. "Just hungry. Think you can get Crab Rangoon?"

"Pffft, if I ever forget Crab Rangoon, I've been replaced by a body snatcher. And egg-drop wonton soup."

"Good to know," I said, chuckling. "I'll test you with your takeout order at random to make sure that never happens."

It was his turn to laugh, but when he did, he lifted his hand from my ankle and patted it three times, like an accompanying percussion to his mirth.

Oh my God, was I really getting wound up from some simple ankle touches? Had the witch's magic accidentally sent my libido back to Victorian London? I needed to get a grip.

Granted, that would be easier to do if I didn't have so many damn bonding chemicals floating around me like the world's horniest soup.

I had known what I was in for ever since his teeth sank into my neck. But knowing it and experiencing it were two very different things, and I was experiencing it firsthand. At least some of the most intense instincts

had simmered down since I'd been saved, but they wouldn't equalize in my system until about six months into our bond.

Six months was an awful lot of time when witches seemed to be bent on wiping our pack out of existence.

"Thanks!" Kaleb said in response to my joke. "Given how many times one of us has been cursed this year, that's probably a good plan."

We shared another smaller laugh, and then he looked at his phone, his hand back in place as his thumb returned to gently stroking my skin.

"So, you only want one dinner order? I still haven't figured out what your base level hungry is. I know you can't eat like I do, but you also need more than a human, right?"

"Yeah, I need more than a human, but I've found more success eating human-sized meals more often throughout the day rather than eating giant meals a few times. Hence the Crab Rangoon and the snacks I brought."

"Makes sense. Lemme put this through, and maybe we can find something to watch on our lil' break while we wait for it to arrive."

"Shouldn't we be doing something more productive?"

Kaleb turned his head to me, his furrowed brows telling me what he thought about that. "Savvy, you've been pushing yourself for hours. It's okay to rest, you know. You don't have to be productive every moment of every day. Let's just sit here and chill."

The idea of resting when I was anything less than utterly exhausted was foreign to me, even if I knew he was right. It wasn't healthy to go, go, go, but given everything I wanted to do, how could I not? Then again, my schedule had cleared up a bit since I was no longer trying to have a secret relationship with my human coworker.

Ugh, that had been such a stupid idea. But I was lonely and desperate.

And I'd thought I was in love.

Had I ever been? I had thought I loved Jamie. I wouldn't have been with him for multiple years if I hadn't. But I was beginning to wonder if I had been so in need of companionship and understanding that I'd attached myself to him because I didn't believe I deserved anything better.

What a depressing thought.

At least that chapter was over and done with in my life. I wasn't proud of it, but I understood how I'd gotten there. No point in looking back and berating myself over my choices. Sure, it was important to identify where

I'd gone wrong and course-correct so I wouldn't do it again, but that was a different animal than wallowing in guilt and self-doubt.

"I just finished the order. It'll probably be here in about an hour," Kaleb drawled, tossing his phone on the coffee table with far more ease than I would. Granted, he had one of those mega-duty cases on it and plenty of money to replace it.

But I was quickly distracted from the phone when his eyes landed on me. What was it about those dark orbs that made it seem he was looking right through me? Although I liked to think I was a friendly person, I was also pretty private. But when he looked at me like *that*, it was like there was no room for secrets between us.

"Are you alright? I can feel you stressing," he said.

"Just thinking," I said with a shrug. But then I realized as mates, he could feel what I felt unless I hid it from him, so I might as well give a reasonable answer. "Sometimes, reviewing the steps of how I got here can bring out some complicated emotions."

"Ah, I understand that. And complicated emotions aren't great on an empty stomach."

"No, they are not," I agreed, sipping my tea.

"Well, in that case, how about I distract you with memes and digital media until our food arrives, and we can solve one of those problems?"

Goodness, was it always going to be so easy with Kaleb? I was used to having to lie, make excuses, or explain myself all the time. But the beefy wolf always seemed to take me at my word. It was a nice change of pace, although startling at times.

"That sounds like a great plan to me."

With that, his long arms grabbed his phone again, and he showed me different reels, memes, and other humorous things. It was so stupid but also absurdly fun. When was the last time I had ever sat around and done something because it was enjoyable? The girls date with Hannah? Probably.

That was far too long ago. Once the witch situation was dealt with, I needed to find a better work-life balance.

By the time our food arrived, my stomach was sore from laughter, and I was waist-deep in a thick, nearly tangible feeling of contentment. Together, Kaleb and I wolfed (ha, I could be funny, too!) down our fare until both of us were full and happy, me nestled deep into the couch and him still sitting with my feet in his lap and his own propped up on the coffee table.

It was like we'd been together forever, which didn't make sense because we technically weren't together. We'd been on one (interrupted) date, and that was it. Yeah, we were mates, but by circumstance, not by affection.

But I could rapidly feel that changing. Maybe it was just the bonding chemicals, but the more time I spent with Kaleb, the more I felt drawn to him. Felt *safe* around him. It was an irresistible pull, coaxing me further and further into his gravitational pull.

Not that I was exactly resisting, but why would I want to? I'd been lonely for so long, feeling like an outsider in my pack. Why wouldn't I take the company and affection he was so happy to give? It wasn't like I was taking advantage of him.

But I was falling too far, too fast—I could feel that. I was right at the precipice of a fuzzy, bubbling crush, but I knew that was just a hop, skip, and a jump away from intense, romantic attraction.

"You want dessert?" Kaleb asked out of nowhere, looking at me with a hazy, contented expression across his handsome features.

"When don't I?" I answered eagerly. "Did you order something?"

"Nah, but if I recall, there's a cheesecake in the fridge from the other day. Wanna help me polish it off?"

Cheesecake? Now that was a welcome surprise. "You don't have to ask me twice!"

And that was how I ended up with a slice of cheesecake in my lap, with the "slice" a quarter of the thing while Kaleb had about half. There was no way on God's green earth that I could finish the huge chunk, but that didn't mean I couldn't give it the ol' college try.

It was *cheesecake*, after all. And apparently from a very high-end bakery, judging by how rich and silky it was.

"Does security work always come with delectable fare?" I joked after several bites of the mouthwatering confection. "Because if so, I think I got into the wrong profession."

"I mean, that's something I can certainly make happen," Kaleb answered, as cheeky as ever. "But I think the rest of the pack would be pretty upset about your sudden career change."

The rest of the pack. "But you wouldn't care if I wasn't an alma anymore?"

Kaleb shook his head, taking another heaping bite of cheesecake. "I mean, it might be complicated to get another alma since they're in short

supply, but I feel like you should get to do whatever you want, like the rest of us.”

Huh.

I didn’t know why I hadn’t expected his answer. It was right in line with how he was.

“What, do I have cheesecake on my face?” Kaleb asked, giving me another curious look as I stared at him.

I could answer him honestly, or I could be a brat. Of the two of those, one was definitely more fun than the first.

Swiping my finger through the slice as quickly as I could, I whipped my hand out and streaked it down his nose.

“Yeah,” I said, sitting back with satisfaction. “You got something right there.” I gestured to my nose before batting my eyes at him like the perfectly behaved princess I was.

“Oh, do I?” he shot right back. “That’s funny, because you do, too.”

He swiped his finger through his cake, but I was too prepared. I grabbed his wrist as he reached for me, and although he could easily overpower me, he didn’t.

“That’s not very sporting of you,” he said before trying with his other hand. But I managed to catch that, too, and I was pretty proud of myself. Was my bond with Kaleb helping my reflexes? I didn’t know, but it wouldn’t be the most far-fetched thing I’d ever heard.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said primly. I’d never played around like this with Jamie. He’s always been the reserved type. And while I appreciated the peaceful nights we’d spent together, it was so *nice* to be silly and cheeky.

“You don’t, huh?”

Suddenly, Kaleb was leaning in, a devilish grin spreading his features. My entire view was filled with his face, his scent heady with every breath I took.

It was like my body responded viscerally to him, my cheeks heating and my heart thundering in my chest. A million and one thoughts flew through my head while I felt my panties flooding, brought to life by the thrill before me.

How was it possible to be so affected by him being close to me? I had no idea, but I couldn’t think. I couldn’t do much but stare into those dark eyes of his.

And then, he wiped his nose down the side of my cheek.

Oh.

It was funny, sure, and that should have broken the moment between us, but it didn't. Kaleb pulled away slightly, laughing with satisfaction, but he paused when he saw my expression.

"I'm sorry, did I-"

I didn't let him finish. It was just too much from me. His face was only a breath away from mine, and I could feel the immense heat of his body radiating into mine. The bonding hormones in me surged, and the next thing I knew, I was lunging forward to press my lips to his.

Oh *fuck*, it was just a kiss, and yet it felt *incredible*. It was like a pleasant warmth shot through every part of my body, taking me away from the aches, the pains, the exhaustion, and everything else. There was only my immense desire and a building wave of potential pleasure.

But then reality kicked in, and I realized what I was doing. Although Kaleb was my mate, that didn't mean I could kiss him willy-nilly! I hadn't even asked permission. I broke away, my hands coming up to my mouth as I gasped.

"I'm sorry!" I blurted in an exact echo of what he said. "I-"

But he was closing the distance between us and kissing me right back. His lips were surprisingly soft and warm against mine, and once more, I was blasted by all sorts of feel-good chemicals.

But it wasn't just chemicals. It was like a deep longing deep within my soul, one that had been crying out for years left unanswered for far too long.

Kaleb was most definitely answering, though. Oh *boy*, was he answering. He deepened the kiss, his tongue tracing around my lips, begging me entrance. I let him in, and the shudder that went through me was visceral.

My hands wanted to be everywhere on him, cupping his strong chin, roaming along the wide breadth of his shoulders, and squeezing those pecs that I knew were amazing even through his shirt. Yet, he was the one who moved first, his large palms bracing my waist and pulling me onto his lap.

I was more than happy to go along, my legs spreading to straddle him. As we kissed, I felt something hard prodding against my backside where I settled into his lap, proving that he was just as affected as me.

Holy shit, it was like I was drunk on it, flying high in the center of the storm. But I didn't want to come down. It was an unfettered taste of ecstasy,



leading me right down the rabbit hole.

“Kaleb,” I gasped, breaking our kiss just to pant his name. I knew I sounded like a wolf in heat, but as an alma, I didn’t have heats. I needed to gather myself, apologize to my mate, and stop climbing on him like a jungle gym.

But I didn’t do any of that. Instead, I ground down on him, enjoying the feel of his hot length hardening even more against me.

God, I wanted more. No, I *needed* more. I’d always had a healthy sexual drive, but it had faltered with my double schedule of being an alma and a nurse. I hadn’t much minded, because Jamie hadn’t had much of a drive, either.

But suddenly, I was consumed by it. Absolutely consumed. I didn’t think I could live if I didn’t quench the fire that was suddenly blooming in my middle.

“I want you,” I whispered again, reveling the feel of my lips moving against his skin.

“You can’t,” he said, but he didn’t sound all that convincing. Why couldn’t I? Because I was an alma? Almas had sex!

“You’re still healing, Savvy,” he finished.

Oh. Okay, maybe he had a point there.

“But I want it,” I whined, sounding entirely unlike myself. I was going to be so embarrassed once I wasn’t high on everything that was Kaleb. “Please?”

“Savvy.” Kaleb pulled away from me, his voice firm, and I started to come back into myself. Oh God, had I really just climbed on Kaleb and begged him for sexual intimacy like some drunk sorority girl? “You *can’t*. I’m not willing to risk you getting hurt.”

I was right—I was absolutely embarrassed. I felt the bottom drop out of my soul, and a burning flush creep up my face.

“Hey, hey, none of that now.” Kaleb’s voice was so tender as his hands came up to grip mine gently. He didn’t seem angry or even disappointed, so I let him pull them apart to reveal my face. “I know things are going fast, Savvy, but believe me, if you weren’t recovering right now, I would have no problem taking you to my room and making it so you walk with a sway the next couple of days.”

Oh, *fuck*, did he have to say it that way? An equal surge of desire and regret shot through my brain, but I clamped down on it as best I could.

“But...” he said, his lips curling back into that same devilish grin from earlier.

“But?” I repeated, voice tremulous.

“There’s no reason we can’t try something else. If you’d let me, that is.”

I was pretty sure I would agree to him dying my hair puke-green if he asked, so I nodded eagerly. That same sparking feeling, the sensation of being *alive*, began to build in me at the promise of something to fill the greedy void.

“Alright then, why don’t you lay back for me?”

As tender as ever, he lifted me out of his lap and placed me on the couch beside him, but sideways, guiding me into a lying position. I usually zoned out whenever the girls went into their stories of just how strong their partners were, as I’d never really been into that, but now I very much got it. I *liked* being manhandled by Kaleb. I felt protected and safe, which only made my desire burn brighter.

“Remember our safe word from the early days of taking care of you?”

I nodded, tongue thick in my mouth.

“Good girl. Can you say it out loud for me, just to be sure?”

“Red,” I whispered, borderline reverent. Because the way Kaleb was looking at me felt like worship. Pure, unadulterated adoration just from being near me.

“Very good. You say that whenever you need, alright?”

I nodded, pretty sure my words had left me entirely. But Kaleb didn’t seem to mind. Instead, he slowly slid my pants down my legs, leaving me in my tunic top and panties.

“*Gorgeous*,” he whispered before leaning down and brushing his lips against the sensitive skin of my thighs. I gasped, nearly jerking my leg away, but his firm grip kept me in place.

How could just the tiniest press of his mouth feel so electric? It didn’t make sense! And yet, it was like someone had injected pure pleasure straight into me, amplifying everything I was feeling.

“You smell *incredible*.” His hymn continued as he slowly kissed his way up one of my thighs, then down my other. But he didn’t touch me at my center, leaving me lying there and ruining my panties.

There had to be a wet spot growing on his couch, and he had to be able to smell it, but he didn’t comment. If words left his mouth, they were only ardent praises of me, muttered with a feral heat.

Once he'd thoroughly peppered my legs with kisses, his hands slid over my skin, his touch feather-light. Like paintbrushes across an artist's canvas, he caressed me, making me gasp and writhe whenever he touched a sensitive place.

It was perfect. It was torture. It fulfilled so much while fueling the need for more, and he hadn't so much as touched my underwear.

"You're teasing me," I gasped after who knew how long, my head swimming in endorphins. It was like being high, the world dropping away and leaving only the two of us.

"I am," he admitted, leaning forward and placing a small peck on my lips. "But you like it."

I had never seen this cocky, self-assured side of Kaleb, but I liked it. Actually, if I was being honest with myself, I liked everything about him. He was an interesting conundrum of someone who seemed so capable and accomplished but had spent most of the time I'd known him as Parker's silent shadow.

"Don't be cruel," I mewled unabashedly, looking straight into his eyes.

And just as I hoped he would, he crumbled. "How can I say no to a face like that?"

"You can't. That's the whole point."

He let out a heated chuckle, and goodness, if that didn't go straight to my core. I was slick and ready for him, I knew that much, and I needed contact *asap*.

"Fair enough."

He crept down my body, kissing a trail all the way down until his head was finally between my legs. I felt wound up tighter than a top, flushed with anticipation and want. So when his lips finally pressed to me through my underwear, I moaned and arched up into him.

"That's my girl," he practically purred, kissing me there again.

It was so much, and yet it wasn't enough. I wanted his lips on my bare skin. I wanted him to *consume* me. I couldn't remember the last time I had gotten head, and I didn't think I could wait a minute more without relieving someone of a limb.

It was like Kaleb could sense exactly what I was thinking because his hands slid up my legs again until they reached my underwear, and he slowly slid them down. It was an arduous journey, but when he finally slipped them over my ankles, I was practically vibrating with anticipation.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long because his mouth was on me again, hot and wet in all the right ways. He started slow, his tongue barely ghosting over me, but with the encouragement coming out of my mouth, he eventually pressed deeper.

And holy *fuck*, if it wasn't just *incredible*. I had no doubt that Kaleb was using his enhanced senses to monitor my every response and adjust accordingly. Hot and slick, he slid against me, winding me up but never flicking his tongue exactly where I wanted him to.

I knew it was just a new form of teasing, and it was driving me mad. I got the feeling that if I weren't so thoroughly worn out, I would have been jack-knifed around his head, but as it were, I was still squirming on the pillowy cushions of his couch.

Wait...would Parker be able to smell what had happened? The thought was too weird to give time to, so I shoved that away for future Savannah to worry about. Present-Savannah was too busy being tongue-fucked into oblivion.

My fingers twisted into Kaleb's hair unbidden, and I pushed myself into his mouth. He drank me down like I was ambrosia, swallowing me up while my mouth ran wild.

I felt worshipped, wave after wave of pleasure flowing through me with every movement of his tongue. He wound me up, licking, stroking, sucking, and finally, *finally*, he sealed his lips over my clit.

"Fuck, *Kaleb!*"

I gripped his hair so tightly, I was surprised it didn't come out at the roots. And crazily enough, I could feel him smiling against my folds. That shouldn't have been so hot, and yet it was, pushing me closer and closer to my end.

If someone had told me the day before that I would be splayed out on Kaleb's couch, thighs spread wide and pinned by his insanely strong hands, crying out as he sent me to heaven with his mouth, I would have called them insane. And yet, here I was.

And what a good position to be in.

"Kaleb, I'm close! I'm close, I'm close, *I'm close!*"

But the craziest thing was that something sparked within me, and it was like the mating bond connecting us doubled in size and strength. Suddenly, I could feel so much coming from Kaleb, pouring into me with intense, all-consuming waves. Somehow, even though I wasn't doing anything to

reciprocate, he was having the time of his life. Ecstasy, pride, care, affection—they all flowed through our connection undiluted.

He...he really felt that way about me?

That realization was like lightning right through my mind, and the next thing I knew, I was toppling over that precipice within me.

*“Kaleb!!!”*

All my muscles tensed as I orgasmed, euphoria filling my entire body. It was bliss, uninterrupted bliss, and I floated into another universe.

By the time I came down, I was covered in sweat and completely boneless. My head was hazy but in a pleasant way. Like I was in such a good place, mean or dark thoughts couldn’t reach me.

“There you go, beautiful,” Kaleb said, letting my legs go and leaning over my body to give me a kiss on the lips. I could taste myself on his lips, which made me smile sleepily at him.

“How about I get you a glass of water, then you take a nap in my bed?” he murmured, looking so pleased.

“But what about you?”

He tilted his head again. I was quickly growing attached to that expression. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you, uh, want me to...reciprocate?”

But he shook his head and kissed my head again. Which was a relief as much as it was confusing. I was so warm and comfy that I felt I could fall asleep right then and there.

“Don’t you worry about that. I had a great time. Now, let me get you that water.”

My lids grew heavy with sleep, and I let myself slowly begin to sink. Who knew? Maybe I would wake up and realize this encounter was a dream?

But even if it was a figment of my imagination, I wouldn’t mind revisiting it.

\* \* \*

I wiped my hands on my scrubs as I headed to work. It was my first day back after taking off two full weeks, and I was more than a bit nervous.

It was also the first time I would end up face-to-face with my ex. It wasn't guaranteed, as we were both pretty busy, and I'd stopped keeping track of his schedule, but it was likely.

Also, I was sure I'd have to answer lots of questions about where I'd been. I'd used the excuse of needing personal time, so I hoped everyone would assume I was nursing my heartbreak from my breakup with Jamie. It would make me look pathetic, but I didn't care. Especially if it discouraged people from talking to me about it.

Oh well. That was the way the cookie crumbled, I supposed. At least I had plenty of pleasant memories with Kaleb to fall back on.

Because wow, did we pack a lot into the time that had passed since I nearly died. After I drank water on his couch, he'd picked me up like it was that first day I'd woken up again, carrying me to his bed. There, he cuddled me through the night.

I'd half expected him to be weird about it in the morning, but no. He'd gotten up before me, made me breakfast, brewed my tea, and asked if I needed anything before hopping back to his work. I'd told him I was fine, finished everything he made for me, and fell back asleep until noon.

Kaleb also must have notified my guards because I wasn't confronted with worried texts asking where I was and calling a red alert. Instead, I leisurely rose when I was ready and used Kaleb's ridiculously nice shower. He had not one, not two, but *three* showerheads, all with adjustable pressure. I was going to need to find a reason to visit more often.

I spent the rest of the day finishing the rest of my social media tasks, and after a light kiss from Kaleb, I went home. It was strange how normal everything felt when I had been so sure that things were going to fall apart because of what we'd done. But I certainly wasn't complaining.

Over the next few days, Kaleb visited me about every other day and gave me updates on anything he'd discovered.

And eat me out if I wanted it.

Believe me, I usually wanted it.

He never asked for anything on his part, and whenever I tried, he would remind me that I was still healing. Part of me couldn't help but wonder if there was an anatomical issue or if he wasn't ready for that kind of intimacy, but the rest of me was too busy getting my mind blown with repeated orgasms to worry about it.

And I was going to count on those orgasms to help me power through what was sure to be a rough day at work. I was only working an eight-hour shift, which was pretty unheard of, but my bosses were strangely understanding about my needing time to get back to normal. I couldn't help but wonder if Mahlan had a hand in that, considering how much he'd started donating to the hospital since I started working there, but I knew better than to ask.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was busy when I got in. I threw myself into work, and no one had time to idly gossip. Before I knew it, the first five hours of my shift were gone. My feet were killing me, and my side was aching, but it was good to be back and productive.

"Savvy! You here?"

I looked up as Melissa, a pediatric nurse, came running in.

"Yeah, what's up?" I was in one of the less used on-call rooms. It was close enough to the orthopedic floor to smell like denture cream and bio-freeze, which was pretty unappetizing to eat around. But I was managing, as the privacy was more than worth it.

"We're slammed in the ER, and we just had a young woman brought in who's been exsanguinated."

I practically dropped my sandwich, jumping to my feet. "Do you mean she's bled out from being injured?"

"No...I mean, she was specifically drained of her blood, as far as we can tell. A homeless lady found her dumped in an ally."

"And she's alive?!"

"Barely. I'm handling the cops—you know how they like to get in the way—but you tend to handle these weird cases, so I was hoping you would tag in."

I nodded, already rushing to Melissa's side. "Lead the way."

We ran through the hospital, as nurses often did with emergencies. My only thought was that if Melissa was handling the case, Jane Doe had to be young. Really young.

The image of Ashlee floated through my mind, reminding me that the witches hunting us had zero reservations about hurting young people.

We quickly made it down to intake, and I burst into the girl's room. Melissa peeled off to address the cops, who had a lot of questions, and I took over setting up the blood transfusion while another nurse established

an IV cannula. I didn't envy her, knowing how challenging it would be to find a vein in someone who had so little blood in them.

"Hey there," I murmured to the patient, although she was unresponsive. Her skin was an ashen gray, and her eyes were matte, her chest barely rising and falling. Glancing around quickly, I subtly placed a hand on her neck as if I was checking her pulse.

I let my alma magic flow through her for a moment—running diagnostics, as I liked to call it. The vibrant spark of life within her was barely more than a flicker, but it was there. It wasn't alone, however. It was surrounded by little echoes, almost like scars against her very soul.

I now had zero doubts that whatever had happened to her had been some sort of ritual. I couldn't feel witch magic like I normally could, but there was no denying the imprint of those ghostly murmurs. Those faint aftershocks of magical trauma.

Not great.

But what was also not great was the door opening and none other than Jamie rushing in. It made sense that it was him since he and I often worked on texting-while-driving victims. Jamie had developed some pretty amazing techniques for the often teenage patients, as they had smaller bodies with high caloric needs that could suddenly and often drastically change in size. It was only natural they would call him for an underage Jane Doe who shouldn't even be alive.

He came to a stop when he saw me, his expression completely blank. For a moment, I thought we were about to have a row, but less than a second later, he continued like nothing was wrong.

Well, at least I could count on him to be professional when a patient's life was on the line.

"Have we found a possible bleed-out site?" he asked, walking to the patient's other side.

I removed my hand from her pulse and nodded, already knowing the answer. "Like intake said, she doesn't have an injury to cause this level of bleed-out."

"Then what could have possibly caused this? There's no way a young woman would have any comorbidities that would cause her to lie there and hemorrhage."

"I believe if we look, we're going to find needle marks right at the subclavian artery, then one on both the right and left iliac artery."



“You think intake would have missed that?”

“Yes. Because they’ve been filled with wax.”

Jamie looked at me like I was insane, but to my surprise, he didn’t question me. Instead, he walked over to the secured sharps box, punched in his code, and grabbed a long needle.

“The IV cannula is inserted,” the nurse beside me said, sounding immensely relieved. I couldn’t blame her.

“Good,” Jamie said. “Get me several of our emergency heating pads.”

She didn’t question him, either, proving why I liked my work so much when people didn’t bring drama into it. We all wanted to save the patient, and save the patient we would. We were determined.

“Let’s see if your theory is correct,” Jamie murmured, crossing back to me and lowering the blanket to reveal the young woman’s décolletage. A moment later, the nurse was back with a handful of heating packs that activated upon cracking. “We should place these on those sights. They won’t melt the wax completely, but they will help us see where there’s an aberration in the dermis.”

I nodded, each of us taking a pack and cracking them, then rubbing them between our hands for a moment. I could feel the heat almost instantly and moved the modesty sheet to the side to place it on her right iliac artery.

In emergency situations, we usually didn’t have time to care about a patient’s modesty; we were too busy saving their lives. But we were caught in the weird pace of her not actively crashing but needing blood instantly.

“Where is the transfusion, anyway?” I asked, applying gentle pressure to the pack.

“She’s O-neg,” the nurse replied. “And we’re completely out after that GSW earlier today, so two of the team took an ambulance to Sister’s Mercy to get a few bags of theirs.”

“Who’s the driver?” Jamie asked. “Angela?”

“Yup.”

“Good,” he said with a nod. “She drives batshit-crazy, but she’s the fastest and has somehow never had an accident.”

For a moment, for the briefest moment, it was like old times. No animosity, no disappointment, just us professionals doing our best. Why couldn’t things have stayed like that?

Then again, if they had stayed the same, I probably would have broken up with Jamie because I was mated. While Kaleb seemed incredibly

understanding about so much, it wasn't reasonable to think that either of us could handle the hormonal drop-off of our new mate sleeping with someone else. A year or two in? Maybe. But not fresh off the bat.

My relationship with Jamie had always had an expiration date, if only because I kept it a secret. Maybe it could have flourished, but I'd choked out any potential by keeping it in the dark.

"Alright, that should be long enough to at least soften the top layer of wax," Jamie said, removing his heat pack. The nurse and I were quiet for a moment as he leaned close, inspecting the slightly reddened area. I held my breath, hoping I was wrong.

But I wasn't.

"I see something," Jamie said, raising his needle and carefully pressing the tip against whatever he saw. Sure enough, a bit of soft flesh-colored wax came up. "*Fuck*. You're right, Sav. How did you know?"

"Saw this once before I moved here."

"You thinking serial killer?"

I shook my head. "No, it's, uh...it's someone practicing magic." Blood magic, specifically. I knew the brothers and witches relied heavily on that particular magic tree, but I was still chilled by it.

Because it was another drained body, which they shouldn't need because the brothers were gone; there was no longer any madness to cure with stolen shifter blood. But I realized that meant the young girl below me was most likely fae. But what kind of fae? I had no idea.

But I couldn't let her vitals or anything else be recorded. I would have to ask Jacobian to erase everything about her from our administration and send our covert shifter police officers rather than the human ones Melissa was dealing with.

Whew. A lot to do. But first, we needed to save the girl.

"Magic?" Jamie asked disbelievingly. "Pfft. Delusional idiots killing people over something that doesn't exist."

"R-right," I tried to sound natural as I agreed. "Ridiculous."

Jamie rubbed his face before taking a deep breath. "Goddammit, where's the blood?"

"I'll go make a call," the other nurse said before rushing out.

Jamie gave an absent nod, then returned to the secured box, no doubt to find a better tool for removing the wax. I was pretty sure it didn't go very deep—less than a fingernail's depth—but I let Jamie be distracted.

I was at an impasse. I had no idea how the girl was still alive because she most certainly shouldn't have been, but it was clear to me and my magic that she was slowly fading away. Death was creeping ever closer, spurred on by the tick of the clock.

Blood would be best for her, but we didn't have her blood type. Which meant I needed to use magic. But there were cops right outside the door, the other nurse and Melissa could come in at any moment, and Jamie was less than a foot away from me.

I had a policy to never use magic in front of mortals. I'd already broken that by using my subtle diagnostic magic, so was I willing to risk a much more blatant display? Sure, it wasn't like I would float in the air and start chanting, but humans weren't completely blind to magic. They could sense it the same way they could sense an electrical storm approaching in the wind. And some people were more perspective than others, either because they had diluted fae blood from some past relative with a wandering eye or were born with senses that had mostly been filtered out of the gene pool by micro-evolution, such as the appendix.

So, did I risk exposing us to our ex and maybe my coworkers, or did I let her continue to fade and hope the blood arrived in time?

Who was I trying to kid? I was going to save the girl. No way would I let her die on our table while I debated the finer parts of fae ethics and politics.

"Maybe I can put a call in with Mathieu." With a nod, Jamie threw his needle in the biohazard waste and stepped out of the room.

I didn't waste a second, going to the box and punching a code to pull out a disposable blade. As quickly as I could, I stood so my back was to the camera, nicked the side of my arm, and gently pressed it to the girl's mouth.

"Come on, dear," I murmured, imagining my calming energy flowing over her. "You're safe now. You've been found, and I'm going take care of you, okay?"

She didn't respond, but I wasn't expecting her to. I just wanted her spirit to sense that it was okay to rise back to the surface, away from the inky darkness that was trying to swallow her whole. I was all too familiar with that feeling.

I wished I could get more of my blood into her, but I had a few moments at most. I did the best I could, pulling away when I heard footsteps approaching.

“Mathieu says he’s gonna see what the hold-up is,” Jamie said, unlocking the medical safe for another needle and returning. He said nothing else as he returned to extracting the wax while I set up a plasmid IV to hold the girl over. She had to be a fae. It was the only way to explain how she was still alive when she was an empty sack of skin, muscle, and bone.

“Thank you,” I said before swallowing. “I’m going to step out for a moment to give Melissa a break from the cops. Should I send her in with a heating pad?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” Jamie paused, cocking his head to the side. “She feels a little warmer.”

“Does she?” I asked innocently. Or I hoped I sounded that way when I was relieved that even the small amount of blood I’d given her had helped. “Is that from the heat packs?”

“Could be, but this feels a bit broader.”

“Alright, let’s hope that continues as her body takes in the IV fluids.”

“Hopefully.”

I left him to it and hurried into the hall where I could text Mahlan what was happening. As soon as I sent those messages, I found Melissa and gave her Jamie’s orders.

The cops were surprisingly patient, excusing themselves to the waiting room and saying they needed to update their captain. Sometimes the officers we got in were belligerent, not understanding that it took time to get answers in medicine and that HIPAA sometimes didn’t allow us to divulge certain things if the patient didn’t wish it.

With the two officers dealt with, I took a deep breath, already thoroughly exhausted. I knew I was still too weak to be doing much healing magic, but what was I supposed to do? Let a girl waste away on my table when she was entirely savable?

I went to the closest vending machine and bought a bottle of water, as I’d left my canteen upstairs in the smelly on-call room. But while I was standing there, I noticed something in the corner of my eye.

It was subtle, something I might have never spotted if it weren’t for a certain new witchy friend who had walked into my life. But the plants in front of the ER doors were leaning against the window, their leaves brushing against the glass as if they were looking for something.

Or someone.

“No,” I murmured, mind churning. “She can’t be.”

But the idea was in my head, so I rushed to the reception area.

“I need a plant,” I said.

The woman sitting there looked up at me, confusion written all over her features. “Pardon?”

“A plant. I need a houseplant right now.”

To her credit, she didn’t question me. She stood, walked to the back area, and returned with what looked like a very colorful croton.

“Be careful,” she said uncertainly. “I’m attached to this little guy.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll have it back to you within the hour.”

Taking it, I rushed back to Jane Doe’s room. I knew I would have to explain why I was bringing a plant into her room, but I would deal with that when it happened.

“Hey, any updates?” Jamie asked. “The officers are doing whatever paperwork and busy stuff they have.”

“We’re able to pick up her heart rate!” Melissa said excitedly, although her smile dropped when she noticed what I was holding. “Why do you have a plant?”

“Uh, I dunno,” I lied, and terribly. How had I managed to have a secret relationship for several years? “Someone handed it to me, and I didn’t think about it. I guess I was distracted.”

“I’ve done that before. They probably bought it for a patient who passed.”

“Yeah, uh, probably,” I said.

I put the plant on the closest flat surface. Naturally, I didn’t stare at it as we worked, but I kept an eye on it in my peripheral vision. Sure enough, it started to bend ever so slightly, colorful leaves reaching for the young woman.

It was official: Jane Doe was a green witch.

My revelation was interrupted by the door banging open and several people rushing in. “Blood is here!” one of them announced.

“Thank God!” Melissa cried, stepping out of the way. “Let’s get this girl taken care of and up to her own room!”

“I can’t believe her organs are still functioning,” Jamie murmured as we shifted to all hands on deck. “This is borderline medically impossible.”

Medically impossible, yes. But magically impossible? That was an entirely different story.

We worked quickly, and against all odds, we managed to stabilize her and get her to her own room. Everyone was talking about it by the time I could stumble away from the whole scene, and that was when I heard that the alley she'd been found in was just outside a cathedral.

A young green witch drained of blood right outside a sanctuary? I didn't need to be a witch to know that our enemies were orchestrating a curse. One specifically targeted at Sam.

It made sense. He had been quite the thorn in their sides, and I was pretty sure our pack would have been wiped out long ago if it weren't for him. He'd given us gadgets, spells, and wards and killed one of their high-ranking warriors. Taking him out would weaken us and cut off our main source of magical knowledge. I knew our pack had contracts with other witches and magical users, but none were as invested or as ingenious as Sam.

We could probably thank Lyssa for that loyalty. She'd really saved our pack in more ways than one.

But I couldn't just stand around and listen to gossip. The green witch was stable but unconscious, and I needed to update my alpha on this development.

Pulling out my phone, I realized my shift had ended forty minutes earlier. Not unusual for a nurse, but they could pay me for another twenty minutes or so while I sat and filled out my notes.

Going back to the stinky on-call room, I updated Mahlan. He said that he would get our guys on the force to arrive and Jacobian ready to erase or alter whatever we needed gone, then told me to go home and rest as soon as I could.

I promised I would text one of my guards to come get me. He replied that he'd send someone, and that was that.

Not that I minded. I was *incredibly* exhausted. Talk about a wild first day back at work.

About half an hour later, I finished what I needed to and headed out. It felt strange to duck out when the girl was alone in her room, but Mahlan had assured me that he was sending guards for her. I would have to come back with Sam once the girl was conscious and see what she knew. I had no doubt that the witches who had left her for dead expected her to stay that way. The girl was lucky that something in the magic within her allowed her to survive.

Sore, with a stabbing pain in my still-healing side, I limped my way to the main entrance. I was so in my world that I didn't notice someone was waiting for me until they called my name.

"Savvy!"

Pausing, I turned and blearily looked around. There was nothing I wanted more than to go home and curl up in my bed. If I had the energy, I might have drop-kicked whoever was delaying me.

Well, until I noticed that it was Kaleb.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, more than a bit surprised. As far as I knew, he was still setting up security for the drone event.

"I heard you needed an escort home, so I thought I would volunteer. You know, taking care of my mate and all that." He lifted the large bag he was holding that I also hadn't noticed. "Got you some grub. I didn't know what you'd be in the mood for, so I ordered from a few places."

He...he...

I couldn't say anything for a moment, warmth and happiness blooming in my chest, then rolling up my throat to block all my words. I knew I was tired because I wanted to cry, I was so moved.

Naturally, Kaleb picked up on my crumpled expression and stinging eyes. "Hey, it's okay. Is this too much?"

"No," I finally managed to gasp, rushing forward and embracing him. "No, it's just right. Thank you, Kaleb. I appreciate this more than you know."

"Glad to be of service. Do you wanna eat here or go home right now? You can snack on stuff in the truck if you want. I made sure to get finger food."

Dear Lord, he was too good. Just too good.

"Let's go home," I breathed. "I don't wanna be here anymore."

"Your wish is my command."

With that, his free hand slipped into mine, our fingers interlacing. Together, we walked out, and I felt better about everything that had happened.

We were in stressful times, but at least I wasn't alone. Even if Kaleb and I couldn't work something romantic out of our mating, I knew he would always, *always* be my friend.

## Chapter 9

---



## *Kaleb*

Days passed in a blur. I was dealing with my whole security thing, Savvy and Sam were dealing with the young green witch, and Jacobian was dealing with both. I wished that we could slow down. That I could spend more time with Savvy, and we could go on another date, but all we had time for was quick texts and the occasional meal.

Or, you know, the meals I made of her.

Thinking of that made me lick my lips, but I told myself to behave. I was monitoring our drone event at a remote location, Jacobian having set up a war room that was close enough so we could get there quickly if a battle broke out, but far enough away where it was unlikely we were violating any warding spells.

My leg was bouncing with nervous energy as people began to arrive. Savvy had been a huge help by doing so much of the busy work on social media, allowing me to set up enough drones to ensure we got appropriate readouts of the area.

Granted, there was no guarantee our new tech would work. It was an insane combination of modern invention and magical ingenuity, with Sam, Parker, and I working together to make a sort of...energy scanner. It couldn't say 100% if fae were in the area, but it could pick up particularly strong spells. And if we were looking at a covert coven, there would have to be all sorts of warding and protection spells in their lodgings and the entrances to their buildings.

At least, that was our working theory.

But given everything I had learned about magic from Sam, I was pretty confident that it would work. And if it did, it could reveal to us the lairs of

most of our enemies.

I had never imagined they would be so bold to have their little hive in the heart of our city, but it made perfect sense. Especially since shifters had been disappearing from every pack in our area. We should have put two and two together earlier, but I had always assumed their base was far away and that they traveled to our city to hunt.

“Looks like we got a great turnout,” Parker remarked, getting our drones ready to fly out of the window one by one. We’d also wired them to have extra battery packs. The last thing we wanted was for them to run out of juice on their way back and crash, allowing witches to pick up the pieces and realize our plot.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I see at least fifty people already, and the event isn’t for another ten minutes.”

“There will probably be a gap before more people arrive, though. We’ve got the early birds now, but most people are always late to these kinds of things.”

“That’s annoyingly true.”

Parker chuckled, then continued his work. I kept my eye on my screens, making sure everything was ready to be recorded onto our remote server. While I was keeping an eye on the data, there was only so much my eyes could catch in real-time. I didn’t doubt we would need to go over it with a fine-toothed comb later.

It wasn’t all that long before the crowd’s drones started to take to the air, and Parker began to release ours. There were too many for us to fly on our own, but that didn’t matter as they had their routes programmed into them with an alert system in case anything disrupted their paths. It was the only way we could have as many as we did without packing over a dozen guards in our hidey-hole with us. And having so many shifters packed in one place could easily tip off the witches.

“You know, those kites are kind of pretty,” Parker said.

I nodded, sparing a glance out the window. It was nice to see the dozen or so families in the kite-only area, their children laughing and screaming while they played with each other and their kites.

It made me think of what it would be like to have my own children. I’d never had an overwhelming drive to reproduce, as I wasn’t an alpha or an omega, and I was also afraid of passing on my genetics. What if I gave my

offspring the same ticking timebomb that had cost my mother her life? Would that be something I would ever want to do?

About a month ago, I would have adamantly said no. I had Parker, and that was all I needed. But a lot had changed in that time, and I could see myself with some little brats on my knees if a certain someone was their mother.

I was getting way too ahead of myself. Savannah and I hadn't even slept together, and I was already daydreaming of our future with kids and one of those lake homes Theo had bought. I would make sure that people respected her time and that she wasn't overbooked, and I would reduce my work hours at our company. Maybe even finally hire the assistant Mahlan and Jacobian kept encouraging me to get.

"What the hell is *that*?"

Blinking, I pulled myself out of my fantasy to see Parker looking at my screen with wide eyes. Following his gaze, I saw a massive energy spike on one of the drone's readouts.

"Whoa," I muttered, leaning toward the screen. "You're right. What the hell is that?"

"We gotta investigate that further."

I nodded, going into my control program and opening the protocol for the machine we wanted. Turning off its auto-pilot script, I used my WASD keys to navigate it like a video game.

Guiding it while watching where the data spiked, I tracked the energy. Just because there was a strange signature didn't mean we'd found something. We could be picking up the home of the banshees, or a medium in the middle of a seance, or something like that.

But still, my heart was thundering in my chest, wondering if we had managed to crack things less than half an hour into our event. That would certainly be a security success.

Bit by bit, we grew closer to it. But the closer we drew to the source, the harder it was to track variances within the data.

"I think we need to switch to the camera feed," I said, carding through a few more screens until I could change the input. There was a bit of flickering, and a fairly crisp image replaced my deluge of data.

"Not bad," Parker remarked before his eyes widened again. "There!" he exclaimed, pointing. "That window! It's got a shimmer, right?"

“And why is a shimmer suspicious?” I murmured, surprised by his enthusiasm.

“Because Sam said he put magic in this to look through glamours, right? I’m not an expert, but that looks like a glamour on the edge of too far for the spell to fully deconstruct.”

I paused, giving my friend an impressed look. “You really have learned a lot about this magic stuff, huh?”

“Of course I have. What do you think I’ve been doing with Sam?”

I raised my eyebrows, and Parker flushed. He’d always been a bit shy about such things, and I couldn’t help but gently tease him about it. It was my duty as his pseudo-big brother.

“Don’t answer that!” I teased again.

I would have loved to keep the banter going a little longer, but we had a mission to concentrate on. I turned my attention back to the drone.

“I can’t believe we’re about to discover a witch coven with a child’s toy,” Parker said, shaking his head.

“Hey, drones are for all ages,” I countered. “And we don’t know that-”

I froze as the shimmer on the window disappeared entirely, and the drone took a swooping shot of a man sitting on a plush-looking couch with five large men sitting around him. As quickly as I could, I throttled the drone away, my blood running cold in my veins.

“What is it?” Parker asked, sensing my abrupt change in mood.

I didn’t answer. I kept pushing the drone at top speed until it was far enough away from the window, and then I crashed it into the water.

“What the hell!? Why did you do that?” Parker shouted.

“Couldn’t risk having it come here,” I said, pulling up the footage in a media player and rewinding it.

“What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me?”

“I recognize that man,” I said, trying to swallow to wet my dry mouth. “Or at least I think I do.”

I didn’t just think; I *knew*. That man’s face was burned into my mind, along with everything else that had happened that day.

“Wait, you do?”

“Yeah.”

Finally, I got to the few seconds where he’d been in full view, and I knew without a doubt who that was. I stared at the man, in so much shock that I wasn’t sure what to say.

His features had shifted some since I'd met him more than fifteen years earlier, but it was unmistakably who I thought it was, just wrinklier and grayer.

"Well, who is it?" Parker asked, breathless beside me.

"That's Frederick Alynsin."

"Frederick Alynsin...should I know who that is?"

I sent my best friend an incredulous look. "Yes, you should know who that is! Frederick Alynsin is on the council!"

"No!" Parker leaned in, scrutinizing the man's profile. "How do you even remember that? The council hadn't been here in ages, and I don't remember him."

"That's because he didn't come when Alpha Sawyer died; he came here when my mother did. He didn't stay long enough for the funeral, but he stopped by my house, where Ellibie was watching me, and dropped off a five hundred dollar grocery card. Said I was my own man now, and he was looking forward to seeing what I would do." Anger flowed through me anew, old memories rising to the surface. "I remembered thinking that I was just twelve, so how was I supposed to know how to be a man of the house? But he patted my head like I was a baby and left. Ellibie told me that some people were so high off their own fumes that they were disconnected from reality, and I never forgot that."

Parker let out a long breath, shaking his head. "I...I can't believe this. But what is a council member doing in the same city block as a witch who's been attacking us?"

I swallowed, not wanting to say anything out loud. But I had a good feeling about why he'd be there. Even if that would be the worst thing possible for our pack.

"We need to talk to Mahlan."

\* \* \*

"Are you absolutely sure of this, Kaleb?"

I looked into Mahlan's eyes, wanting desperately to tell him no, I was pranking him. But I couldn't.

Parker and I had waited until the end of the event so we had a full picture of the data. Just as we'd thought, there were three apartment

buildings chock-full of energy signatures indicating powerful wards. We'd found the home of our enemy and a council member within it.

"We're sure," I confirmed, opening the video file on my laptop. "This is him."

Mahlan cursed under his breath, and even Theo bristled. Parker and I had called Theo the moment we packed up and asked Mahlan to meet at the alpha's new place, dreading the interaction but knowing it was necessary.

"This is...unprecedented," Mahlan said eventually, his anger filling the room. "Thank you—both of you—for finding this out."

"What are you going to do?" I asked, hoping his answer would ease the pit in my stomach.

"I'm going to contact the council and submit all this evidence. They need to know that one of their members has gone wrong."

I swallowed hard. I wasn't a fan of the council, so the idea of contacting them made my stomach twist. "Alright. I'll compress this into a drive you can send."

"Thank you, Kaleb. With any luck, now that we've finally figured out who's at the heart of all this, the council can come in and shut everything down."

"Yeah," I agreed weakly. "Let's hope so."

One thing was for sure, though: I needed to tell Savannah.

## Chapter 10

---

## *Savannah*

“Did someone order our Piña Piñata?”

I raised my hand at the server looking over our noisy table. It was the first family meal I’d been to since my injury, and honestly, the get-together was like a balm to my soul.

So much had happened so quickly, I felt like the world was rapidly spiraling away from me.

Only four days earlier, the green witch Jane Doe had appeared in our ER—only two days since Kaleb told me about his insane discovery at the stake-out.

I still could hardly believe it. The council was supposed to be the unifying force that stopped all-out war between the fae. They were the peacekeepers, the leaders we looked to for conflict resolution. That one of them was working against them would be a huge blow.

Not that it wasn’t unheard of. There’d been a small handful of council members who had become corrupt or violated laws in the long, long history of the fae, but they’d been dealt with swiftly. I couldn’t imagine the skill of this Fred guy to have gone so long and done so much without being detected.

Our entire pack was on high alert because of it, waiting for the other shoe to drop. We all knew that Mahlan had sent the evidence to the council by an Hermes, so they had to have it by now. We just had to wait for their response.

Which was easier said than done. It felt like their response was hovering over all our heads, just waiting for...well, I didn’t know what it was waiting for, but I was definitely on edge.



“Oooh, that looks tasty,” Lyssa said across the table, gazing at my tropical drink. “Can I have a sip?”

“When you’re twenty-one,” I answered frankly. Although Lyssa was mature beyond her years, she wasn’t old enough for alcohol in America. I didn’t feel like getting the waitress in trouble by offering some of my drink to someone underage.

“You know I’m a wolf, right? Alcohol can’t affect me.”

“No, but losing her job would certainly affect our server.”

“Oh...” Lyssa huffed a sigh, but it was a good-natured one. I could tell she didn’t resent me for my answer, simply the trappings of the situation. “Yeah, never mind.”

“I’ll take some of that, though,” Kaleb said, leaning in and capturing my straw in his mouth. The move brought our faces incredibly close to each other, and I was instantly flushing.

Man, the bonding chemicals in me needed to ease off a bit, or I was going to end up walking around with a permanently red face. It made no sense to be so affected by him just drinking my cocktail.

Thankfully, the urge to jump his bones right there at the table eased when he scrunched up his face in distaste. “That is way too sweet. How do you drink that?”

“Hey,” I said, pulling the oversized goblet away. “You leave my alcoholic slushie alone. Mommy’s got a lot of stress she’s dealing with.”

I’d said it in jest, but it was impossible to miss the spark in his eyes.

“Oh, so you’re Mommy now, huh? Well, what does Daddy have to say about you having so much sugar before-”

“Is this where I need to remind you all that we have enhanced senses?” Hannah mused, trying not to laugh as she twirled her spaghetti around her fork.

Oh, right. Despite being an alma to a pack that was over 300 strong, I still managed to forget that every so often.

“Aw, come on, we’re newly mated,” Kaleb said, as cool as a cucumber. “You’ve all been there at this point.”

“I haven’t,” Parker murmured, looking longingly at the chair Sam had occupied at the beginning of the meal. However, the green witch had gotten a lead on Jane Doe’s possible parents and had to hurry off.

Not without his guard, of course. Even since we’d discovered that our enemy witches were trying to make a hex specifically for him, he’d had no

less than two of our guards and two of his magical allies. I didn't know either of them very well, but one was a dream-weaver, and the other was a pyromantic—or a fire witch, for the lack of a better term.

I'd always known that there was a vast breadth of magical classes, but I'd had no idea that there were so many classes. Apparently, European witches tended to have more generalized studies over multiple elements and spell types, though many indigenous magics were the opposite. I had no idea why, and while I was sure I could ask Sam, I wasn't sure I had the mental capacity to digest the lesson at the moment.

"You could always change that," Kaleb said, putting his arm over his brother's shoulders. "I think Sam would be receptive."

"You think so?"

It was Emma who reached over, resting her hand over his. "Parker, we can tell he's wild for you. And it's okay if it's a little too soon for you, but I can see him being open to that in the future."

"Even if...even if he's not a wolf?"

Ah, now I understood Parker's hang-up. It wasn't uncommon for inter-fae relationships to be a thing, but there weren't any I knew of in our pack. Well, except for Ellibie's sister, but she had long since moved away. I could understand that Parker would be nervous about aligning himself with someone who was not only from outside of the pack but also a witch.

"Designation doesn't matter," Emma said softly, and I couldn't help but admire how calm and sweet she was. "What matters is that the two of you are in love and respect each other."

Parker smiled sweetly, and it was such a lovely moment. The kind I lived for. It made the pain, the stress, all of it worth it.

The meal moved on with more talking and celebrating. By the time we finished, it was several hours later, and the restaurant was beginning to close. I got the feeling that we all wanted to extend the dinner as long as possible, as it felt like there might not be another one for a long while.

I hoped that was just paranoia on our part. The council was so powerful, I had no doubt they would sweep in and clean everything up without much fuss. And then finally, finally, *finally*, we would have peace.

It was difficult for me to imagine a life without the threat of the witches looming over our every step. I would certainly have a lot more free time! Maybe I could finally go on that second date with Kaleb. And by second date, I meant a raincheck of our interrupted first date.

Even that felt like a lifetime ago, back when he was just a nice, handsome guy in my pack who was kind to me and not someone I was quickly coming to need in my life. It was rather insane how quickly my feelings were developing for him, but considering the times we lived in, maybe it wasn't the most unbelievable thing.

"Hey, does anyone want to come over to our place for a bonfire?" Mahlan asked as we gathered in the parking lot. There was a chorus of yeses, but something cold settled in my gut.

"You don't have to," Kaleb murmured to me, noticing my shift in mood immediately. He was just so attuned to me. I knew we had a bond that linked us, but I couldn't help but feel it was more than that. Even without our bond, I knew he would pay close attention to my mental state.

Or maybe I was just biased. I didn't mind it either way.

"N-no, I wanna go."

Because I did want to go. I wanted to be with my friends and share fellowship with them. I wanted to absorb every second of goodness I could because we could all feel a storm approaching on the horizon.

But the last time I'd been at Lyssa's house, I'd almost died. That was bound to leave an impression on anyone, especially considering my intense recovery, even with the mating bond accelerating my healing. I was scared. While I knew it wasn't likely that witches would just burst out of the ether and attack me again, there was still the adrenaline response of returning to a scene of trauma.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded but reached for his hand, which he happily took. For us not being real mates, I certainly felt bolstered by his presence. "Yeah, I'm sure. Just, uh, would you stay by my side?"

He brought my hand to his mouth, kissing the top of it. "Always."

*Goodness.*

He probably didn't mean it exactly. It was just a comforting phrase to confirm he'd help me out in the current. And yet, it *felt* like he meant exactly what he said—that he would always be there for me whenever I needed him.

And perhaps what was crazier was that I believed him. There was an earnestness in the way he looked at me. A look without guile and full of affection.

A girl could get used to getting looked at like that.

“Okay, let’s carpool then. I’ll drive and bring you back to your car later?”

“One of my guards drove me here.” I was plenty capable of driving now, but I’d been so exhausted from work that I’d happily accepted his offer to drop me off at the restaurant.

“Oh, that works.”

It certainly did.

We got into Kaleb’s truck and headed over with our impromptu convoy. Despite the fear churning in my gut, I felt mildly giddy, like I was about to go to a sleepover with friends. Which was silly, considering I was a grown woman and we would probably be together for a few hours.

Oh, well. Maybe I could use a little silliness.

We arrived within a few minutes of each other, and I couldn’t help it when my eyes flitted to where the gazebo used to be. I was relieved to see that it wasn’t there anymore, and another little area was set up a bit away, a rose-covered pergola with stone benches.

Well, that was one thing settled.

But as we went around to the back, where a cook-out deck had been set up, it was like I could walk past the lingering ghosts of adrenaline and enjoy myself. As if nothing nearly fatal had ever happened to me on the property. Maybe it was just because I was a tough cookie and had processed the trauma, or maybe it was that being surrounded by my pack and feeling like I truly belonged with them was enough to help me through.

Because I no longer felt like an outsider, someone resigned to the fringes of the pack and only called when needed. And I owed most of that to Kaleb and the girls. I would be endlessly appreciative of them, that was for certain.

Naturally, with this many shifters, there was only so long they could go without food. They lasted maybe an hour and a half before Mahlan hauled out some brats and burgers, firing them up on his grill.

It was so quintessentially Americana that my heart squeezed in my chest. We really were a family that had built itself brick by brick.

When I’d first moved to the pack, I’d never imagined I’d end up mated to one of the inner circle with several of their mates as my closest friends. I never thought I would be BFFs with a very snarky green witch. Funny how things had turned out.

Plenty of conversation abounded, and I was chatting with Lyssa about the latest and greatest elf-fantasy hit when several of the wolves around us paused, their noses in the air. As someone with a regular sense of smell, I could only look around in alarm.

“What is it?” I asked, wondering if I were part of the world’s strangest prank.

“Intruder,” Jacobian growled from where he was sitting a few feet away, working his way through his fifth burger. The inner circle was lucky that they were rich; otherwise, I had no idea how they could support their ravenous appetites. “Someone who doesn’t belong.”

That...that didn’t sound good.

Together, we walked around the edge of the house to the front yard, where, sure enough, there was indeed a car sitting about fifty feet away, a young man leaning against its side.

“Who the hell is that?” Emma asked, her face pulled back in a snarl.

As if the man heard us, he lifted a simple cloth out of his pocket, waving it slightly. It was a deep blue, barely visible in the dark, but the silver moon and stars at its center were all too familiar.

“That’s a council messenger,” I breathed, my stomach dropping.

There were a lot of ways I’d imagined the council getting back in touch with us, but none of them had been a lone twenty-something appearing at Mahlan’s house past midnight in the middle of the week. Perhaps they were trying to keep it on the down low to get the drop on Frederick? That certainly made sense.

“Let’s see what he has to say,” Mahlan said, straightening his shoulders. “Theo, Jacobian, with me. Kaleb, Parker, stay on your guard.”

I wasn’t sure why the two had to be on their guard, considering it was only a messenger, let alone a messenger who was on our side, but I was grateful that Kaleb wasn’t leaving my side. I reached for his hand again, and relief flooded me when he took it, gently squeezing it.

Once more, I regretted my lack of wolf’s hearing. It felt like everyone else could hear what was being said but me. Somehow, I managed to hold back my questions, although I was nearly vibrating when Mahlan finally turned around and began to walk back.

Only a few minutes had passed, but it felt like forever, especially when Mahlan didn’t speak right away. He waited for the messenger to get back in the car and drive off.

“What happened?” I blurted when the silence grew to be too much for me.

“We’ve got a missive from the council,” Mahlan said, gesturing with the thick roll of paper he was holding. Wait, the council still communicated via sealed scrolls? What year were we in? I appreciated the institution for keeping the peace amongst the many fae factions, but would it kill them to send an email?

“Let’s go inside and see what they have to say,” Mahlan said.

Boy, the adrenaline was pumping as we moved to follow our alpha’s orders. Had the council sent up covert plans? Were we suddenly going to find ourselves embroiled in a complex web of espionage?

I was going to find out soon enough.

All of us gathered in Mahlan and Lyssa’s sitting room, and the air was *tense*. Although almost everyone in the inner circle had had experiences with the council, I didn’t think any of us had interacted with them on an official basis. But accusing one of their own of betraying them was a big deal.

“Mahlan Reese, alpha of the Silent Ridge Pack, we have received your information packet,” our leader began, his voice low and deliberate. As someone without enhanced hearing, I appreciated his enunciation.

They had received what we’d sent, though, so that was good, right? *Right?*

“While it was undeniably thorough, we were appalled to see a blatant violation of the rights of your fellow fae.”

*Wait, what?* No, I had to have misheard!

“Although the council recognizes your position in the hierarchy of your city, shifters are not the arbiters of justice amongst all fae kind. You stalked and harassed an innocent and valued member of our community based solely on their designation. Such infractions cannot be ignored.”

“They can’t be fucking serious,” Theo hissed, which was almost as surprising as the content of the scroll itself. He was usually pretty good at keeping his cool. Not that I could blame him for the interjection.

“We hereby order your alpha and beta to submit themselves to our custody two days after the delivery of this missive. We are allowing this grace period for you to put your affairs in order. We hope to remedy this grievous oversight within your jurisdiction and ensure the continued longevity of the Silent Ridge family.”

“Well, if that isn’t the biggest load of horseshit,” Hannah said once Mahlan stopped reading.

“That’s more than horseshit,” Jacobian said, his tone grave. “That’s endorsement.”

Endorsement? What did he mean?

“You think so?” Mahlan asked, calmly rubbing his chin as if looking at a menu and not an order for his arrest. How could he be so serene?

Being arrested by the council was a *huge* deal. I’d never heard of anyone who went into their custody for anything less than an extremely serious matter, and most never returned. Whether they were imprisoned, exiled, or executed always varied, but the punishments were harsh. Because if the council felt the need to call someone in, they were looking to teach a lesson to all fae.

“What else could it be?” Jacobian asked. “The evidence we sent was irrefutable.”

“What do we do?” Lyssa said, her voice quivering as she gripped Mahlan’s arm.

“I’m not sure,” he answered, and while I admired how honest he was, my heart was beginning to thunder in my chest. “But I’ll tell you one thing for certain: Theo and I aren’t going anywhere.”

“Let’s hold on a minute,” the beta said, drawing a deep breath and resuming his typical matter-of-fact demeanor. “Let’s say the council is somehow in on it and is covering for Frederick. Why? What’s the goal? What would they be gaining by having him terrorize us?”

Wait, *that* was what we were thinking? My mind wouldn’t even compute it.

“We are the leaders of the packs in this city,” Mahlan murmured, still rubbing his chin. “But I don’t think they would care about that. It’s not like taking out the top of the power structure would help them with anything.”

“But what if it did?”

I was surprised to hear Kaleb join in, and everyone looked to him.

“What do you mean?” Mahlan asked.

“Well, we didn’t realize the disappearances were a pattern at first, right? We thought they were a string of murders from opportunists from the power vacuum after Sawyer’s death, right?”

“Wait...” Jacobian said, his tone filled with an epiphany. “You’re right. Those first victims were from Cyprus’ pack, right? A pair of girls who were

out to dinner?”

My eyes widened. Could the council truly be after destabilizing the power structure of the shifters in our city? But why?

“And Lyssa’s old pack was at the top in their territory, too. As they fell, there was a power struggle there, and most of the packs are still recovering—if they exist at all.”

It was like puzzle pieces were being put together in real-time. I couldn’t believe it, and yet the math was adding up.

“So they’re destabilizing multiple packs in at least a three-state radius that we know of, and this plot has been going on at least for...” Theo looked to Lyssa. “How old are you again?”

“I’m about to turn twenty.”

Parker let out a long whistle. “Wait, are we seriously hypothesizing that the council has been plotting something for nearly two decades, and it involves messing up the pack structure around here?”

“Why are we assuming it’s just around here?” I asked, the thought chilling me. Suddenly, all eyes were on me, but I forced myself to continue. “I’m not saying this *is* happening elsewhere, but I don’t think we should assume it isn’t. We could just be one of hundreds.”

That thought settled over us like a heavy blanket, and for a moment, no one said anything. I hated the idea I proposed, but I felt like it was vital to realize. Something in me had the feeling that we weren’t alone. A group as powerful as the council could wipe us off the face of the earth in much easier ways, so the only thing that made sense as far as the witches’ convoluted attacks was if the scheme went far beyond our borders.

But it was while we were standing there that everyone’s phone went off. In any other circumstance, a call probably would have been pretty amusing. But it mostly just made me feel even sicker to my stomach.

“It’s Sam!” Parker said quickly.

There, as clear as day, was a text message from our resident green witch. Boy, did he have a lot to catch up on.

*EMERGENCY*

*Where you at?*

*Like, all y’all*

*We need to talk. Big ol’ deal!*



It was the same Gen-Z slang that Lyssa used sometimes, but I got what he meant. What timing, though.

“Someone tell him to meet us here,” Mahlan said, heaving a sigh. He was still reacting so well to everything that was happening while I wanted to puke. And I wasn’t even one of the people who was supposed to be arrested. “For now, let’s go inside. It’s clear we have plenty to discuss.”

# Chapter 11

---

## *Kaleb*

It felt like my world had been turned upside down. It had started when I'd spotted that damned council member in the window and had escalated during what had been a great family dinner with the inner circle. I couldn't help but wonder if I had hit my head and was having the world's most vivid and terrifying hallucination.

"Hey, do you want some water?" Savannah asked, sidling up to me with a chilled glass of water.

"No, I don't think I can swallow anything right now," I admitted. My stomach was churning so hard that I was surprised its momentum wasn't ricocheting me around Mahlan's living room. The wolf inside me wanted to burst out, to rip and tear all the witches it could get its teeth on. But I couldn't do that. I needed to sit and plan—not exactly my strongest suit.

"I get that," Savvy said with a nod, leaning against my side. Even though it was just a light pressure, it worked as a balm to my soul, helping me settle back into my skin. Thank God for her, really. If she wasn't around, I was pretty sure that I would be chewing at the walls like a rabid dog. "None of this feels real. And if it did, I was sure that I wouldn't want it to."

I nodded, unsurprised that we were on the same page. Ever since Savvy and I had been trying to get closer, I'd learned how much we gelled. Mating bond or not, she was hilarious, smart, and charming, which all happened to be traits I cherished. And while she was always taking care of everyone around her, I appreciated that I could take care of *her*. It made me feel mature and independent in a weird way. Maybe I didn't have all my shit together, but at least I was helping someone who was intrinsically valuable to so many people in our pack.

“What do you think-” I began.

“Sam is here,” Parker said, standing and crossing to the door.

Was he? I couldn’t hear anything. And apparently, no one else could, either.

“Are you sure? I don’t hear...” I paused, my head cocking to the side like a dog.

Sure enough, as I concentrated, I could hear the faintest rumble of a small engine. It would have been imperceptible in the city, but in the quiet around the lake, I could just pick it up. “Ah, I hear the moped now.”

Lyssa also went to the door, opening it and scenting the air. “He’s not alone. There’s a...a woman with him.”

A woman? Geez, I knew that Lyssa had an especially developed sense of smell, but I didn’t know it was *that* good. I hadn’t even caught the scent of the moped yet, which was fairly strong.

“Sometimes I can’t tell if you guys are pulling my leg or not with this whole scenting thing,” Savvy mused beside me. “But then one of you goes and says something like that.”

“It’s okay,” Hannah said, crossing to her friend and putting an arm over her shoulders. “My sense of smell is pretty weak, too.”

“Weak for a *shifter*,” Savvy corrected. “Which is still a world away from mine.”

There was a longing in her voice I’d never noticed before. As much time as Savvy and I spent together, I’d never thought what it was like for her to effectively be blind, deaf, and unable to smell compared to the rest of us. Sure, I’d thought about what it was like for her to be unable to shift or communicate with shifter-speak while in animal form. What it was like for her to be set apart and treated as an afterthought. But never about her completely different perception of the world. I couldn’t imagine being boxed in without my ability to scent or hear. No wonder almas were dependent on their packs to protect them!

It was a few more moments before I heard Sam approach the door, another set of lighter footsteps following him quickly. When he threw open the door, he stopped short at seeing all of us waiting for him.

“Uh...creepy,” he remarked before stepping to the side. Behind him, a young woman entered.

I didn’t recognize her at all. She looked like she was in high school or just out of it, her strawberry blond hair pulled back into a messy bun and

her clothes oversized. Her eyes were such a light blue, they were practically white—something that was more noticeable since she was staring at us with wide eyes.

“Hello, everyone,” Sam said, recovering quickly. “This is Hyacinth, and she has some important stuff to tell you.”

“Jane Doe!” Savvy blurted from beside me, quickly rushing to the girl’s side. “I didn’t even know you’d woken up.” Our alma circled the girl, examining her up and down scientifically.

“I...I...I just came to late last night. Mr. Fischer here was in my room, and he’s been helping me come back into myself.”

The girl’s voice was so quiet, tender. I’d heard about the Jane Doe from Savvy, and I was horrified to come face to face with the victim. It put everything in perspective. The witches would really stop at nothing to do what they wanted.

And the council, too, apparently. How fucking daunting.

“It’s good to see you up and alive, but Sam, was it really necessary to haul her all the way out here?” Savvy’s voice was layered with concern, and I wasn’t surprised. When she’d briefed me on her Jane Doe experience, it was clear that she was pretty upset by the whole situation.

“Normally, I would say something snarky here, but I’ll be frank,” Sam replied. “Yes, it was necessary, and y’all wolves really wanna hear what she has to say.”

“You guys can listen to my heart and smell me, right?” Hyacinth asked. “To tell I’m not lying.”

“Not exactly like that,” Mahlan said. “But close enough in theory.”

She nodded, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear and looking at us through her lashes. I was stuck once more by how *young* she was. And the fact that she’d been purposefully targeted and bled out like some animal made me sick.

We had to be in the midst of some misunderstanding. Our council couldn’t be complicit with a group that would ritually sacrifice someone who hadn’t even gotten a chance to live.

Could they?

“I was snatched on the way to a magic circle program I go to,” she murmured, her voice trembling.

“A magic circle program?” Mahlan echoed curiously.

“Yeah, it’s uh...it’s for young witches to get a handle on their powers if they’re interfering with our ability to be covert. I, uh, once I started menstruating, I started to lose control of my abilities during my period.”

That was a thing? There was so much about witches that I didn’t know. That no one in our pack knew, despite my brother basically dating one of their number.

“I got tired of missing four days of school every month, and I didn’t have any time for when I actually got sick,” Hyacinth continued. “Last year, I was supposed to be held back because of attendance issues, but my aunt went in and enchanted my record to let me squeak by.”

“Your aunt?” Savvy questioned. “Does she know you’re here? Does she know you’re alive?”

The girl nodded. “Sam let me call her on his cell. No one contacted her in the hospital because the witches stripped me of all my identification. As a witch, I never had a file on public record. She’s beside herself, but she’s happy knowing that I’m going home.”

“About that...” Sam began. “Do we have any guards to spare for her place for a bit? I think the witches don’t know she’s alive, but I don’t want to risk anything if they find out.”

That was a good idea, and as the head of security, I was the one who was the most cognizant of where our guards were and when.

“We’re somewhat short right now,” I said, doing quick mental math. “But if I’m remembering right, we can spare two.”

Sam winked and shot me a finger gun. “Knew I could count on you, big bro.”

Big bro? That was a new one. And yet...I didn’t mind it. I didn’t mind it at all.

“Okay,” Savvy said, sounding a bit more relaxed. “So you were kidnapped on your way to a group that helps you pass as a human.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the teenager replied.

“Please, call me Savvy, or Miss Savvy if you want to be formal.”

The girl smiled ever so slightly, her cheeks rounding cherubically. “Okay.” But her expression fell as she continued narrating her trauma. “I woke up being strung up inside the church. I think they’d already killed a priest there, because I saw bodies on the ground.”

“Hung up? What do you mean?”

“They looped a rope under my arms and around my back, then strung it over the cross behind the altar. I’m not, like, super-knowledgeable on dark blood magic, but I know that’s what people do when they...uh...” Her voice cracked, and Savvy stepped forward once more, resting a gentle hand on the girl’s shoulder.

I felt so bad. It was clear we needed to get the girl into counseling. I would pay for it personally if our pack didn’t.

“It’s what they do when they wanna make a bad spell. A *really* bad spell.”

I wished we could stop her talking, because I was pretty sure I knew what she was going to say next, and I didn’t want to hear it. But if Sam wanted us to listen, I trusted that it would be worth it.

Even if it made me want to murder our enemies and throw up at the same time.

“They, uh, they hurt me. With a blade. I hung there for a long while, and they collected my blood in a big bowl made of bone that sat on the altar below me.”

“Did they say anything?” Savvy asked.

I hoped they did. Otherwise, we were listening to a horrible story for no reason.

“Not at first. But after a while, I closed my eyes and tried to pretend that I was somewhere else. That I wasn’t, uh, that I wasn’t...”

*That she wasn’t dying.*

God, did the girl have a college fund? Because we should start one for her. Immediately. Maybe at a nice school far enough away that she didn’t have to worry about malevolent witches stringing her up for some macabre ritual.

“It’s okay,” Savvy said. “You don’t need to talk about that part. Just take a deep breath, then continue when you’re ready.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I was again struck by my mate’s compassion, how she exuded strength and protection. We had really lucked out by getting possibly the best alma of her generation.

“Okay, um, anyway, they must have thought I passed out because I heard them complaining. One of them said that this better work to get, um, to...” she trailed off again, her eyes flitting to Sam as she blushed. “They used a word I don’t wanna say,” she said finally.

“That’s okay,” Sam soothed, none of us needing to guess what she meant. “They said they wanted to get rid of me?”

“Yeah. But after that, another one was bitching about how they couldn’t understand how a fellow witch would betray their kind, even if you were the inferior sort.”

I couldn’t help but mentally remark on the irony of that entire statement, considering they were actively killing a fellow witch. Bigots usually had gold medals in mental gymnastics.

Sam snorted. “Inferior? Right, I’ll remember that the next time my vines are ripping one of them limb from limb.”

The girl smiled wanly at that. Yup, therapy. Definitely. “Then the guy I think was their leader told them to be patient, and soon their time would come. That the savages’ power structures had been weakened all over, and the council knew what they were doing.”

That hit like a sledgehammer in my gut. Whatever small part of me that wanted to believe we were wrong shattered at that moment.

“Was there anything else?” Mahlan asked, as cool as ever. And that was why he was the alpha, and I was the muscle who could feel whatever I needed to feel in the moment.

“Y-yeah, something about not needing the cover of the brothers anymore and some slurs for them. They laughed about them being puppets, then one mentioned that they wouldn’t have the idea to build their curse for the, uh, bad-word witch without the mad brother’s heretical medicine.”

Silence ruled once again as we digested her words, connecting the dots of what she’d overheard.

But we should have known better, because the girl seemed to deflate, her eyes sliding away from us. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Oh, no, honey,” Sam said, rushing forward and gently patting her face. Huh, I’d never seen the guy be openly caring. At least not without a couple of jokes. He clearly knew to turn it off when it came to a young woman in need. “You did amazing. Thank you for telling them. You just gotta understand—it’s a lot for them to digest.”

She nodded, and I didn’t know where Savannah got another water bottle, but she handed it to Hyacinth without missing a beat. The young girl gratefully guzzled it down, giving the rest of us a few more beats to think.

“Speaking of a lot to digest,” Mahlan said gravely, crossing the floor and handing the scroll to Sam. The witch raised an eyebrow but dutifully



unrolled it.

It wasn't exactly a long manifesto, so a little over a minute later, Sam looked up from the paper with an incredulous look. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Mahlan shook his head. "Unfortunately, we are not."

Sam drew in a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose as he did. "So lemme get this straight: y'all found out that a member of your council is leading a faction of witches who are trying to stage a coup over us *savages*, you sent in proof, and now the council wants to *arrest* you?"

I didn't think I'd ever seen Sam so incensed. He began to pace back and forth. As for Hyacinth, Savannah ushered her to the side, sat her at the kitchen island, and started to cut up a watermelon for the young girl. Where she'd gotten a watermelon, I couldn't say, but I had to assume it must have been in the fridge.

"This is ridiculous," Sam raged. "Fucking ridiculous. The council is supposed to protect us—*all* of us—and keep the peace between squabbling little factions. They should be cracking down on dear Freddy like Zeus' lightning!"

"But they're not," Parker said mournfully.

"They're not," Mahlan repeated. "It's clear to me that we've uncovered some sort of plot."

"But what is the plot?" Theo murmured, and I could practically see him mapping things out in his mind in that way of his. "Here's what we know: the witches were using the brothers as a cover. They were never invested in gathering shifter blood—at least the higher-ups weren't. They were just going along with the men who killed Lyssa's family as a convenient cover."

"That sounds accurate to me," Emma remarked, followed by affirmative sounds from several others.

"They consider themselves superior to other fae, even other magic users," Theo continued. "What was that word they used?"

"Savages," Hyacinth offered from the kitchen, her mouth full of what looked to be pulled pork. Where in the hell had Savvy found pulled pork? Has she raided Lyssa's fridge when I wasn't looking?

"Right. Savages." Now it was Theo's turn to pace. With all the frenetic movement going on, there would soon be multiple grooves in Mahlan's hardwood floors.

“Two of the council members are incredibly old, right?” Theo asked. “A couple hundred years. While that’s not exactly colonial age, they’re not spring chickens, either. But that word—‘savage’—makes me think of the witches who escaped persecution in England to come over here and try to wipe out all the indigenous magicks.”

Right, I’d learned about that when I was younger. Just like with humans, there had been a lot of strife when European fae arrived in the Americas. Bloodshed, war, genocide. That was half the reason the council had been formed in the first place. A new land with previously unknown peoples, myths, magicks, and power was too much of a temptation to expect the colonizers to behave like decent people.

“You think that’s it?” Mahlan asked. “That this is some xenophobic effort to take over the entire council and ensure the supremacy of the Judeo-Christian European-based witches?”

“I think that’s the most likely theory we’ve got,” Theo said. “Especially when you throw in splinter cells of their henchmen trying to destabilize the power structure of shifters in several states. We’re the largest population of fae on this continent, and our battle prowess isn’t exactly a secret.”

“Right?” Sam huffed. “Between the speed, the power, the healing factor, the enhanced senses, and then that weird telepathic thing y’all do in your animal forms, you sure make a bad enemy.”

“Exactly,” Theo said. “So by destabilizing our hierarchy, they ensure fights and skirmishes that never need to happen. We take ourselves out in large numbers and allow the witches to sweep in and pick off the wounded survivors.”

“Do you think they killed Sawyer? And stole our moonstone so Mahlan couldn’t be sworn in?” Hannah asked, looking out the window as she chewed on her thumb. Jacobian walked to his mate and gently took her finger from her teeth, gently kissing it.

Wow, I wasn’t used to seeing the quiet guy be so outwardly affectionate. It was nice, but I wished the moment wasn’t as dire as it was.

Our alpha nodded. “That would make sense. And then stole other moonstones to cause tensions that would hopefully erupt into a fight.” He shook his head. “If it weren’t for Lyssa causing that fight between Cyprus and I...”

He trailed off, but my mind was reeling from that implication as it reverse-engineered everything that had happened since Lyssa had been

found after pickpocketing the lead alpha of our city.

That made a lot of sense to me, which was crazy to think about. If it weren't for a lone, cursed orphan, we might have never sworn a blood oath and either been absorbed by other packs or scattered to the four winds.

The witches had to be pretty pissed that all their plotting had been ruined by a girl who couldn't even legally drink.

"I mean, I'm certain I wasn't that big of a deal," Lyssa said, flushing a little. "Just at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Mahlan held his hand out to her, and she took it, allowing him to pull her into his side and kiss the top of her head. "I like to think it was the perfect time if it brought us together."

"Softie," Lyssa accused, pushing herself onto her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

It was sweet but it also wasn't the time. Not that I would tell our alpha that. I valued my head, thank you very much.

"So let me get this straight," Jacobian said. "I just want to make sure we're all on the same page."

Mahlan nodded. "Go ahead."

"We believe the council is trying to throw a coup over all fae kind, starting here in the US, to position Judeo-Christian witches at the top of the hierarchy and as unopposed rulers over us inferior species. They've been plotting this for years, at least since Lyssa's family was killed, and have used multiple subterfuge tactics, including a pair of homicidal brothers, to cover their tracks?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much the long and the short of it," Theo confirmed.

"So what do we do, then?" That was Hannah, chewing her thumb again. Jacobian moved it away again and wiped the blood from her digit. Poor girl, she had to be stressed. "You say you and Theo aren't going to submit yourself to their custody?"

"Well," Mahlan said slowly, and the gravity behind every word that fell from his mouth made my stomach twist. "If we do not do as they ask, we can expect repercussions."

"Repercussions," Emma repeated with a scoff. "And by that, you mean war, don't you?"

War? *War*? Something inside me knew they were right, and yet most of me was terrified at the idea. Sure, I loved fighting. I loved protecting the weak. But all-out war wasn't like that. Innocent people got hurt no matter

how hard we tried to protect them. That was where the phrase “collateral damage” came from.

“How could we possibly win a war with the council?” Sam cut in, still pacing. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him move so much without rave music. “Even if you don’t count their elite enforcers, they have an army big enough to keep the entire continent in line.”

Theo cleared his throat. “Actually, a majority of their army is contracted through various fae factions throughout the world. We really only have to worry about their elite enforcers.”

“*Only* their elite enforcers,” Sam parroted. “You say that like that’s not nearly insurmountable. Even all of us together probably couldn’t take them out.”

“They probably have an alliance with witches,” I said.

“Pardon?” That was Mahlan, who looked to me with curiosity.

“Well, they’re bigots, right? Bigots promising unlimited power. That’s gonna attract everyone who shares their beliefs. Ergo, a secret army of witches spread out across the entire continent. Probably the same witches who have been doing all that destabilizing.”

“Dammit, that makes sense,” Theo said, his pacing increasing. Between him and Sam, I wondered if we should get some sort of traffic light involved to avoid collisions. “So if we make a move, they’ll likely call that entire army here.”

“So what do we do?” Lyssa asked, and if that wasn’t the question of the night. It ricocheted all around my mind, and no doubt, the minds of everyone else present.

Because what could we do? Even if we got every single adult in our pack, that wouldn’t be enough to face an elite guard and a cadre of radicalized witches. We would end up dead where we stood, their magic overwhelming us.

But we couldn’t just lie down and wait for the end. We had to do *something*. The arbiters of justice, the ones who were supposed to protect us, had abandoned their position and turned into something malevolent. It was the worst-case scenario.

“What if we reached out for help?” Savvy asked, re-entering from the kitchen. “Send word to every single pack we have connections to as well as all the fae in the city. We have a family of banshees, right? And if there’s a

magic circle program, some of the parents have to be willing to help. It's their children on the line, too."

"That's an idea," Mahlan said, nodding and rubbing his chin. "But the council will find out if we're assembling an army and will beat us to the punch."

We fell quiet yet again, the whole group coming to terms with the incredibly dire situation we were in. Never in a million years did I dream that we would be going up against the council itself.

It was Emma who spoke first, her voice strong and sure. "Then we don't assemble an army." We all looked to her, and she raised her chin as if defying the witches who wanted us dead. "We have a wedding."

My eyes widened at her suggestion, and she kept going, elaborating on the idea that could end up saving our skins.

"It's already known that Theo and I are engaged and have been planning our wedding. We can use that knowledge to our advantage. It'll give you a reason not to submit yourselves to the council. It'll give us a reason to send out information. It'll give us a reason to gather at a specific location we choose. And most importantly, it'll give the council a target to attack. We'll look like sitting ducks, with everyone dolled up for a big event with no idea of what's coming. They won't be able to resist it, and that's how we lay our trap."

We looked around, and the energy slowly began to shift. Instead of shock and hopelessness, a flicker of vitality was beginning to bloom.

"Well," Mahlan said with a grave nod. "Let's plan a wedding, then."

## Chapter 12

---

## *Savannah*

“Thank you for meeting with us here,” Mahlan said, his voice firm.

I had to marvel that sweat wasn't pouring out of my palms, considering how nervous I was.

“Are you ready to submit yourself to council custody?” the messenger asked. It was the same one we'd seen two days ago, which meant he was staying in the city. Which also meant that we were right about the council being able to figure out if we were recruiting other fae.

“We are not.”

The messenger's eyebrow went up, and I could tell that wasn't what he was expecting. “You are aware of the consequences of defying the council, yes?”

“We mean no defiance,” Mahlan answered, tilting his head in deference. “However, we ask for leniency and an extension. You see, my sister is engaged to the beta who is summoned, and we wish to complete the ceremony before they are potentially parted. We hope our previous good relationship with the council and the inadvertent nature of our infraction would allow us one week to celebrate together.”

“A wedding, huh?” The messenger looked from Emma to Theo, and I couldn't read his expression at all. “The council isn't likely to grant as such.”

“We understand, but you understand that we must try, yes? They are already mated, and it is our custom in this pack to wed as well. Should my beta and I be relinquished to long-term custody, you would be depriving Emma of her rights as a mate.”

The messenger said nothing for a long, long moment, his eyes traveling over our faces. I wasn't sure what he saw, but it was probably a dozen shifters staring him down grimly.

Finally, he nodded. "I will relay your words to the council. If they do not approve your extension, it will not be a messenger who returns but the elite guards themselves."

"We are aware," Mahlan answered, and boy, if that wasn't the truth. We were acutely aware of the hell guaranteed to rain down on our heads. The only reason we might get a week was that the council likely thought we were still in the dark about their plans and couldn't resist the drama of crashing a wedding.

"Then good day to you, Alpha Reese. And a happy wedding to the lovely couple."

With a small polite bow, the messenger returned to his car and drove off, leaving the rest of us standing there. No one spoke for a long moment, no doubt worried about spells or technology allowing him to spy on what we were saying. It wasn't until Sam cast his magic out and gave the all-clear that any of us opened our mouths.

"I suppose there's no going back now," Mahlan mused, turning on his heel and walking back to his house. Once again, I was struck by how stately our leader was. Thank God we had one with such a good head on his shoulders.

"No," Emma confirmed. "It's full steam ahead."

"Progress?"

"Invitations have been set out to every fae whose information we have, with requests to spread the word to any other fae they know who are safe to inform."

"About that," Kaleb cut in. "Not that I don't trust you, Emma, but how are we telling them everything that's happening in a wedding invitation?"

"That's where I come in," Jacobian drawled, his arm around Hannah's shoulders as we walked back into the house. "I added a QR code on the invitation that's supposed to be for the registry. Instead, it takes them to a drive folder with all the evidence they collected and an invitation to investigate further with an email link. Hannah and I have been running a team to reply to them individually after screening for potential double agents."



I was so impressed. I wasn't technologically ignorant, but I never would have thought of such a thing.

"What about the venue?"

"That's where I come in," Kaleb said, looking quite proud. "There's this Amish town of fae I've been working with for the past couple of weeks. They say they can build an entire house to accommodate us and whatever traps we want to fold into it."

Mahlan whistled. "An entire building in five days?"

"Three, actually. The extra time is for traps. They say they can have it big enough to seat about two thousand, with a reception area that would stop the council's forces from seeing how many fae are lying in wait. And I'm sure some stealthier species can hide in the rafters or other areas, too."

"Speaking of that," Mahlan said. "What's the spread of our guest list?"

"Ah, that's me," Emma said, and I realized how much of a joint operation our plan was. And yet, I wasn't doing anything. But what could I do? I wasn't a computer whiz or a shifter, nor did I have many connections in the fae community. I was just a healer, so my part usually came after the battle.

Then again...

"I can get in touch with other almas, maybe convince some of them to get their packs to let them come and help with the casualties," I offered.

Mahlan's eyebrows lifted, and I knew why. Almas were a precious resource, for all that they were sidelined, and it was unlikely that a pack would want to risk their healer. Especially since there was a shortage of our kind. "You think they'd be up for that?"

"I can at least try."

"Anything you can do would be appreciated."

And so the conversation continued, the planning continuing long after we'd settled into the house. There wasn't much I could contribute after that, but I ended up making grilled cheese and ham sandwiches with Ashlee in the kitchen. She was silent and sullen, but I understood why. She had been adopted by Lyssa, despite how close they were in age. Knowing her "mother" was going into battle and might not come back had to be a heavy burden on her young shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she blurted, nearly startling me into dropping the sandwich as I flipped it.

"Sorry?" I repeated, a little confused. "Sorry for what?"

"I almost got you killed," she said, unable to look up from the counter. And my heart just about shattered right then and there. What a dear, *sweet* soul. After all she'd been through, she was worried about me? All I had to show from the incident was a nickel-sized scar and a possible fear of gazebos.

"Oh, honey, no," I soothed. "None of that was your fault. Please don't blame yourself."

I knew it wasn't something that could be dismissed with a platitude because Ashlee's eyes grew wet with restrained tears as she answered. "But it is. If I weren't here, you wouldn't have touched me, and the witches never would have been able to trigger the fetch spell for your blood."

I winced, remembering that ravenous cacophony in my head that had shrieked for my blood. I would never forget what that maelstrom of insatiable hate had felt and sounded like, but that didn't mean I wanted Ashlee to be haunted by it, either.

"You almost died, Miss Savvy," Ashlee said. "They had to lay you on the table and cut that wood out of you because of *me*."

There was only so much I could take, and seeing a young, innocent soul in so much pain was too much. My soul aching, I turned off the burner and circled the island to draw her into a hug.

"Ashlee, I know it's hard, but please, please believe me that it is not your fault. I've never blamed you. Not even for a moment."

"But how?"

"Because you're a victim just as much as I am. They hurt your family, Ashlee. They took you away and kept you prisoner. You saw things that no one should have to see, let alone such a kind young woman." I took a deep breath, willing myself not to cry. I was already exhausted, and that would only increase if I sobbed myself silly.

"I know what you saw was scary, and I'm always willing to talk about things with you. And if you don't want to talk about things with Lyssa or me, we can get you a counselor. Lyssa said you were going to one before, right?"

Ashlee nodded. "We put it on pause after the attack at my school because I was too scared to go to my appointments."

"And that makes sense, honey. Soon you won't have to worry about any of that." I kissed the top of her head and, not for the first time, felt a faint longing for children of my own. I was pretty sure I'd be a good mother,

except when it came to having time for them. Because if I had a family of my own, I wanted them to be a priority, and I didn't see how I could do that while working as a nurse and alma.

"It's just...you looked like you were dying," Ashlee said, pressing her face into my shoulder. "I thought I was gonna lose my family again."

"I promise, I'm staying right here. You don't have to worry about me going anywhere."

"Even with the council army coming?"

"Even with them coming. You see, Ashlee, there's something that the council doesn't realize."

"What's that?"

"That the only reason they've been able to get this far is that we fae are so easily divided. But together, united under one fight, we're unstoppable."

"You really believe that?"

"I really do," I said with a nod.

Ashlee sighed, and I felt her relax under my arms. She really was a lovely teen. I hope she kept that attitude throughout the nastier teen years to come. But even if she didn't, she would grow out of it.

"Now," I said, wiping the few tears that had escaped from her eyes. "How about those sandwiches?"

"Yes, please," she said, giving me a watery smile.

\* \* \*

Planning for full-on rebellion while disguising it as a wedding was a surreal experience, to say the least. Whenever I thought I had a handle on it, something new would throw me through a loop.

But things were coming together. Sam and over twenty of his witch friends had put together all sorts of curses, hexes, and amplification spells that would give us an edge in battle. And we would need an edge, considering the sheer power of the spellcasters coming after us.

Some in our pack who were leery of trusting any witch, but Sam had long since won our respect and loyalty, so Mahlan quickly shut down any skeptics. Sam hated the bigoted witches even more than we did, and I had a feeling they were connected to why he was an orphan.

I didn't have proof of that. But maybe one day, I could ask him about it.

“Hey, are you dead in there?” Emma asked through the changing room door.

I blushed as I looked in the mirror. Part of our charade was going through the motions in case the council had any spies on us, and that meant bridal-party dresses.

Naturally, we couldn’t have anything custom-fit, not like Emma would have intended if it were her real wedding, but we were a small enough party that we could go to a bridal shop and find three similarly colored dresses.

“Not yet,” I called back to Emma. Nerves were bubbling in my stomach as I looked at my reflection. Not because I particularly cared how I looked in the dress but because it represented a battle I wasn’t ready for.

But it didn’t matter if I was ready for it; the battle would happen no matter what.

It would be hilarious if we prepped ourselves for a grand battle only to have the council respect the wedding and not show up. But we all knew we wouldn’t be that lucky. The more fae that answered Jacobian’s QR code, the more stories we heard about other factions’ interactions with the council, making us all the more certain of our theory.

I didn’t understand how all of us could have been so blind. While the council had once been comprised of twelve different species, it was now ten witches, a shaman, and a *bruja* due to accidents, replacements, and retirement. They were all magic users, most of them European.

We should have known, but it had seemed like a coincidence. Especially since each of those witches had a different specialty. I didn’t know all of them, but I knew one was a prolific necromancer and another was an illusionist. Those were subclasses, though, which tended to make my eyes cross.

“Savvy, you okay?” Emma asked.

I heaved a sigh. Although this wedding wasn’t real, that didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy the time I had with my friends. The fake wedding was tomorrow, and it could very well be the last time I saw them.

“As okay as can be, considering the situation,” I said, steeling myself. “But I’m coming out.”

“Yay! Lemme see ya!”

I opened the curtain to see Emma, Lyssa, and Hannah all standing there, the latter two dressed in peach get-ups. Lyssa wore a cute, knee-length dress

that reminded me of a princess. The dress looked a bit like a cupcake, with a solid layer of fabric underneath a translucent, shiny one.

As for Hannah, she wore what I believed was called a trumpet dress. It hugged her every curve, skin-tight and lustrous, and flaring out at her knees.

“Oh my God, Savvy. You look *beautiful*.”

Emma said it so earnestly, her eyes lighting up as she did, that I almost forgot about the cloud over our heads.

“You think so?” I gave a twirl, and all the girls clapped their hands together. It was something so *normal* and lovely, making my heart ache in the best way. “The style isn’t too old-fashioned?”

I liked dressing up, but I usually lived in my scrubs. Sometimes I spent so much time as a nurse or an alma, I wondered if I’d forgotten how to dress myself. But I’d picked out a floor-length peach dress that was almost Grecian in style. Light and flowy, making me feel like I could float away from all my problems.

Wouldn’t that be something? But I was pretty sure I’d have to be a pixie or faerie to do that, and I’d never met those fae.

“No, it fits you so well!” Lyssa said, flashing me one of her megawatt smiles. “Like, really. It’s perfect.”

“Perfect for a battle?” I muttered, even though I knew better. We couldn’t risk exposing our plot in case the enemy was listening.

“Well, I guess it has to be,” Emma said glumly.

I felt guilty when the mood grew sullen, so I cleared my throat and forced myself to cheer up. Sure, it may not have been the wedding Emma wanted, but that didn’t mean I had to ruin her day.

“Hey, now that we’ve got our dresses picked, why don’t we go to that all-you-can-eat sushi place and see how long it takes them to kick us out?”

That cheered everyone up, and after paying for our gowns—which Emma insisted on covering—we headed there. Drinks and fish abounded as we ordered and ordered and ordered. It was almost like everything was normal, with us laughing, exchanging stories, and joking around. It wasn’t the wildest bachelorette party, but it was better than nothing.

About an hour into our impromptu meal, my phone buzzed several times. I was so used to getting horrible news or emergency messages that I instantly whipped it out and checked my texts.

Thankfully, it wasn’t anything like that at all. It was Kaleb, and seeing his name on my phone made my heart flutter.

*Damn, I wanna kiss him.*

The thought surprised me, and I felt heat wash over my body. But it was true; I wanted to press my lips to his and trace them with my tongue until I had them memorized. I wanted to taste him and feel his skin on mine.

It wasn't guaranteed that we'd ever get a chance again.

The thought was sobering, filling me with a thick, viscous dread. There were so many ways the next day could go badly.

For one, Kaleb could die. I could die. Or we both could die. Or we could survive, only for the rest of our pack to be killed. There were far too many awful variants waiting for us, but only one positive one: victory. We had to defeat the council and stop them from enacting their evil plan on all fae kind.

How had such a gargantuan problem fallen into our laps? We were just a single pack of wolves. We weren't ancient and terrible cryptids who wielded power untold. We weren't politically motivated sirens negotiating with caecilians about water territories.

We were the Silent Ridge shifters. That was it.

And yet, it felt like the world was on our shoulders, crushing us under its impossible weight.

Shaking myself out of my ruminations, I glanced at Kaleb's text.

*Hey, can I see you tonight? It'll be late. But I'd really like that.*

My throat tensed with emotion, and I quickly typed him a response.

*Your place or mine?*

*Why don't you pack up everything we need and spend the night at my place, then head to the wedding tomorrow. Together.*

*That sounds perfect. I'll be ready at about 10?*

*I can probably get there by 11.*

*Alright, 11 it is.*

I put my phone away, smiling at myself. I'd wanted to ask Kaleb if we could spend some time together, but I'd assumed he was too busy with last-minute preparations. He was the head of security, after all, and desperately needed for organizing all the fae. There were strengths and weaknesses to consider that were more important than any other fight he'd been in, so I understood that such a thing needed delicate and purposeful organization.

But he wanted to see me and was taking time to make sure we could spend at least a few hours together. Just the two of us.

I knew Kaleb and I were technically fake mates the same way that Emma was preparing for a fake wedding, but I couldn't help but feel there was something real to our bond. We'd never even gone on a full date, yet I could see myself living a long, full future with him.

If we lived long enough.

I tucked that dour thought away, although it never strayed far from the surface. It lingered, a melancholy echo to everything, seeping into the cracks and weighing me down.

At least I was able to enjoy the rest of my time with the girls. If the possibility of total annihilation wasn't hanging over our heads, it was just like any get-together. All smiles, laughter, bonding over our lived experiences. But that cloud remained, and every so often, I could tell when each of us was grappling with it.

I texted Kaleb when things were finally winding down so he knew where I was, and we ladies strode to the parking lot. Instead of our normal goodbyes, we all held each other for too long, but it didn't seem long enough. Our grips were firm, even if our confidence was waning, our bonds as packmates wrapping around us in a comforting little bubble.

What a motley group we were. A once-cursed orphan, our alpha's sister, a prodigal wolf, and me. The alma with no wolf at all.

And yet, we were family. Through and through.

After about ten minutes, we released each other.

"See you all at my wedding," Emma said, her voice firm despite her red-rimmed eyes.

"We'll see you," I said, echoing other assurances from Lyssa and Hannah. There was one more round of cheek kisses, and then we went our separate ways.

I got into my car and drove home, my mind brimming with thoughts. Ever since I almost died, I'd been filled with a renewed gratitude toward life. I'd come so close to losing it all and never again tasting a cup of coffee, taking a deliciously hot shower, and holding the people I loved. And as the wedding approached faster and faster, I found myself wondering if I'd ever experience those things again.

Because this time, it could be the end. And that knowledge made me want to taste everything anew, to *feel* everything. I didn't want to miss any experience.

That thought stuck with me all through my drive and beyond, while I packed, showered, and waited for Kaleb to arrive.

Naturally, he parked and came to my door like a gentleman. There was little chance the witches would attack us before the wedding, as they were likely preparing to ambush us the next day, but he was always thoughtful like that. And though I was plenty healed enough to carry my bag, he casually took it from me and slung it over one of his broad shoulders.

I couldn't help but stare at him as he did that, drinking up everything I could about him. The wide breadth of him as he blocked the starlight, the moon hanging above his head like a sliver of a spotlight meant just for him. It exaggerated the pleasing angles of his face, emphasizing the solid curve of his jaw.

Although it was his character I was falling in love with, he wasn't bad to look at. Not by any stretch.

Wait...

I...loved him?

Thankfully, he was taking my hand and kissing it when my eyes shot wide open at my internal revelation.

No. I couldn't say I loved him. Not yet.

But I *was* falling in love with him, actively and deeply. I loved how much he cared about others. I loved his sense of humor. I loved how courteous he was. I loved that he was incredibly strong but never used his strength to bully anyone.

Funny how it had been tragedy that had pushed us together when we'd already known each other for several years, but I was grateful for it. I had found someone and something truly incredible that I wouldn't have otherwise.

"You alright?" Kaleb asked, noticing I hadn't budged. I blushed when I realized I'd just been standing there, staring off into the distance while I parsed my feelings.

"Yeah, just thinking."

Kaleb being Kaleb, he just nodded in an understanding way. "A lot to think about today."

"Yeah, there is."

He squeezed my hand, and comfort washed over me. Together, we walked to his truck and headed to his place.



We were relatively quiet on the short drive over. I knew we probably shouldn't waste a single second and get out all the words we could, but there was peace in the quiet. A tranquility that was in short supply. I couldn't recall when I'd ever felt so comfortable *being* with a partner. Just living in the moment and enjoying each other's presence.

When we arrived at his fancy apartment building, he took my bag once again and guided me inside. I knew how to get up to his place, but I enjoyed the pampering, imagining a future where I could let myself in and tackle him while he was working on something in his kitchen or playing video games on his couch.

Would we ever get the chance? I hoped so, but there was no guarantee. I could see so many wonderful possibilities stretching out before us, but all of them were contingent on us winning the insane stakes we were up against.

Not for the first time, I found myself wishing that I was more useful in a fight. Sure, I would be doing triage and everything I could to minimize casualties, but those actions wouldn't really turn the tide in the fight. They would only help with the aftermath.

"Here we are," Kaleb said as we stepped into his place. There was a pile of dishes in the sink, and the trash was overflowing, alerting me that he'd put his day-to-day life on the back burner to prepare for what was coming. The sight strangely made me feel better, like it was evidence that he was just as overwhelmed as I was.

Hopefully, that meant all our ducks were in a row for the battle itself. I know Kaleb longed to do battle drills and have formal briefings with every person in attendance, but that just wasn't possible. He had to make do with encrypted emails with diagrams and Zoom calls—not the best way to prepare for the war of a lifetime, but we made do with what we had.

As always, Kaleb noticed my troubled expression, and his warm hand cupped my cheek. "Hey, what's going on in that head of yours?" he asked, his smile soft but containing worlds of emotions behind it. Goodness, being a functioning adult shifter in modern times was awfully complicated.

"Everything," I answered honestly, heaving a sound somewhere between a sigh and a shaking laugh.

Kaleb shared my uneasy chuckle, then pulled me into a hug. "Me too, Sav. me too."

I had to admit, I *loved* being embraced by my mate. Something about being pressed to his strong wall of a body just did it for me. Maybe it was

how insanely warm he was as a shifter. Maybe it was feeling mildly crushed by his strong arms that would never let anything hurt me if he could help it. Maybe it was how his woodsy scent filled my nose. Maybe it was all of that combined. Whatever the reason, I let myself melt into him, my arms encircling his waist.

Much like my goodbye with the girls, we held onto each other for a while, like we could fuse into one person if we just clung to each other enough. Wouldn't that be something?

But I didn't think the world was ready for a wolf-warrior-alma hybrid, so we eventually pulled apart, still holding hands.

"Let's put your bag in my room, shall we?" Kaleb asked.

I nodded, my tongue feeling thick. I was filled with so much *longing* that it was hard to speak. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to do and experience.

But we only had one night.

As gentle as ever, Kaleb led me down the hall to his room, and I followed. I couldn't help but remember the few times I'd taken naps there, warm and comforted by his scent. And the few times he'd eaten me out so thoroughly that I'd almost cried from overstimulation.

He really was incredible.

Setting my bag in his closet, Kaleb turned to me. "Is there anything that needs to be hu-"

He never got the words out because I was kissing him with *everything* I had. My arms draped around his shoulders, my fingers digging into his shirt as if that would bind him to me and negate the possibly limited time we had.

For what it was worth, Kaleb kissed me right back. There were no words, no speeches. We didn't need them.

We just needed each other.

Kaleb deepened his kiss, and I moaned into it. Why pretend that I wasn't enraptured by him? But the sound seemed to spur him on, and his arms wrapped around my middle, lifting me clear off the ground.

Being lifted was undeniably hot, and I encircled his waist with my legs, squeezing enough to give myself hold. A thrill of heat when through me when I could already feel how much he was straining against his jeans for me. Hard and heated, an iron rod just begging to be released.

“Please,” I murmured, not caring that desperation layered my voice. “I want you.”

I had gone along with his insistence that I was too injured to have intercourse with him because I figured that, as a shifter, he knew his strength with partners better than I did. But the time for caution was over. I wasn’t going to potentially go to my grave without fully consummating my mating bond with the man I was falling in love with.

“Are you certain?” he asked, and part of me was pleased by just how ragged his voice sounded. That little ol’ Savvy, the wolfless alma, could affect him so.

“Absolutely. There isn’t a single question in my mind.”

With that, he kissed me further, deeper, heat rising between us. My heart started to thunder in my chest, fueling my excitement.

“I don’t want to die without us being together,” I whispered against his lips, knowing I needed to be honest.

“We shouldn’t do this in fear,” Kaleb answered, and for a moment, I thought he was putting the brakes on things. And as much as I ardently, desperately craved him down to my bones, I wouldn’t violate his consent. Besides, what was sexy about coercing someone into sleeping with me who didn’t want to? As much as I desired him, I wanted that feeling to be reciprocated.

“Then we don’t,” I murmured, cupping his face. “We do it because we want to, and we won’t let a corrupt council get in our way. This is just me and you, Kaleb. No one else.”

Standing up on my tiptoes, I kissed him much more tenderly. It wasn’t beseeching, and it wasn’t torrid—just a simple statement of affection with no expectations.

“I *want* to have this memory with you, Kaleb. But if you aren’t on the same page, that’s okay. We can go to bed, hold each other, and share memes until we pass out. However, if you *are* on the same page, then I *really* want to share myself with you. As your mate. As your friend. And maybe...” I paused for a beat, wondering if I should go out on that ledge. But considering tomorrow, I knew I would regret it if I left it unsaid. “And maybe as your partner. Your *real* partner.”

Although I didn’t have enhanced hearing, I swore I heard his heartbeat pick up, thundering against my chest like a percussion line.

“You’d really want that?” he asked, his voice wobbling.

I nodded, feeling happy tears prick at my eyes. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because we haven’t even gone on one fully successful date. I wanted to court you, but I haven’t done a very good job of it.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at that preposterous idea. Kaleb had cooked for me, brewed my tea, listened to me vent and talk about my life experiences. He’d shown me his favorite memes, included me in his work, and had my legs over his shoulders while he tongue-fucked his way to my heart. How could he think that he hadn’t done an exceptional job of things?

“I would beg to differ, but I don’t want to waste time arguing,” I answered, kissing his lips softly once again. “I am falling in love with you, Kaleb, and as terrifying as it is to say that, it’s the truth. And like I said before, if you’re not there yet, that’s okay. But I wanted you to know where I stood.”

“Savannah...” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Was rejection coming my way? I couldn’t tell. But I braced myself, blood thundering through my veins. “I’ve wanted you for so long now, it hurts. I just...” He heaved another breath. “I wish we had more time.”

“Me too,” I agreed wholeheartedly. “But we don’t. So I want to use the time we have and share something that the council can never take away from us.”

With that, he nodded and carried me to the bed. He set me on the sheets so tenderly, so lovingly, I flushed from head to toe.

“I want to give you a night we both remember for the rest of our lives,” Kaleb whispered reverently. “No matter how long that is.”

I didn’t trust my words, so I just nodded, extending my arms to hold him. Kaleb let his larger frame settle over mine, his weight an affirming pressure grounding me into the mattress. I clung to him, my refuge in the storm that was quickly approaching us.

He kissed me without any restraint, and our bond opened the floodgates to his feelings into me. They mixed with mine, a synergistic explosion of want, affection, and *trust* building by the second.

Yes, I was most definitely falling in love, and that would be one thing I knew I would never regret.

We kissed for a while, me writhing underneath him occasionally, demanding more sensation. More of him. It was a complex struggle between wanting to rush because time was limited and wanting to make

every moment last as long as it could. No breath taken for granted, no sensation forgotten.

It was only natural that our urgency began to build, and Kaleb pushed himself up just enough to get my shirt out from between us. He was rough as he pulled it over my head, but I liked it. I liked how *desired* it made me feel. Like he couldn't hold himself back because he needed to see me and feel me so deeply.

My hands were just as urgently on him, unbuttoning each button before finally growing frustrated and ripping the shirt apart. Three or so buttons went flying, and I couldn't help but giggle at Kaleb's shocked expression.

"What?" I challenged, feeling more than a bit spicy. "You can afford a replacement."

"Do I need to keep a backup budget for clothes you intend to destroy?" he asked wryly, and goodness, how *fond* I was of him. He never minded when I was silly or cheeky, but seemed to like it.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"If we do it again," I said, raising an eyebrow.

He kissed me again, so deeply that my toes curled inside my socks. Speaking of which, I needed to get those off because sex with socks on was weird to me. After a moment, when I was thoroughly breathless, he pulled away to look at me smugly.

"Well, I aim to make you a repeat customer."

"Customer, huh? Is that what I am now?"

"I guess that depends on if you're buying what I'm selling."

"Well, let's see the goods, mister."

I tried to pull the line off, but it fell off my tongue so clumsily that we broke into laughter.

For some people, that would have ruined the moment. But it didn't for me; just put me at ease and made me want Kaleb that much more.

So I kissed him again. I didn't think that I would ever tire of it, and if we survived, maybe I would even schedule regular make-out appointments to keep myself topped up. Until Kaleb, I'd never had a partner I could mack on without getting bored.

My hands roved over his bare torso, pushing his shirt out of the way so I could feel more of his deliciously warm skin. It was like his vitality was a simmering fire just below his skin, and I could absorb it through my palms.

At the same time, I could feel how much he loved touching *me*. It was like a feedback loop, building into an impossible crescendo between us.

I was in heaven—that was the only explanation for it. Heaven enhanced by the delicious heat of sin. It made my skin spark, and I was greedy for it.

“Let’s get these out of the way,” Kaleb said, tugging at my leggings. Sitting back, he dutifully stripped me of them, kissing my skin as it was revealed to him inch by inch. I was reminded of how reverently he touched and looked at me whenever he ate me out, and as much as I loved that, I wanted *more*.

“You don’t have to hold back,” I told him, my voice serious. “I won’t break.”

He finished peeling off my leggings and then my socks. When he climbed back onto my body, his eyes gleamed with an undeniable fire. It caught my breath, my body thrumming at seeing his lust.

“You should be careful what you wish for,” he growled, his voice so deep, it made goosebumps appear along my arms.

I’d *never* heard him sound like that. But boy, did I enjoy it.

I mewled, and his lips dove to me once more. But as much as I thought I’d known Kaleb’s kissing style, he switched it up on me. Our lip lock grew demanding, almost bruising, full of teeth and fire. My tongue glided along his slightly elongated canines.

The thought that he was wound up enough by me to partially lose control of his form lit a fire in my belly, and I began to push my hips up, trying to grind against the hard length I could feel pressing against his dress slacks.

Speaking of, why was he still wearing those? That was a failure on my part, and my hands slowly made their way down to them.

My head was swimming in pleasure and pure, undiluted lust. It felt like my every sense was full of Kaleb, except the one I craved the most.

As much as I didn’t want to break the almost punishing kiss, I needed to feel him. *All* of him. My patience had worn out, and all my emotions were whipped into a demanding frenzy. I let all of that pour through our bond as I tugged at his belt, unable to loosen the clasp with how tightly our bodies pressed into each other.

“Patience,” he growled into my lips, sending shivers through me once again. But for once, I couldn’t agree. I was done with being patient, with being a good girl. I wanted what I wanted, and I fully intended to get it.

“No,” I said right back.

“No?”

“No,” I affirmed.

“Alright then. The lady knows best.”

Finally, some logic I could get behind. I didn’t even mind when Kaleb shook his head and chuckled ever so slightly at my greed. His chest rumbled enticingly against mine.

His mouth moved away from mine, but his kiss-swollen lips didn’t leave me entirely. Instead, he traveled down my jaw and then my neck, until he was right over my scarred mating bond. For a moment, I froze, wondering what it would feel like to have his mouth on there again.

I held my breath for what was probably only a few seconds but felt like a lifetime, our hearts pounding against each other. When his lips finally descended and his tongue laved against my mating scar, I was surprised I didn’t climax right then and there.

It sounded impossible, and if one of the girls had told me that had happened to them, I would have had my doubts. But it felt like pleasure shot through every nerve in my body, consuming me so I felt nothing else but ecstasy. My toes curled so hard, they popped, and I was surprised my back didn’t follow suit.

Holy shit. If this was foreplay with Kaleb, what would it feel like when he was *inside* me?

I didn’t know, but I was going to find out soon. Because once I was thoroughly drunk off his ministrations, he sat up and pulled his belt from his pant loops.

God, such a simple move shouldn’t have been so attractive, but it was like I was engulfed in flames. I welcomed them, wanting *more*.

Kaleb knew that. He had to, because the look he sent me as he moved out of his pants was pure sin. Fuck, I wasn’t just falling in love anymore; I was rocketing into it, spurred on by the deluge of emotions he was letting flow freely through our bond.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked, staring at me without any reservations.

I opened my legs just enough for him to see how thoroughly soaked my panties were. “What do you think?”

Apparently, death looming over me made me saucy. But Kaleb didn’t seem to mind, his lips tugging into a crooked smile that breathed sex and

command in ways that made my breath hitch.

“Such a princess,” he commented, his thumbs hooking into the top of the boxers.

And then, he was finally revealed to me in all his glory. Somehow his dress slacks had hidden his thick, muscular thighs. They made my mouth water at the sheer strength in them, and I wanted to sink my teeth into them in a way that wasn’t like me. Sure, I’d always loved giving my partner light hickeyes and love nips, little reminders of where I’d been and what I’d done, but the way I wanted to sink my teeth into Kaleb and leave my mark was entirely new.

Maybe I was more of a wolf than I’d thought.

Kaleb’s length stood at full attention, already dripping at its deeply flushed head. If I wasn’t drooling over Kaleb’s thighs, I was over his cock, making my desire skyrocket.

“Please,” I gasped, reaching for him. But he was as wicked as ever, staying just beyond my fingers. Before I could pout at him, he was ripping my underwear off, making me gasp again.

“What?” he challenged, being the handsome bastard he was. “I can afford to replace them.”

Oh, he was cheeky, alright. If I wasn’t so strung out on the pleasure he was giving me, I might have objected, but I only let out a sharp bark of laughter.

I would definitely pay him back later.

Assuming we got a later.

“And you also deserve this, don’t you, princess?”

I looked down to see that he was gripping himself, lining himself up so he could slip into me. Normally, some oral or fingering would be a must for me before intercourse, but he had me so amped up in anticipation that I was surprised there wasn’t a small lake pooling under me.

“I do,” I said, trying to push up into him. But his other hand held me down firmly, letting me know I needed to lay back and take what he gave me when he was ready to give it.

His subtle show of domination thrilled me. I was a pretty headstrong woman, so I wasn’t into being submissive most of the time, but I liked it with Kaleb. Probably because I knew he would take care of me. That he would put his life on the line before he would ever intentionally hurt me.



That level of trust allowed me so much freedom to feel safe in whatever we did together.

“Don’t worry, princess. You’ve been so good. Daddy’ll take care of you.”

I knew he could smell my spike in excitement, because he was sliding in, finally filling me in all the ways I craved. The stretch I felt was intense, tearing my breath right out of my chest, but it never bordered on too much. It was a delicious challenge, one I was thrilled to defeat.

Kaleb, to his credit, went slow, paying attention to how my body responded to him. And boy, was it responding with an intensity that made me dizzy. We really were becoming one. Two halves of the same spirit, joined together by our affection and respect for each other.

“That’s it, princess. I’m just getting started.”

## Chapter 13

---

## *Kaleb*

*Goddamn.* Being inside Savvy might have been the most amazing thing in my entire life. There were no words for it, especially not when my mind was overwhelmed with electricity and insane pleasure. And I wasn't even thrusting yet, even though my body desperately wanted to.

But I held myself back. Although Savvy had asked me for *more* and told me I could go hard, I could feel that her body needed to adjust to me. That discovery certainly stroked my ego, but my ego wasn't worth hurting her over.

"Gods, you're beautiful," I breathed, unable to help myself as I captured her lips again. My hands slid up her body, enjoying the journey, until they ran into her bra. Well, that wouldn't do at all. I wanted to feel and taste every inch of her skin, take those pink buds into my mouth and tease her until she was even wetter around my cock.

I didn't know if she clenched down on me on purpose or if it was in response to my words, but the feeling nearly made me lose my mind. My teeth went even longer in my mouth, and I knew my claws were growing, too.

They bit into the bra, so I would have to replace that, too, but that was fine with me. She was more than worth it. Especially when those perfect breasts slid out of the loosened bra, allowing me to throw it to the side.

"Touch me," she gasped, her walls fluttering around me. It was a wonder I didn't bust right then and there, but I was determined to give her the night of her life. I couldn't do that by losing control when things were just getting started.

Even if it would have been *very* easy to.

“As you wish.”

I took one of her breasts in hand, one of my fingertips grazing her nipple. The gasp she let out fueled me, filling me with the need to make her orgasm at all costs.

I teased one bud and then the other, all the while sinking deeper and deeper into her as her body allowed it. It took all my willpower not to give in to my inner wolf, who wanted to ravage her until she had trouble walking the next day. But we had a battle to fight the next day, so that probably wasn't the best course of action.

Then again, if we managed to emerge victorious, she could take a few vacation days, and I could show her what I was *really* capable of.

Not that I minded being tender to Savannah. She deserved it so much. I was happy to take all the time her body needed; it extended how long we were connected. And I deeply enjoyed being connected to the woman I was in love with.

I'd been afraid to admit that earlier, but it was the truth. I'd been in love with her since I'd watched her heal bit by bit and saw how strong she was. How understanding. I didn't mind that she was only beginning to fall in love with me, as I hadn't expected that in a million years. Let alone for her to be the one to initiate things.

Finally, I sank fully into her, our hips flush. And God, if that feeling wasn't utterly incredible. She was slick and hot, a velvet vise gripping me like it never wanted to let me go. Which was fine, because I didn't want to let it go, either.

“That's my princess,” I murmured, pulling out, then filling her all over again. Normally, I wasn't a talkative one during sex, nor was I that into pet names. But ever since we'd jokingly called each other Mommy and Daddy at our last family meal, I couldn't get it out of my brain.

Yeah, it had managed to stay in my thoughts, even after the messenger's visit and the possible impending doom of our pack. It was part of the reason why I'd messaged her, asking for her time even though I knew she was busy.

Not that I'd texted her intending to have sex. I had faintly hoped for it, but I'd never figured it was within the realm of possibility. But I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't spend this night with her in my arms, cuddling on my bed as we laughed, talked, and slept.

We knew what we were up against, and nothing was guaranteed. At least if everything went wrong in the battle, I could die knowing that we'd shared everything with each other. That there was something between us, and perhaps, if we'd had a bit more time, it could have been so much more.

Who would have known that my perfect match had been in our pack for nearly half a decade? I felt like a fool for having missed it for so long, but it just went to show the things we missed when we locked ourselves into finite boxes. I'd been afraid to live outside Parker's shadow. Afraid that my mind would take me down the same path as my mother. She'd tried so hard, fought for years and years, but that still hadn't been enough.

It was quite possible that she had passed on the same genes to me that had caused her mental illnesses. But I wasn't as terrified of them anymore. While it was true there wasn't an effective medical treatment for shifters yet, I had a strong support system. I still had Parker, even if he was pursuing his relationship with Sam. I had Mahlan, Jacobian, Theo, Lyssa, Emma, Sam.

And I had Savvy.

She strengthened me in a way I didn't even know I needed. She was so fearless, even though she couldn't shift into a wolf. She couldn't hear like I could, see like I could, and couldn't smell like I could. Yet, she was going into battle with me tomorrow without hesitation.

And she was doing it in *heels* and a *dress*, no less.

I hadn't thought I was nearly as strong as my mother, but I knew now that I was. In a different way, sure, but I was her son through and through. She would be so sad to know I'd given up years of my life in fear. She'd always wanted me to have the best experiences I could.

"God, I love you," I gasped to Savvy, overwhelmed by the emotions rushing through me as I pulled out and slammed back into her again. I loved watching her breasts bounce as I did.

I didn't need her to say it back, as she'd already told me she was falling for me. But to my great surprise, she mewed a response.

"Fuck, Kaleb, I think I love you, too."

Her words shot through me like lightning. Going from thinking she was falling in love with me to thinking she was already there was a huge jump, and it thrilled me through and through. Maybe it was too fast, and we were making a mistake, but who cared? The only thing we had was the moment, so why not say what we were feeling?

I had to kiss her again. I bent down to her kiss-swollen lips and truly ravaged her. Normally, I wouldn't try to make out when I was losing my human form so completely, but she seemed to like my shifting body, judging by what was pouring through our bond.

Some of my control slipped, and I thrust into her much more sharply. She let out a rapturous sigh.

"You like that?" I murmured. God, did I sound like a porno? Maybe, but I couldn't stop. Something about Savannah was so much more than earthly. She was a revelation in non-shifting form, a beauty and soul that some could go their whole lives without meeting, yet she was in *my* bed loving *me*, giving me the privilege of plundering the depths of her body and baring everything that she could feel.

"God, yes," she rasped. "Give me more. I can take it!"

Savvy had never lied to me before, so if I couldn't trust her in the bedroom, where would I? Straightening, I lifted her legs, placing them over my shoulder and changing the angle I was plunging into her.

"Fuck! *Kaleb!*"

I didn't think I'd ever heard Savvy swear so much in such a short time, but it made me feel quite accomplished. Granted, "accomplished" was just a polite way to say "hard as fuck." Even though I was gripped by her satiny walls, I felt myself stiffen further with need.

I was already too close. I was starting to feel Savvy's womanhood ripple and cling, her face growing flush. She had about several minutes if we kept going how we were. I guessed that meant I had to switch up my game.

I'd never really thought about the length of my arms before, but I was very appreciative of my reach as I pistoned into her, little mewls spilling from her mouth every time I slammed home. If only because it allowed one of my hands to settle over her mons, fingers splayed over the short, curly hairs there, and the other to settle on her breast that I'd neglected before.

"Kaleb, Kaleb, *Kaleb!*"

She said it like a prayer, whispering my name over and over again. I wasn't going to lie—her utter rapture with my work was doing it for me. If she didn't stop, I was going to blow way too soon.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, so I went to work. My hand over her mons pressed down ever so slightly, shifting downwards in a slow, steady caress until my fingers ended up framing that sensitive little

clit of hers. I'd spent many an hour knelt between her legs with my tongue on it, so I knew exactly what she liked.

At the same time, I gently pinched her nipple between my thumb and forefinger on my other hand. Those two counterpoints of pleasure had her arching off the bed, and she clamped down on me like she was trying to rip my dick off.

It was the perfect escalation of pleasure, and much to my relief, I felt the telltale sensations of her orgasm. One would think after the dozen or so I'd wrung from her in our oral adventures, I would be used to her climax. But watching it—and now, feeling it—was a renewed experience every time.

She was like art, lovingly depicted in careful detail by a master. Her cheeks flushed to that perfect pink, and her red lips opened in a wanton gasp. Her eyes went hazy and unfocused, her pupils blown.

*"I'm c-c-c-Oh God, Kaleb!"*

There it was.

I felt it happen. Smelled it happen. Watched it happen. And it was utter perfection. She tensed so hard that for a fleeting moment, I thought she might break, flying higher and higher into a realm I couldn't go to.

When she collapsed back onto the bed in a boneless, sweaty pile, I finally let myself release.

*Holy! Shit!*

It swept through my entire body, burning me from the inside out in the most delicious fire. Everything good I'd ever experienced was bound up as I came, redoubled through my bond with Savvy.

Mine didn't last nearly as long as hers, but it didn't need to. I was breathless and nearly trembling when I finally came down, collapsing alongside my love.

I felt like I should say something, but no words came. I was just so contented, sleep already hanging heavy on my eyelids as I pulled her closer to me. If there was a heaven, I was pretty sure I'd found it.

And not in the unhealthy, codependent way I'd spent with Parker for far too long. Savvy was her own person, and so was I. We enhanced each other, encouraged each other, but we didn't need each other to exist.

If we survived the next 48 hours, I knew we would make mistakes and quarrel. But I had no doubt that Savvy and I would be able to communicate and grow together.

As long as we had the chance.



## Chapter 14

---

## *Savannah*

I stood outside the very impressive building that Kaleb's Amish connections had built for us. I would be the first in the wedding party to walk down the aisle, Kaleb at my side, followed by Hannah and Jacobian, Ellibie and Parker, and then Lyssa and Mahlan. As for Sam, he had never expected to be a part of the wedding party, so he was chuffed when he was asked to be the "flower bro."

I'd never heard of such a thing until Emma showed me multiple videos online of a handsome young man with a fanny pack throwing flowers down the aisle. They all differed in their delivery, but everyone was tickled pink by it.

Naturally, it was the perfect role for Sam, who was dressed from head to toe in Emma's wedding colors: a deep green suit with gold accents. Even his hair was done up in very complex-looking braids, woven with several lovely crystal pins and beads.

I knew our event was a sham, but I was still moved by the sight of all of us together. I hoped in the future—if we had a future—we could have a real wedding. After all, Lyssa and Mahlan's had been quite fun. I'd even danced with Kaleb, if I recalled correctly, although I hadn't thought much of it at the time.

Suddenly, the door leading into the ceremony hall cracked open, and one of the guards, dressed as an usher, peeked his head in.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Emma confirmed, looking like she was floating. Although I'd seen pictures of her dream dress online, she still looked lovely in the last-minute substitute we'd found. It was a pale, pale blush that practically

looked white next to our peach dresses, and her gold jewelry tied her in with the matching embellishments on all the groom's tuxes. Originally, she'd wanted the classic black and white tuxes with green kerchiefs in the pockets, but those weren't available. I didn't understand how the most common suit color wasn't available, but I didn't really get fashion, anyway.

"Break a leg!" the guard said happily before ducking back into the doors. A moment later, the music started, and that was our cue to walk forward.

Despite everything, it felt magical to walk arm-in-arm down the aisle with Kaleb. Unlike the rest of the girls, I was in flats. As wolves, it didn't matter what shoes they wore because they would shift. But for me, a little ol' alma who had to run everywhere and stop people from dying because of various malevolent curses, practical shoes were a must. Besides, I was pretty sure that no one would even notice. It wasn't like the council would burst in, immediately notice my flats, and figure out that the wedding was a ruse.

At least, I hoped not. That would be the strangest way to tip off the enemy.

Kaleb and I reached the end of the aisle and parted, going our separate ways as part of the bridal party and the groom's party. Then came Hannah and Jacobian. Then Lyssa and Mahlan. And then Theo, the groom.

He looked so sharp in his suit, his normally stoic face alight with happiness. I'd heard him called the ice prince plenty of times, but I'd never seen that when it came to him and Emma. It was clear that he was hopelessly devoted to his bride.

But once the groom took to his position, the wedding march didn't drop. An upbeat, funky song started to play, and Sam made his grand entrance.

He worked it just how I knew he would, tossing flower petals all over the aisle and even over some of the audience's heads. It probably would have seemed a little over the top, but I knew those petals were from flowers Sam had grown himself. They were supposed to be blessed with his power, allowing him to call on his powers more easily. I couldn't be certain, but I was pretty sure some seeds were mixed in, allowing him quicker access to the vines and thorns he used in battle.

It was yet another brilliant trap that the council had no inkling of, and hopefully wouldn't until the last possible moment.

Once he finished walking, Sam took a sharp right at the end of the aisle towards a side door. The signage said it was toward the restrooms, but I knew better. It was a battle room filled with potions, weapons, and all sorts of supplies. They had been warded up the wazoo to escape detection, which was important, considering about two dozen fae were crammed in there.

I'd only seen them in passing or heard whispers of them from those helping us set up, but Sam had gotten in touch with a small group of very old, very sequestered fae who lived in the frozen west of Canada. How he'd done that, I didn't know, but I'd heard a rumor that they were the great, great godparents of one of the council members who'd died of a heart attack.

Given everything we'd learned, maybe it hadn't been a heart attack. Maybe it had been poison or even a cover-up. If we came out on top, maybe we could find out. But we wouldn't know until well after the battle, so I didn't let myself dwell on it.

At long last, the bridal march started playing, and the doors opened to reveal Emma and her father. He was a distinguished old man, and I could see the family resemblance between him and his two children. The audience, a healthy crowd of over fifteen hundred, stood, cameras at the ready.

Usually, so many recording devices were a no-no at a wedding. But the witches on our side had enchanted them to be used as weapons to temporarily blind enemies. Our attendees just had to be careful not to accidentally flash-bang an ally with them.

My heart swelled in my chest as Emma and her father walked down the aisle. It was just so beautiful and a testament to how far we'd come as a pack. Not too long ago, the entire inner circle had been single. Well, except for me, but I'd had a secret relationship no one knew about.

But now, all of us were paired up with someone who loved us, including me. I was happier than ever, and I was willing to fight for that joy.

The two of them reached the end of the aisle, Emma's father giving her away at the end to stand across from the groom. Everyone sat, and we were all ready for the next step.

Which was the trickiest part. We had a ceremony to get through and a fake one, at that, but we had no idea when the council would strike. Would it be in the middle of the vows? Perhaps as the couple marched out? At the reception? I hoped it wasn't that last one, as we hadn't planned a reception.

We would find out, and quickly.

“Dear friends, family, fae, and pack members,” the officiant began. He wasn’t one of my guards, but he was one of the largest men I had ever seen. Apparently, he belonged to a southern tribe of bear shifters who also had members of their territory disappear. He was also an ordained minister, which was interesting. I was sure he had a great story, but it would have to be told another time.

“We have come together today to witness Emmaline Reese and Theodore Johnson join in marriage. We gather around them now, connected by the magic that runs through every fae, to celebrate the beginning of their new lives as one.

My heart squeezing progressed to throat squeezing, and I could feel tears brimming in my eyes. I wasn’t a big crier, but something about weddings got to me, even if they weren’t real.

And I could tell I wasn’t the only one. There were plenty of sniffles in the audience that even I could hear with my relatively human hearing.

“Throughout history, we have often been distracted by things that need not separate us. Allowing ourselves to be divided along lines that we never should have accepted. But today, in this joyous union between two souls, let it remind us that we have always been stronger together.”

If that wasn’t a very pointed sermon, but I got it. He was like a bard, invigorating us before battle.

“So it is with unification in mind that I ask this. Do you, Theo, as you are known by your pack, take Emma, as she is known by her pack, to be your mate and lawfully wedded wife? Will you honor and cherish her? Love, trust, and commit yourself to her? Through joy and pain, and in sickness and in health, and whatever else life might throw at you, until death do you part?”

“I do,” Theo said, and holy halibut, if the way he was looking at Emma didn’t make my heart sing. They were so in love, and I felt so utterly blessed to witness it.

“And do you, Emma, as you are known by your pack, take Theo, as he is known by his pack, to be your mate and lawfully wedded husband? Will you honor and cherish him? Love, trust, and commit yourself to him? Through joy and pain, and in sickness and in health, and whatever else life might throw at you, until death do you part?”

“I do,” she answered, the epitome of a blushing bride.

“Then it is at this time that Theo and Emma will exchange rings. These wedding rings are physical symbols of a binding promise, a sign of your attachment and belonging. Never of possession, but of partnership. As the ring-bearer presents these tokens to you, you may exchange your vows, should you have them.”

That was Ashlee’s cue, and she stood from where she was sitting beside Emma’s mother, bringing the two of them their rings on a fancy filigree platter. Theo took his first, then lifted Emma’s hand in his own.

“Emmaline, you are by far the most enchanting woman I have ever met,” Theo said. “I have been in love with the idea of you for so long, but falling in love with the real you has been a gift beyond anything I could imagine. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, to grow old with you, and see what sorts of adventures we can accomplish together.”

Slowly, steadily, he slid the ring onto her finger.

“With this ring, I promise to stay by your side. To protect you as your mate and your husband, to raise our children as our ancestors did, in the light of the moon and under the stars themselves.”

Once the ring was solidly on her finger, it was Emma’s turn. She mirrored her mate, tears welling up and spilling down her cheeks.

“Theo, I love you more deeply than I ever thought was possible. With each day that has passed, I fall deeper into that love. I am a better person since I met you, and I know I will continue to grow and learn on our journey together. We are two halves of the same whole. Whatever path life may lead us down, I am content in knowing that we will journey down it together.”

“Emma and Theo, having proclaimed your love and commitment to one another in the eyes of all the fae present here, by the power vested in me by the magic that binds us all, I am happy to pronounce you mates, husband, and wife. You may now kiss your mate!”

Theo swept Emma into his arms and dipped her into a long kiss while the audience went wild, a raucous cheer exploding from the crowd. It was such a magical moment that for a moment, I forgot we were at a pretend wedding. A trap.

And then, the doors blew off their hinges.

## Chapter 15

---

## *Kaleb*

One moment, we were sharing the joy of our friends. The next, the doors exploded into wooden splinters, and people flooded in.

It looked like our trap had worked, after all. Not going to lie—it was one of the few times I desperately wished we were wrong.

A large part of the audience screamed and scrambled out of the way. I had to hand it to them—their acting was on point.

It was a serious situation, but I couldn't help but wonder if they had been waiting just outside the doors, warded as all get out, listening for the most dramatic moment to burst in. Honestly, it was far too easy to picture.

Imaging that made some of my fear dissipate, and I did my best not to chuckle as twenty elite guards poured in, fanning out along the wall as if they were going to stop an audience of over fifteen hundred from leaving.

Surely they'd brought more with them, right? I wasn't sure, and I was too busy trying to look shocked to puzzle it out. How long was I supposed to pretend we hadn't known they were coming?

I guessed I would have to follow Mahlan's lead. Thankfully, I was meant to be muscle, not an actor, which was why Savvy and I were put on the end—and so she could bleed into the background and watch out for those who needed her help.

"What's the meaning of this?" Theo barked, and once more, I did my best not to snort. I'd built up the moment so much, and the council had really laid an egg, hadn't they?

Twenty people? *Really?*

"Mahlan Reese and Theodore Johnson, you are under arrest. Submit yourself to council custody immediately!"



“This is my wedding!” Emma countered, and wow, her anger was spot on. Either she was an excellent actress, or she was channeling some serious rage. Considering that the council had been haranguing us for so long and had nearly killed multiple of our members, I was leaning toward the latter.

“You knew the risks when you openly defied the orders of the council.”

“Are you really going to do this?” Mahlan challenged, stepping forward from the wedding party. “Are you really going to break up the sanctity of a wedding in front of so many witnesses to this blatant defiance of the law?”

It was our last-ditch effort to see how far the council would go, if they were ready to show their colors in front of so many. Because if they backed off, we might have time to put together even more evidence and launch a full-scale invasion. But I knew deep in my gut that they would never back down. Not until every single one of us was done and dusted.

“You think we would be foolish enough to come alone?” The man I assumed was the lead guard scoffed.

At that, more witches strode in, single file like a military march. It would have been an intimidating display if it didn’t look like a high school production of *The Sound of Music*.

Was this what I had spent the past week dreading and having nightmares over? If I had known they were going to do a line-dance entrance, I would have gotten better sleep.

But my mood sobered when I recognized two of the witches who’d attacked me back when Emma had been cursed. They’d nearly killed me, and there they were, smiling smugly.

A growl issued from my throat, but no one shamed me for it. In fact, I thought I heard similar noises from those around me.

“There’s no need for violence today,” Mahlan said.

“Then you will submit yourself to custody?”

“No,” Theo said, walking forward to join his alpha. “We will not.”

The man snapped, and all the witches raised their hands, the air crackling with their power. This was the intimidating part I’d expected. Still, it only lasted for a second, because that was when the “wedding guests” fell into formation, shaping themselves into an arch facing the witches. Shifters’ teeth and claws began to expand, and our own witches readied their hands. Dryad elemental power began to fill the air around them, and demons began to show their true form, the scent of brimstone filling the air.

It was then that the witches realized what they had gotten into. Seeing their eyes widen and waves of doubt rush through them was more than satisfying.

It was their turn to be afraid.

“Attack!” Mahlan cried.

And we did.

Sam burst out of the side room with all the fae who’d been crammed in there. There were way more than the two dozen or so I’d thought. Translucent figures that I couldn’t get a good look at flew out, spinning up to the ceiling, and then two *actual cyclops* came lumbering out, clubs in hand. Where were they even from?

I didn’t know, but the banshees followed them. Their feet were touching the ground, though they didn’t seem to be taking any steps—just sliding along behind the cyclops like the world’s most terrifying calvary.

“Now!” the elite guard yelled back.

The witches threw their first volley of spells, but they were hit by the wall of vines that suddenly shot up from every seed and petal that Sam had scattered across the floor. And he’d scattered quite a lot of seeds. I would have almost felt bad for the dryads who’d built the place if they hadn’t tricked out the place to be our battleground.

Their spells hit the vines, some striking through, only to hit another shield from the witches, warlocks, *bruja*, and other magic users who were on our side. That was the cue for the rest of our audience to surge forward, which they did with gusto.

There was only so long that I could sit back and watch. I was a warrior, dammit. I deserved the chance to fight. To protect those I loved.

Looking to Mahlan, I raised my eyebrows. He knew what I was asking and gave me a nod.

*Perfect.*

Turning to Savvy, I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Please, be careful,” I murmured. “Stay out of trouble.”

She nodded, giving my hand a squeeze before letting me go. I was immensely grateful that she understood. Fighting was in my blood. I couldn’t just stand by and watch.

“*Phalanx!*” I heard the guard cry, and the witches began to converge together, forming that oh-so-famous spartan soldier formation they were known for.

Oh no, that wouldn't do at all.

Letting a growl rip through my chest, I jumped forward, exploding out of my skin and flying over the battle.

My skin burst away in a wave of hair, my form elongating and stretching in a series of sharp pops. It *hurt*, but I reveled in the pain. Finally, after what felt like forever, my inner wolf was allowed to come out and give an enemy hell.

And he had a whole lot of pent-up hell to give.

I landed beside the elite guard and lunged at him, teeth ready to clamp down on flesh. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy, however, because a thick, iron spear appeared out of nowhere, landing right in his hand. Its filigree and rune carvings carved onto it prompted me that it was enchanted, so I dodged instead of lunging.

The man stabbed at air, his eyes glowing a brilliant gold, and I wondered what kind of fae he was. I got my answer when thin, gossamer-like wings unfurled from his back, and he took to the air. That gold shone even brighter as a ring of horns shimmered into existence around his head, and his ears turned long and pointed, matching his several rolls of needle-like teeth.

Great, a sprite. The meanest of all the fairy folk. And by meanest, I meant able to spit actual venom.

Which was exactly what he did right where I was standing.

Once more, I jumped to the side, but he had clearly anticipated that movement because he threw his spear right into my path.

The thing flew true and strong, but I was ready. Twisting, I caught it between my teeth and clamped down as hard as I could.

It wasn't exactly a great feeling, but I was glad to feel my teeth puncture it. Tilting my head, I pressed the tip against the ground and bend it until it snapped in two.

The guard dove at me, calling out something in a language I didn't understand. The broken spear ripped out of my mouth, only to appear in his hand again, fully repaired.

*Well, shit.*

He dove at me, using his wings to propel himself forward impossibly fast. Well, maybe impossibly fast for a human warrior, but I wasn't that.

Tensing all my hind legs, I launched myself into the air, arcing over his head. Grabbing his spear once more, I used it as a ricochet tool to kill my

momentum and drop straight down.

Right onto the sprite's back.

First things first, those wings had to go. I sank my teeth into the closest one and tore, a bright blue liquid spraying across my face. I ignored it, going after the next one without wasting a moment.

The sprite below me screamed bloody murder and tried to whirl, but I wouldn't let him. I tore the second one out, less surprised by the near-neon spray that coated me.

It was when I moved onto the third one, the two of us hurtling towards the ground, that I smelled smoke.

Was that...was that burning hair?

Nope, that was burning *fur*.

That thought made me lose my concentration long enough for the sprite to knock me off, and when I collided with the ground, my large body made a series of loud cracks. They sounded truly awful, and I recognized the crisp pop of breaking bones.

I wasn't exactly surprised. Heavy figures slamming into hard surfaces at high speeds led to serious injuries. And maybe if my fur weren't smoking and my face burning, I would have been more concerned about it.

The sprite landed a few feet away from me, screaming, flailing, and cursing. We shared a look for a moment over the cacophony and chaos of battle, and I half-expected him to beg for help. Or mercy.

Instead, he grabbed that gods-damned spear again.

"I have you!" someone cried, a voice I didn't recognize. The next thing I knew, I was caught up in a deluge of water that pushed me and the sprite apart. I panicked as I was lifted off my feet and unable to breathe, unable to find the surface as I tumbled this way and that. I fought, thinking it was the enemy sweeping in to save the sprite, until I realized the burning had stopped.

And I could breathe.

It was a strange sensation, drinking water but with oxygen filling my lungs. When I looked down, I saw one of our witches and a dryad below me, working together to save my wolfy ass. Their hands moving, they set me gently on the ground, the water splashing formlessly to the ground.

*Thanks*, I said, wondering if they could hear me. The dryad nodded, but the witch did not, which didn't really answer that question.

I couldn't spare much thought for it, because I felt the now-familiar displacement of air from a certain iron projectile. Whirling onto my front paws, I caught it again, then used my back legs to launch myself at the grounded sprite who had only just begun to pull himself up.

He lifted his arm, no doubt trying to stop me, but there wasn't any killing my momentum. I ran him through with his weapon, taking care to avoid any of that dangerous blue blood.

But with witches, one could never be too sure, so I finished him off by clamping my jaws on either side of his head and biting down.

*Squish.*

I turned back to the witch and dryad, only to get sprayed in the face with another deluge of water. I sputtered, skittering for a moment on the wet ground.

"Sorry!" the witch cried. While the dryad didn't say anything, it looked like she smirked. "Could you open your mouth?"

Oh, right. The blood. My tongue and gums were already burning, so that was a good idea.

In a situation that I never thought I'd be in, I opened my maw and let them spray me in the mouth. I wasn't sure who was channeling the water and who was channeling the neutralizing magic, but it worked.

With that done, I shook myself off like a wet dog. It wasn't the most glorious I'd looked in battle, but I supposed acid blood would have been a lot worse. With a bow of my front half, I jumped back into the thick of it.

Thankfully, no one seemed to have noticed me getting hosed down like a puppy who'd encountered a skunk. Or at least they didn't have time to comment on it while battling for their lives.

Except the battle wasn't as dire as it could have been. Yes, three hundred witches in a large room was a formidable army, but we outnumbered them by more than five to one. While normally, those were about even odds on a shifter versus witch level, we had a lot of fae our enemies could have never predicted.

And Sam. For being such a snarky little shit, he sure was a powerhouse.

In a strange twist of fate, I heard his voice cut through the din not too far from me. "Yeah, how do you like them apples?"

He was far too young for that reference, but when I spun on my back paws, I saw him surrounded by vines, beating a prostrate witch with what looked like a large tree branch that was, indeed, covered in apples.

Huh.

But he didn't notice the two witches behind him, magic at the ready. I could take out one of them, but they weren't spaced close enough for me to get both. I could call to him, but he couldn't hear the thought-speak we shifters used in our animal forms.

It turned out that I didn't have to worry. One moment, Sam was oblivious to them, and the next, there was a piercing howl, and Parker barreled into one of the witches, his jaws latching around his neck. I moved instantly, charging the other. They noticed me at the last moment, twisting and throwing up a shield that I bounced off.

But their Hail Mary didn't last long, because in one movement, Parker pushed against one of the pews and rounded on the shielded witch. At this point, Sam knew what was going on. He turned, making a viny ramp that Parker could descend to reach his target.

It was quite impressive to watch them work together, the witch and the wolf, attuned to each other in a way I'd never expected. It was strangely beautiful, and if I had a drop of artistic talent, I would have liked to draw it.

Except it wasn't like I could pull out an easel in the middle of a battle, so I moved on to my next target.

Which was harder to do than I'd thought. It was clear that this was not a fair fight, and the witches were falling back, their numbers decimated. It was far more exciting than it probably should have been for me, and I let out a triumphant howl.

It was high time that the witches understood what it was like to be afraid. What it was like to stare into the face of death and know it wasn't likely to come out on the other side. The council had made a grave mistake underestimating us, and now they were in for a war.

It just figured that they were too cowardly to annihilate us on their own. Did they really think our alpha and beta would give in?

It was probably beyond their comprehension to have some backwater wolf pack figure out the scheme they'd been hiding and plotting for so long. Pride cometh before the fall, and all that.

*Enough!*

Mahlan's voice echoed in my head, firm but pleased.

*We give them a chance to surrender.*

It took a few moments for the attacks to stop and for our troops to pull back. Some of our own were injured, but our support fae were picking them

up and taking them back to the wedding altar, where Savvy and few other almas were getting ready to heal. It made me feel better that Savvy was so far away from the heat of things. While I loved a good fight, I would give it all up to keep her safe.

*Give them space*, Mahlan commanded.

We returned to our original formation, with the exception of the wedding party and myself, who clustered in the middle of the arch.

Mahlan shifted back into his human form, knowing that the witches couldn't hear him and were confused by our sudden backing off.

"Do you understand now?" he asked, striding forward like he hadn't just been embroiled in an intense battle for the freedom of all fae-kind. "You thought you were clever, didn't you? With your little scheme to overthrow the entire council and declare martial law over all of us fae?"

The witches looked gobsmacked. That was satisfying, too. I couldn't be prouder of Mahlan, who truly looked like a general of legend.

"Now you see the power of all of us together, so know that we will not submit. We will never submit. The cruelty you have wrought upon our people will be no more."

"Cruelty?" someone's voice echoed. Everyone looked around, but it seemed as if the words were coming from the walls, which were spattered with an impressive amount of different-colored blood. "You haven't even begun to see this so-called cruelty you accuse us of."

The voice was awful—oily and thick. It made my skin crawl below my fur. Who the hell was that?

"That's—" someone close to me started to say, but she never quite got it out. But that was probably because half of the roof was *suddenly ripped clean off*.

Witches. Such a dramatic lot. And that was coming from a guy whose species had taken several centuries to learn how not to burst into a giant furred animal during a full moon.

Thunder cracked above our heads, a blinding lightning bolt striking across the roof. It was so unnatural that all of us winced. It felt like a rock had lodged in my stomach, a rock frozen and covered with the same oil that was so audible through the strange voice.

"You wish to throw a tantrum? To challenge us as if we are equal? Then congratulations. We are here to give you the attention you so crave."

Finally, the gray, opaque clouds parted, and ten of the council members descended in a whirling but transparent bubble of wind. Like something out of a movie, they slowly alit on the ground, dressed in matching robes.

I had to hand it to them—they made a stylish entrance.

“Aren’t you supposed to use a broom to do that?” Mahlan asked, ignoring their jibes, and I couldn’t help but smile at his *cojones*. That was our alpha, alright.

“One would think that you would be wise enough not to taunt those you should be begging for mercy,” one of them said, an older man with salt and pepper hair and blazing green eyes. There was a generous smattering of freckles along his strong Roman nose, but that was about all that distinguished him from any old grandpa on the street.

“What mercy would we need to beg when your forces have been defeated?” Mahlan asked. “Do you truly think that ten of you are enough for the nearly two thousand of us?”

“You think these are our forces?” another council member laughed, one closer to the back of their little gaggle. “Surely you’re not that foolish!”

Before we could answer or my brain could catch up, the woman pointed to the sky. Without warning, a blazing purple beam shot out of it, sending an impressive display of fireworks exploding in the air.

It was beautiful, I would admit, but what happened after was not. Suddenly, more witches came pouring in through the doors, this time not marching in neat, orderly lines, and then the sky began to fill with them as well. I knew Sam could sometimes propel himself on giant, magic-infused plants, but I had no idea that so many witches could *fly*.

It just didn’t seem fair.

“It’s not your fault,” another council member said. “You are simple folk. It is not your nature to understand such things. While your rebellion has been amusing, it is ultimately futile.”

“Futile enough for you to bring an army here to stop us,” Mahlan said, still calm. But I could tell from the lines of his human body that he was tense. I would have been, too, if I were in the same situation.

“Our policy has always been to never let an opportunity go to waste,” the older man said, taking a step forward. And yet, I could tell it was all posturing as he made sure to keep a healthy distance from us. A good idea, considering I wanted to sink my teeth deep into his throat and *rip*. “We



brought an army, yes, but it's mostly all our followers you've managed to piss off."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Theo said flatly, and God, he could be so deadpan. The council member sent our beta an unimpressed look, but Theo didn't flinch. It would take more than a glare to intimidate our ice prince.

"Defiant to the end, I see. And this *is* your end, in case you haven't figured it out. Our loyal disciples will spill your blood across this floor in waves of crimson."

Waves of crimson? This guy watched too many fantasy TV shows with dragons. Who even talked like that?

Well, bigoted witches who were over a hundred years old, apparently.

"But fear not, it won't go to waste," he continued. "If there was one thing we learned from those truly obnoxious brothers, it's that there's untapped power in different types of fae blood. You shifters have a remarkable ability to imbue someone with healing powers. The blood of a lesser witch can increase the power of a hex on that same type of witch tenfold. A pixie's blood can temporarily give you immunity to poison. And succubus blood creates a field of attraction around anyone who dares to imbibe it."

"So what?" Mahlan challenged, and I could tell he was tiring of the council's shit. When I'd imagined this battle going down, there had been a lot less talking. "You're threatening to slaughter us to make some sort of beauty regimen?"

"Just kill them already, Phynol," one of the witches growled. "Why explain what they cannot understand."

"Oh, we understand you, don't worry about that," Mahlan said. "We're just not buying what you're selling."

"That's the thing," the older man said. "You don't understand. You're still thinking so incredibly small-scale. But what else can we expect from such small minds?" He took one more half-step forward. "So much blood. So many lives. So much power. Instead of letting that go to waste, we will use it to fuel a spell that will push us into a new era."

Mahlan scoffed, and I was right there with him. A spell, huh? Was it one that turned everything into a Saturday morning cartoon?

My jaws clenched as I vibrated with the need to hop in and destroy them. I didn't do well with intimidation when my enemies were soft,

squishy, and wearing elaborate D&D robes. Since when did a battle involve a debate team?

“Make whatever spell you want. It will not cow us into submission.”

The older man’s face split into a wicked grin. “You have no idea how wrong you are.”

I growled and couldn’t help but take a couple of steps forward. Mahlan held his hand out, and I paused. As much as I wanted to destroy anything threatening my family, I would always listen to my alpha. That was why I’d sworn a blood oath to him.

The council member—Phynol, apparently—didn’t spare me so much as a glance, which really got my wolf going. He wanted to teach the witch a lesson. To show them that wolves were not someone to mess with.

Instead, the man calmly stepped to the side, letting out a dramatic snap.

I braced myself, preparing for more witches to arrive, but that didn’t happen. Instead, the wall separating the ceremony hall from the entrance disintegrated into ash, revealing a row of a dozen or so animals.

*Shifters.*

Several wolves, a couple of bears. Some cougars. A panther. And was that a couple of oversized badgers I saw? Yeah...yeah it was. They stood in a neat line, but I could tell that there was something incredibly *wrong* with them.

It was only after a thorough round of revulsion shot through me that I noticed the others. I was pretty sure there was a demon there. And a druid. And even a nymph behind them. Not exactly a broad spectrum of fae, but more than enough to be concerning.

Suddenly, I remembered Theo telling me about a guard of ours who had been kidnapped, then used to fight against him in the big fight with Eleanor or whatever that bitch of a witch's name was.

“See how much more palatable you lot are with the proper guiding hands?”

*Mind control*, Lyssa’s voice hissed through my brain, sharp and full of venom. Oh, she was pissed. *They want to use our blood to mind-control other fae.*

“You see, with your contribution, we can cast our spell for miles and miles and miles—perhaps over several states. You have an impressive group here, but it’s by no means the entirety of the fae population. So while

all of you will lay down your lives tonight, the rest will be able to prosper under our new rules.”

“You’re insane,” Mahlan breathed, and I couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment.

“Such things are often said of visionaries.”

“Most fae are little more than barbaric animals who haven’t progressed in centuries,” another council member spat, a slight woman with flaming red hair. “The entire council had to be created because you wouldn’t stop killing each other for any reason your little mind could cook up!”

Well, that was just offensive.

“We’ve put in so many laws, courts, and whatever other protections you can think of, and yet you persist, slaughtering each other right and left!”

“We’ve had enough of it,” another said. “If you refuse to live peaceably, we will take the option to harm away from you. There *will* be peace, even if we must make it forcibly!”

“So that’s it, then?” Mahlan said, his voice practically shaking with anger. “You murder all of us and use mind control to position yourselves as a new class of rulers over all fae?”

“We prefer the term ‘guardians,’” Phynol said, so cocksure. God, could I rip his face off with my teeth? I wanted to rip his face off with my teeth.

“Of course you would.”

“Enough with the pointless banter. It is beneath both of us.”

“Hey, if you can’t keep up with it, just say so,” Theo shot back.

I couldn’t believe Mahlan and Theo were antagonizing a malevolent force threatening to wipe us off the face of the earth and enslave hundreds of thousands of our kind. But honestly, I was here for it.

“So be it,” the man said, raising his hand. I tensed for a fight, hackles raised and jaws snapping, but no attack came. Instead, a bright circle of radioactive green light appeared around the witches, and the smell of sulfur filled the air. I was sure that they were about to ready some insane attack, right up until I realized that an invisible hand was carving runes into the ground.

“I’ve had enough of this,” one of our witches hissed, sending out a plume of flame. But it never made it close to the council members, bouncing off some sort of forcefield.

Ugh. *Witches.*

“Begin the sacrifice!”

Now that I thought about it, “sacrifice” was more of an intimidating word than “battle.”

All the witches stormed forward as one.

We didn’t need the order to engage, and there was an explosion of noise, sound, and magic as we clashed. The sounds of fighting were everywhere, dulling my sensitive hearing. It was above our heads, in front of us, and hell, I wouldn’t have been surprised if it was below us, too. The building began to fall apart around us, what was left of the roof staying steady but most of the walls crumbling or catching fire.

But I didn’t let that destruction distract me. I launched myself at the closest group of witches, slashing with my claws and clamping down on whatever body part I could. My blood pumped in my veins, and I felt so *alive*.

I wasn’t a violent person by nature, but I would never be ashamed of protecting those I loved. I was also filled with a righteous fury for all the people the council was threatening. They wanted to mind-control the entire fae population? I would have said that was impossible if there weren’t nearly two dozen of our own mindlessly fighting against us. I couldn’t imagine that sort of existence, locked within my brain while being used as a living weapon. I couldn’t let that happen to all the innocents trying to survive.

A whip of lightning shot past me as I ripped off the arm of an attacker. I managed to dodge the bolt, tossing the arm to the side, but it caught my paw on the recoil. Heat lanced through me, and the smell of cooking meat filled the air, making me want to barf.

I was yanked to the ground, landing hard, and my previously broken bones let out a little ache. My wolf eyes spotted who was pinning me.

The lightning disappeared as quickly as it came, and I sprang forward immediately. I didn’t expect to make contact, so I wasn’t surprised when I bounced off a shield as I tried to land on the witch. I twisted as I did, landing on my front paws and kicking out with my back legs.

Because if there was one thing I had learned from Sam, it was that shield spells weren’t a one-and-done thing where a witch cast it, and that was that. No, it was a direct connection to the witch’s magic, which it drew upon every time there was impact. A clever witch knew this, casting multiple smaller shield spells one right after the other, layering them like an onion.

Sam had also told me that far too many witches thought they were more clever than they were.

So, after tanking the momentum and damage of a full-sized shifter wolf slamming into it, I figured the witch would need a moment to recalibrate and pump more magic into its barrier.

And I was right.

My back legs weren't going to do a lot of damage—I wasn't an emu or a horse—but it could knock a witch off balance for me to whirl on them, close my teeth around their ankle, and go bounding through the battle.

It was brutal, I knew, but one did what one must in battle. I jumped from safe spot to safe spot, repeatedly slamming the witch into the ground or furniture, bludgeoning or knocking his fellow witches off balance as I ran.

It was the epitome of hitting a bunch of motherfuckers with another motherfucker, and my wolf was high on bloodlust. After so much time shoved inside my skin, it was finally free to be its primal, uninhibited self.

Until it heard a scream. A very *particular* scream.

I knew that voice as if it were my own, and it made me skid to a stop, my mouth letting go of the long-unconscious witch.

*Savannah.*

I jumped to the closet pew, standing on my hind legs to look for her and scent her. I knew it made me more of a target, but I didn't care. The only thing that mattered was finding her before anything went wrong.

Well...more wrong.

Finally, I spotted her. She was patching someone by the altar, but a bear shifter had reached them. Too many on our side must have let him by in the chaos. He was trying to get to the wounded fae, who was barely conscious, and Savvy was fending him off with a broken pew piece.

It was impressive, for sure, and she looked like a Valkyrie. Hair flying, cheeks flushed, with her beautiful features pulled into an aggressive snarl, she was glorious—truly glorious. But she was also in danger, so I didn't hesitate.

I launched myself towards them, howling as I went. It would likely tip the bear off to my approach, but that was fine with me if it took its attention off Savvy. She had to be protected at all costs. She had to be *safe*.

The bear indeed heard me as I approached them, whirling away from Savvy and bellowing at me. Well, whirling as best as a creature of its size

could. While it could run impressively fast and had a near-godly amount of strength, bear shifters didn't have the best lateral movement. As a wolf shifter, I was downright nimble in comparison.

He swiped at me as soon as I was within range, but I jumped over his swinging arm, landing on his back and trying to bite at the back of his neck. But bears were just so damn *wide*, and my teeth couldn't find purchase before he threw me off.

My side hit the altar, and I slammed into the floor, more grateful than ever for my healing factor. My burned paw was almost completely healed, and my broken bones were already forgotten.

We shifters really were unfair.

Well, if we weren't going up against another shifter.

The bear advanced on me again, and I realized we would have to undertake death by a thousand cuts. A wolf's attack wouldn't likely penetrate their protective coat or thick layers of fat.

I could do that, though.

Shaking my head, I waited for it to draw close, then dashed past it, swiping at its side as I rushed to a pillar I used as a springboard to flip the other way and run along his other side. He swiped at me and bit the air behind my feet, but he couldn't catch hold.

It was exhausting, running in the world's narrowest circle, avoiding other people's attacks while I concentrated on weakening the bear.

I'd forgotten how much damage one of them could take.

Like most shifters, they could heal quickly, too, so any time I scored lines in his flesh, they sealed right back up again. But surely after the dozenth or so pass, his ability to mend itself had to be flagging a little.

Right?

I never found out. When I went for yet another slash, something slammed into my side, lifting me clear off my feet and making me collide with the altar again. This time, I didn't bounce off it. No, I mostly went *through* it, pieces of wood biting into me as I crumpled to the ground.

Okay, that hurt. And it hurt far more than it should. Once more, it wasn't until I smelled burning meat and fur again that I realized I'd been hit by a large fireball, leaving one of my sides crispy and smelling of seasonless barbeque.

That was going to bring out some complicated emotions during the next cookout.

If I made it that far, because the bear shifter was advancing on me, looking nonplussed at the hell I had been giving it for the last minute or so.

*Come on, brother!* I implored, trying to get to my feet. *You're better than this. You don't want them to control you!*

But it was like he couldn't even hear me. He was methodical in his actions, more machine than fae. One step after the other, no emotion in his eye, no spikes in his pheromones. Just determination to see me dead.

I needed a few more seconds to heal. Whatever had hit me in my side had done quite a bit of damage, and the bits of wood impaling me weren't doing much help.

Was this my end? Not out in a blaze of glory but felled by a simple mistake? It seemed possible.

Or at least it did until Savvy jumped onto the bear's back, wrapping her arms around its neck.

"Kaleb, hold him!" she cried.

Hold him? To do that, I needed hands.

Well, if the lady insisted.

Despite every instinct in my body screaming to do the opposite, I let go of my wolf form. Not all the way, of course; I didn't think he would allow that. But my fur began to recede, and my bones cracked as my joints reset.

Naturally, the bear shifter gave me no respite. There was no honor among brainwashed fae. He lunged forward, jaws wide, as he nearly flung Savvy off his back. But she hung on for dear life, and if she was going to put herself in danger, I was damn well going to make sure the move paid off.

My mostly human hands shot up, catching the bear at the corners of his jaw and sinking my pointed nails into the flesh there. He killed his momentum in an attempt not to give himself a Glasgow smile, but his teeth still snapped together in front of my face.

"Hold him!" Savvy ordered.

*Gee, what a novel idea!*

Maybe it was a good thing that Savvy couldn't hear my thought-speak after all.

But I held him despite my snarky unspoken comeback, ignoring the drool dribbling down my hands and how the bear was trying to jerk my arms out of their sockets.

It would only be a moment or two before he remembered he had paws tipped in massive claws and used them on me. I was riding on the element of surprise and the sudden pain in his mouth distracting him from disemboweling me.

My jaw was still too half in, half out of wolf form, so it wasn't like I could warn Savvy. Not that she seemed to be idling, not at all. Instead, I saw her press her face into the bear's fur as she clung tightly to its neck, her thighs clamped against his sides to keep her on him.

Was...was she trying to choke him? Because that would never work on a shifter like him. It wasn't until I felt a strange...sucking draining energy from the air that I realized she was using her alma magic.

Digging my claws deeper into the meat of the bear's cheeks, I tried to focus my hearing. Barely audible above the din of battle, I heard my love.

"Come back to us, friend. You are wanted, you are valued, and we will protect you. Come back. Come back. Come back home."

And then, she reached around and *put her hand in the bear's mouth!*

I was surprised I didn't have an apoplexy right then and there. Honestly, if it weren't for my half-shifted form and accelerated healing, I might have, anyway. But I jerked the bear's face to the side and watched in horror as Savvy purposefully raked the top of her hand against some of his teeth.

*Oh.*

*Blood magic.*

In my panic, I'd forgotten the core ability of almas. How embarrassing. Thankfully, I managed to recover from my shock and keep a good hold on the bear, despite my wolf panicking that it could smell the blood of its mate.

*Protect! Protect! We must save! Protect!*

I was working on that part, even if I didn't feel like it, as I watched rivulets of Savvy's blood trickle over the beast's lolling tongue.

"Alright, run!" Savvy cried, which was a curveball I wasn't expecting. I wanted to ask her what she would do, but again, my whole mouth thing wouldn't allow me to speak.

It was quite the conundrum, and I had only seconds to decide what to do. Less than seconds, actually. Did I trust her? Or did I listen to my inner wolf and hold on for dear life before she could get hurt again?

Well, she was the one casting the spell, so I figured I might as well listen.



It seemed like a dozen things happened at once. I let my wolf form back out, all the progress I'd made towards slipping into a humanoid figure vanishing in a flash.

At the same time, ignoring the popping and cracking of joints reforming, I threw myself to the side, bouncing off the altar was on and landing with a splat on the floor. But my healing was working overtime, healing muscles that snapped and ligaments that tore themselves, allowing me to bound away.

I didn't go far, however. Savvy had asked me to run, but she didn't ask me to go on a marathon sprint to a new state. Spinning, I prepared myself to change the beast.

Except there was no longer a bear shifter but a very haggard-looking woman lying in Savvy's arms, looking around like she didn't understand what she was seeing.

Was...was that the bear shifter?

"Hey there, friend," Savvy said, smiling softly. "Welcome back."

I trotted over, in wonder at what I saw. The bear shifter flinched at my approach but made no move to strike. I considered that a vast improvement over our previous interactions.

"Kaleb, would you help me get her to safety?"

I nodded my big old wolf head and lowered myself to my belly beside her. She could mostly support herself, but I could feel how badly her legs were shaking as she used my back to brace her weight.

Savvy and I got her where Savvy needed her, and I crouched again, allowing the woman to put pressure on my spine as she lowered herself. I was a shifter, after all; I could take it. Once she was settled, Savvy began to tend to the woman, which was my cue to rejoin the battle. I was sure the bear shifter had *plenty* of interesting things to say, but those would have to wait for later.

Assuming there was a later.

But looking over the battle, the bloodshed, and the utter cacophony of hate, I was hopeful. We were forcing the witches back further and further, although the ritual circle around the leaders had finished carving itself to the floor and was beginning to glow within their shield. I didn't need to be a part of a magic after-school program to know that wasn't ideal.

But if I wanted to do something about it, I had to get close to them. Unlike some of my allies, I couldn't blast fire across the room or rend the

air in two with my mind. And since I'd moved to help Savvy, I was well on the edge of the battlefield. I only had to cross one hall to reach them, but in the thick of battle, that was easier said than done.

Well, the only way to get closer was to start running.

So I did, racing as fast as I could. As much as I wished I could go in a straight line, that wasn't how fights worked. I bounded across the ground, only to feel momentum at my side. Skidding, I slowed myself enough to jerk to the side, just as a golem punched where I had been.

Right. Witches could do that.

Actually, was there anything they *couldn't* do? Because it seemed like their powers were limited only by their imagination.

Well, and schools of magic. Sam had told me once that while he *could* summon a fireball if push came to shove, it wasn't exactly a strong one, and it made him feel, for the lack of a better word, "icky."

Not the time to be distracted by anecdotes about my witch friend, however. Scanning the room, I dodged again as the golem raised his hands above his head, then slammed them down where I had been.

*There!* I spotted three witches standing in a triangle formation, their hands raised above their heads and glowing the faintest gray. If those fine folks weren't controlling the golem that was trying to turn me into wolf paste, I'd eat my shoe.

Not that I had shoes because of that whole being in wolf form thing...

Shaking my head, I jumped forward, using one of the golem's extended rocky arms to clamber up to his shoulder. It wasn't the most graceful move; I was a wolf, not a cat. But I got enough purchase to push my considerable bulk off him and land by the witches.

That was the thing about magic users: if you could surprise them with a physical attack, they often didn't have the reflexes to combat it. That was part of what made Eleanor and her lackeys so dangerous. They seemed plenty trained on how to handle a close-range fight with shifters.

I slammed into the closest witch, sending him stumbling and crashing into the ground. I bit into the back of the other's leg and jerked. Unsurprisingly, he let out several curses and tried to twist to fight me off.

I just shook them, ignoring his cries of pain. The third witch, however, had recovered quite quickly, and I could see her in my peripheral vision reaching out for me, purple lightning crackling around her hand.

I knew I didn't want her to make contact, so I spun in a tight circle, like a kid pretending to be a top on the playground. Did kids even play with tops anymore? I was pretty sure that I was part of the last generation who had.

Either way, I spun hard enough that the witch jumped back. Eventually, the meat of the enemy I was biting gave way, but they were sent sliding across the floor from my sheer momentum, leaving a streak of bright red behind them.

With my mouth free, I tackled the witch. To her credit, she called up a shield that made me feel like I was biting into tin foil. Not exactly the most pleasant sensation, but not enough to make me let go.

So I bore down, and bore down, and bore down until the shield began to flicker. I could feel the witch trying to summon her power to push me off, but I was too heavy. And every time my teeth snapped against her shield, she had to recast another.

It was a battle of attrition, and in our situation, I was inevitable. After a few more moments, her shield faltered, and my teeth latched around her throat.

I made it quick. Although my inner wolf reveled in battle, I didn't take pleasure in killing random fae, even if they were bigoted. The ones who had directly attacked us, sure. The council? Oh, yeah. But not their forces. Who knew what lies they had been fed or if they had been tricked? That gray area robbed me of any enjoyment.

Well, at least the path was clear to get to the council.

I dropped my most recently felled enemy and booked it toward their shield.

*Charge the shield on the north and west sides!* I called mentally for any shifters around me. I wasn't foolish enough to think I could take the shield on alone. But if enough of us did, maybe we could break it entirely. And even if we couldn't, I was willing to bet that a good dozen or so shifters attacking at once would more than serve as an excellent distraction.

The space between me and the council rapidly disappeared, my feet flying across the floor. I hear howls, roars, and screeches all around me, echoing over the fighting.

Only a few seconds later, I slammed into the barrier at full force, my teeth snapping at it. It knocked me back, which I expected, but then the next shifter hit it. And the next. Then Mahlan, his wolf form as impressive as ever. Then Theo's bright white coat flashed.

I recovered from the ricochet of my attack and tried again, standing on my hind legs and bringing my paws down, claws scratching at the enchanted surface. Meanwhile, other shifters continued to attack it.

Just as I hoped, it started to flicker. We were doing it. Witches had a lot of tricks up their fancy sleeves, but they sure messed up a lot by chronically underestimating the enemy.

And we were more than willing to take advantage of that weakness.

The shield flickered for a split second. Then again, a moment later. More shifters were joining us as other fae watched our backs.

We were doing it. *We were doing it.* Feeling triumph building in my chest, I locked eyes with the stupid, smarmy council member who had first spoken. I was willing to bet he was feeling pretty stupid about his boasting, given the turn of events.

But I couldn't help but falter when he just shot me an amused grin. Like what we were doing was *funny*. Surely it was just his ego. We had them on the ropes.

Didn't we?

"Enough of this," he said with a sigh. "It's not nice to dangle false hope in front of them before they die, is it, Arrieta?"

"It is a bit cruel," the redhead from before mused.

And that was all the warning we had before every council member faced forward and clapped together, sending out a blast of energy that made everything go white.

Pain. Indescribable pain filled me as I flew through the air. For a moment, there was nothing but my mind and the faint feeling that I was hurtling through space.

But my vision came rushing back as my very human body hit the ground.

*Ow.*

I'd been thrown around a lot in battle, but it hurt so much more in my squishy human body. I lay on the ground, unable to move and wheezing like an asthmatic.

Well, this wasn't ideal. But it wasn't anything my wolf form couldn't take care of.

Sitting up, I saw that my fellow shifters were littered across the edge of the battleground, animal forms lost. Everyone else who'd been a bit farther had also been shoved back.

Huh, whatever spell the witches had hit us with had been able to make us lose our animal forms. That...that was extremely alarming. When had they learned to do that?

I didn't know. But I wouldn't have been surprised if it was from all the shifter blood they'd collected. That young green witch woman had said that they'd hated the brothers, so it would make sense that they were spending their time researching other things that were useful to them.

"Come on," I groaned to myself, getting to my feet. My body was aching more than it had in ages, but that would end soon. I just had to shift.

Closing my eyes, I let go of my human form, ready for the popping, crackling, and nausea that came from rapidly changing my form.

Except nothing happened.

Confused, I looked down at my hands that were still very much human. Maybe my fall had rattled me more than I'd thought.

Taking a deep breath, I focused, then *shifted*.

Except I didn't.

Panic began to rise within me, and I looked around. Every shifter that I could see was upright also looked bewildered. Suddenly, the very full chapel had no wolves. No bears. No panthers. Not a single shifter in animal form.

No, no, no, this couldn't be happening!

Forcing myself to take a long, calming breath, I reached within myself for my inner wolf. While I found no pleasure in killing the masses, he certainly did. He liked the noise, the spray of blood. He reveled in defending everyone he loved at all costs.

But he wasn't there.

"What's happening?" I heard Lyssa's sharp, confused cry from across the room. I didn't answer her. I was afraid if I uttered the words, they would make our horrible reality true.

Because, as far as I could tell, the witches had taken away our ability to shift.

*Fuck.*

## Chapter 16

---

## *Savannah*

They weren't shifting.

*Why weren't they shifting?!*

It had to be the smoke. It wasn't just meant to obscure our vision, but it was somehow stopping the shifters from being able to reclaim their animal forms.

How was that even possible?

I knew the witches had curses that could lock a shifter's wild spirit away from them, like what had happened with Lyssa, but that had been a curse placed on her by powerful witches who had hoped to use her connection to the brothers to distract us from their true intentions. But this was entirely different. For one, there were no spoken words, no ritual. And secondly, it was affecting all the shifters at once.

No, no, *no!*

They were sitting ducks. Suddenly, our numbers had fallen from dozens and dozens of different types of powerful fae warriors to less than half our number. What I wouldn't give for a mythical drake or oni to appear out of nowhere and show the council what was what.

Time stilled as the revelation sank into my mind, all the consequences of such a thing freezing my thought process. Everything around me moved in slow motion, and yet I was powerless to stop it, a witness to our demise.

And that was when my eyes landed on Kaleb, pulling out a gun with the cursed bullets that Sam and our other allied witches had created. But he was still in mid-movement when one of the head witches from the council—Cornelius, I was pretty sure—reached out with power crackling around his fingers.

Even from where I was, I could feel the sheer force rushing out of the air and into the witch's spell. It reeked of death and destruction, something that would rip the soul right out of its target.

And its target was Kaleb. My mate. My *love*.

"No!" I shrieked, reaching out. What I thought would happen, I didn't know. It wasn't like almas had any projectile magic. Or cancellation magic. Or any magic outside of healing.

Yet, I reached out anyways, refusing to accept a reality where some bastard, racist witch could kill my love.

"*Kaleb!*"

But then, something happened.

It was impossible. There was no way it could happen, and yet it did. The crackling energy that the witch was summoning flickered for a moment, as if it was being ripped away from him.

Was...was that me?

It seemed so, because in the insane tumult of battle, the witch's eyes flicked to me before narrowing. And then his lips pulled into a foul sneer, one that made me want to punch him with his own magic until he was a fine mush.

"Cute. The nurse wants to pick up the sword," he drawled.

The resolve within me strengthened, but I felt something shift, and the energy in his hand began to increase again. It felt like it was pulling right from my soul, making me colder by the second.

"You fight me, not her!" Kaleb cried, unloading several bullets right after the other. The witch didn't even flinch, conjuring a shield to protect him.

I could feel the battle slipping away from us, the shifters retreating behind fae who could protect them. We needed our wolves, panthers, badgers, bears, and everybody else. We needed to be *untired*.

"Oh, this isn't a fight," Cornelius countered. "This is a *massacre*."

I tried to make his magic flicker like before, but whatever I had done in the moment couldn't take hold as it had in that split second of an adrenaline rush.

Until a cold—no, *freezing*—hand clenched my shoulder. I jolted, head whipping to the side, only to see that it was one of the banshee family I'd heard about. The mother.



She said nothing, as was expected, but her eyes told me everything I needed to know. Gripping her hand with my own, I looked back at the witch and *screamed*.

“*Stop!*”

The rush of power that went through me was like nothing else. It was like the lightning crack of the curse that had almost killed me, except it was positive. It was more than positive—it was *life-altering*.

I’d never experienced a banshee’s power before, and I was more than grateful I wasn’t on the receiving end as she used my body to channel her ability. We were incredibly lucky that banshees needed other fae to amplify their power. They probably would have taken over the world all on their own long ago.

The blast from the both of us, her magic combining with my own, hit the witch square in the chest. It sent him flying off his feet, but it did more than that. First, his clothes ripped to shreds, practically bursting into confetti. But then his skin started to tear from the sheer force. Then his muscles.

By the time he slammed into the wall, he was just a pile of bone and viscera, going from a fully formed witch to a pile of gore in less than a few seconds.

The banshee let go of me, and I stumbled to the side at the loss of contact. Thankfully, Kaleb caught me with one arm, gun at the ready.

“Savvy, are you alright?” he asked.

I nodded, slowly straightening myself, and I realized that I was still burning with power. After I looked back at the banshee, she gave me a knowing nod before running off deeper into the battle. Whew, what could she do if she got her hands on someone truly powerful, like a succubus or an impundulu, and not just a healer without any abilities? Wild.

“We need to press on to the ritual circle!” I called over the din of battle.

“I know!” Kaleb yelled back. “But I can’t shift! I can’t communicate with any of our pack!”

Ah, yes, the telepathic connection I’d always wanted. It was also gone, though the battle depending on it.

So what did we do? What *could* we do? We were disconnected, useless soldiers surrounded by others who were trying but depending on our muscle.

“Savannah!” I heard a familiar voice cry.

Whipping around, I saw Sam rushing towards me, moving impossibly fast as a rolling wave of vines propelled him along. I knew he was powerful, but he couldn't be *that* much stronger so quickly!

My answer came when he skidded to a stop below me, and two dryads emerged from the vines, their bark-like skin stark against the green.

"We need you."

"You need *me*?" I questioned, eyes going wide. What on earth could *I* do?

"Yeah, we've got two zephyrs in there who might be able to clear the smoke, but they just don't have enough power."

"So you need one of the banshees?"

He shook his head. "No, letting a banshee channel through a zephyr is more likely to cause a tornado that would kill all of us. We need *you*, Savannah."

He must have realized I was baffled because he pressed on.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to realize it. It should have clicked at that very first battle with you at Lyssa's place. But Savvy, you were able to pour so much energy into me that you nearly died, and I was able to take three witches down all on my own when I'd been just struggling moments before.

"So we need you to help the zephyrs. And this time, since you're not impaled and bleeding out, it should go a whole lot better."

Give them my power? If almas could do such a thing, wouldn't I know about it? Then again, it wasn't like we interacted with other fae that much. We were usually too busy healing the wounds those fae gave the wolves in our pack.

"I...I don't know how to do that."

"Sure you do! Just grab them and give them your energy. Like you gave to me last time.

It wasn't the time to argue about it, and it wasn't like refusing would save us. I swallowed and looked around. "Are...can I even grab them?"

I didn't know much about zephyrs other than that they were cousins of dryads, some of the oldest fae, along with the fates.

"If they want you to." He looked over his shoulder as if addressing them. "Come on, now's not the time to be shy."

They must have heard him because two more bodies were phasing out of the mass of vines. They were translucent, so I could see the battle behind them. Their features were aquiline and only vaguely humanoid. But they

were beautiful in a way I couldn't articulate, not that I was feeling all that poetic on the battlefield.

"So here's the plan," Sam said, his eyes sparking with his magic. Something had definitely changed in him. There was a fire burning in him anew, and that warmth filled me with a courage I'd been afraid to have before. "You channel your energy into the zephyrs, and we'll carry you forward to the ritual circle, clearing the cursed smoke as we go. Kaleb, the *very second* you sense you can shift, do it and spread word as loud as you can through your freaky mental connections that everyone else should, too."

"You're talking about joining spirits and magics with multiple fae, but you're calling a shifter's ability to communicate freaky?" Kaleb retorted, leveling his gun at a beast running straight for us. He managed to drill it three times in the head, and I couldn't help but wonder when he'd had time to have so much firearm training. Clearly, I'd missed a lot of the inner circle's training. "Huh, an atrinoch. I've only seen those in books before."

"Save that new sparkling personality for later," Sam shot right back. "It's time to save the world." He winked at me, then continued. "Kaleb, as soon as you get that message out, you lead the shifters in a surge toward that circle. We're going to overwhelm them with sheer numbers and teach these colonizing bastards that us fae aren't going to sit back and let them take over."

"Understood," Kaleb said, saluting with his non-gun hand.

"Let's do this," I agreed, reaching out and taking the zephyrs' hands. It wasn't quite like gripping something corporeal; there was no flesh, no warmth, no blood. And yet, they were real, living beings, the spark of life in them connecting with my healing magic.

Was it really so easy? Were we fae more connected than I'd ever thought, and all the partitions between us were falsely made?

Perhaps, but that was something I could tackle when we weren't facing off against seven of the most powerful witches alive and all their followers.

*Ready?* one of the zephyrs asked, their voice echoing around my head like a heady sigh.

"Ready," I answered.

"Alright, face forward and try to relax," Sam said. "Wouldn't want you to get whiplash."

Of course. Out of all the devastation, death, and violence, the last thing we'd want was something like that.

At least I knew that I didn't lose my snarky humor even when facing the apocalypse.

Before I knew it, we were surging forward. I had almost expected it to feel like a breakneck escalator, but it wasn't like that at all. Instead, strong but somehow cushioned vines wrapped around my legs up to my knees, then formed a barrier behind my back, supporting me as we rushed into the fray.

The magic of the zephyrs began to spread out. I could feel it the same as I felt Sam on that fateful day when my life had changed. Just like that day, I opened myself and shoved all the energy into my fellow fae as I could.

The change was immediate, and just like Sam said, it was *so* much different than when I had been dying. With only a scar on my side and the strength of my mating bond flowing through me, I could release so much *more*.

And it wasn't just that I was pouring my energy into them. It was like we were connecting, my blood becoming theirs and their...whatever...becoming mine. We were inexplicably connected, by magic, by battle, by *love*.

Their magic went from a swirling mass around us to a massive whirlwind. Except "whirlwind" wasn't quite the right word. There was no rage to it, no destruction, its caress no more than a gentle passing over the skin. And yet, it was ravenous for the cursed magic it sought, whipping it into the air and tearing it to shreds.

A familiar howl behind me told me it was working, and the next thing I knew, a cacophony of answering sounds issued from all around us—wolf calls, wildcat snarls, the chittering of badgers, the bellow of bears, all of them! Like a ripple of defiance, animalistic battle cries sounded in a wave.

And then, they all rushed forward.

We had to stay ahead of them, or they would hit the mist and falter out, but Sam didn't seem to have an issue directing the vines. We traveled in a rapid spiral, working our way closer and closer, until we reached the horde of underling witches guarding their leaders in the ritual circle.

They all looked to us, and I wondered if those witches could communicate just like the shifters. It wasn't like I got a chance to ask, as they all pointed their hands toward us.

Oh, dear.

It was like the air itself suddenly sublimated, solidifying itself in my lungs as the witches released a horde of spells at us. It was only a split second, but I saw beams of light, plumes of fire, clouds of biting bugs, and spiraling lighting. It was an unstoppable, unbeatable force that was coming right for our faces.

I was sure we were going to die, but then, the ground below us cracked in two, forming a path around the ritual circle, and a thunderous rush of plants shot up from them like the world's greenest geyser.

I gasped, watching as the plants formed a giant wall. The sheer force of magic that hit the plants seemed to shake the entire world, but the vines held steady for several long seconds, taking the brunt of the spells and neutralizing them.

By the time they crumbled—some ash, some glue, and some cut down—the witches were panting hard, clearly needing a beat to summon their next spell.

Too bad the shifters were on them the moment they became visible.

I hadn't even realized they'd caught up with us, but they had. Suddenly, hundreds, maybe thousands of shifters were racing forward, teeth and claws bared.

They hit the witches like a tidal wave, and the fae rushed in behind them, corralling the witches further and further back. Now it was a real battle, with brimstone and magic, shifter howls and fae curses. It was a cacophony of violence, and as much as I abhorred it, I knew it was necessary. We had to stop the council right then and there.

"If you'll excuse me," Sam said, tipping his head to me. "I'm needed to break that circle."

He jumped down. I let out a yelp of alarm, knowing that we were far too high up for him to land without hurting himself, but more vines shot up, gripping his waist and gliding him down to face the circle.

And he wasn't alone. The dozen or so witches on our side were all rushing forward, joining hands with him and speaking in rhythm. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I was sure their words were ancient and powerful.

But what was there for me to do?

As a healer, I wanted to be on the ground, dragging the injured away from the fray and stabilizing them. But how to get down? It wasn't like I could summon vines at the ready or heal my knees immediately after

shattering them. Sure, Kaleb's healing abilities had bolstered me, but that didn't mean I was anywhere near shifter level.

Then again, I did have two zephyrs next to me.

Turning my head, I looked to one and then the other. Once more, no words were exchanged between us. They simply nodded, each gripping my arm while their other arm went around my waist.

I was being floated down to the ground in a rush. Once my feet were on the ground, I bowed to them, and they returned the gesture before rushing into the battle ahead of us.

Now it was time for me to do what I needed to do.

I raced to the closest fae body, a young buckling with a mass of dark, oily roots growing out of his chest. Pulling out my knife, I made a small cut on the side of my arm and pressed it to his lips.

Thankfully, he was able to drink, and while the pressure made me wince, I didn't let it distract me. I placed my other hand over the mass and concentrated on it.

*You don't belong. Remove yourself!*

The mass tried to fight me, but I plunged my hand into the center of it, my blood beginning to rush through the young man and push it out from within him.

It was a fight, and I had no idea how I wasn't flagging. But somehow, I ripped it out and throw it toward the body of a witch lying near us.

"Wha...?" the buckling murmured after a beat, letting me know he was alive.

"Get yourself to the edge of battle," I ordered firmly. "Find somewhere safe."

He nodded and rolled onto his hands and knees, crawling over the devastation of the battle. It wasn't ideal, but it was better than death, and I moved on.

So many bodies. So many casualties. They all blended together as I treated them, feeding more and more of my blood. I knew I was relying on Kaleb's bond more than I should, but what choice did I have? I had to save everyone I could.

I concentrated on nothing but healing, everything else falling away. At least until what felt like a sledgehammer slammed into my back.

"What the fuck?" I gasped, nearly slamming my face into the ground as I fell.

Whirling, I saw that Sam and the rest of our witches had been blasted away from the ritual circle, three of the council members within turning their attention on the offensive while their brethren continued their chant. I could feel their power building by the second. Whatever grand spell they were casting would be completed soon. If we didn't stop them, it would spell the end of fae freedom across the world.

But what could I do? I'd helped with the zephyrs, but they weren't anywhere around. Could I even get to Sam? If I could, I'd give him everything I had.

"You! Alma!"

Struggling to sit up, I saw what looked like a saber-toothed tiger racing towards me, a slight woman atop the massive beast. I had no idea who she was, but her mount skidded to a stop beside me, and she offered a hand to me.

"You are the one who can amplify powers, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Come with me. I have a plan."

I probably should have asked for more info, but we were in the middle of a battle. She could explain to me as we went.

Reaching up, I took her hand, and the tiny, mousy woman kicked her heels into the creature's side. Once more, I found myself racing across the battlefield at impossible speeds. Who needed a motorcycle or a sports car when giant battle cats and semi-sentient vines were around?

The woman and tiger took us to where our witches were trying to regroup, but the shield barrier around them was expanding outward.

We were running out of time.

The cat came to a stop right behind the witches, and the woman pulled me off its back, both of us landing squarely on the ground.

"Savvy, what are you doing here?" Sam cried, his arms crossed in front of his face as he magically pushed against the advancing barrier.

"I don't know!" I called back as the woman led me right up to beside him.

"Hey, that's our alma-" Sam began.

"I know," the woman said firmly, removing her glasses with her other hand. "That's the whole point."

"Care to enlighten us?"

She tilted her head, grinning at Sam with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth, almost like a shark's. Meanwhile, her eyes began to glow with green fire, making her go from mild-mannered librarian to something otherworldly and haunting. "I'm a succubus, and she's gonna help me drain these guys."

A succubus?

As she said that, her hand tightened around mine, and I felt her energy beseeching me, begging me for aid. It felt much...sweeter than I expected, filled with concern for those around her and a flickering hope that we would win.

Perhaps I had a few prejudices about succubae that I needed to address. If we survived.

"Here goes nothing," I said, relaxing my body and letting my energy flow into her. While every exchange of energy so far had been unique, none of them were like connecting with the succubus. It was like she had an endlessly empty well within her, one that could be fed and be fed and never be satisfied.

As I poured myself into her, the terrified part of my mind whispered that she would devour me whole until there was nothing left. I knew I couldn't give in to it, but it started to grow in volume as I grew weaker and weaker.

Then, she lashed out with our magic.

It was like the barrier wasn't even there, perhaps because her magic wasn't an attack, though it wasn't a defense, either. No, it was a siren's song, promising warmth and extravagance. Promising untold pleasures and whispering deepest fantasies.

*Holy shit.*

It didn't spread like a rippling wave like Sam's and the zephyrs' magic. It seemed to become the air itself, filling the ritual circle with its appeal. Although it wasn't affecting me, I could still feel what it was supposed to do, and if I weren't holding the woman's hand, I was sure I'd be caught up in the spell, too.

"Succubus!" someone within the circle cried, and the three defenders focused on her. But Sam was too quick, calling up his shield in front of us as they tried to attack her.

"It's working!" he crowed, his eyes alight with victory. "Keep going! Give her all you got, Savvy!"



That was the thing—I was giving her everything I had. Despite my elation at seeing her strategy working, I felt like I was going to fall over.

But the succubus just looked over at me with such a charming grin, it was hard to be swoony. “Don’t worry. I got you.”

Did she? It could just be an empty promise. Because that was what her kind did, right? Promise impossible things and then drain people of their very souls?

No, I was being prejudiced again. I needed to trust her. All of us fae needed to trust each other. Our squabbles had allowed the witches to get such an advantage over us.

“You ever hear of a feedback loop?” the succubus asked.

“Wha-”

Suddenly her power inversed itself, going from a gentle, balmy caress to an irresistible pull. It had the inevitability of a gravity well, beckoning everything within the ritual circle into it.

And then, that magic fed into us.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, feeling like I’d just gotten the biggest shot of adrenaline. Except it was even better than that, because it wasn’t artificial. It was *real*. My body was suddenly topped up with everything that made me *me*, fed by the magic of those the succubus was draining.

And with my power topped up, I could pour that much into her. And with more of my power in her, she could ratchet her ability to a higher degree. And the higher the degree of her power, the more she fed into me.

*Ah, the feedback loop.*

Magic, energy, and life itself surged between us, rising higher and higher into an exponential crescendo. It was *exhilarating*, and I found myself laughing almost maniacally at the rush of so much happiness. So much life.

Was *this* what it was like to be a succubus? Well, we were lucky there wasn’t a lot of them in our part of the world. I could see myself folding for the once librarian-looking woman like a house of cards.

“This is incredible!” I heard Sam cry behind me. “Brothers, sisters, let’s help them out!”

Help us out how?

I got my answer when I felt their energy pool out of them, sliding across the ground until it was at our feet. And just like all the energy from within the ritual circle, it poured into the succubus and me.

Then I heard one very familiar voice. One I shouldn't have ever been able to hear.

*You can do it, Savvy. I believe in you.*

Kaleb. My mate. He was speaking to me inside my head like I was a shifter! I supposed out of the whole day, that was the least world-changing thing to happen, yet it struck me right down to my core, reverberating through me like a rhapsody.

I could do it. I *could*.

Wait, no—I *was* doing it. I was going to end the bloodshed once and for all.

A handhold wasn't enough. Turning to the succubus, I fully embraced her, pouring everything I could into her. The explosion of power out of her was indescribable, filling the council's space with magic levels I'd never heard of before, let alone experienced.

"Stop her!"

"Kill the succubus!"

"What is happening!?"

"I can't cast!"

It started as a flicker in the barrier, a barely perceptible crack. But then, it began to crumble in rapid succession, allowing a wave of the succubus' magic to flood out. I could feel everyone around us being refreshed by it, invigorated, and I was immensely grateful that the woman had enough control over her powers not to drain our allies accidentally.

Finally, in a moment that seemed to teeter on the edge of possibility for far too long, the council members collapsed, the last of their magic fleeing from the ritual circle and their shield dropping.

It was over.

No one moved for a moment, save for the leader of the council trying to crawl his way out. But the succubus wasn't done. I felt her ability reach for him, saturating his frame and draining him right to the point of death.

It was then that a cheer erupted from all around us.

We had done it! The council was defeated!

Suddenly, I found myself lifted and spun around before lips crashed into mine. Giddily, I knew who was embracing me. Kaleb. My love, my mate, and my warrior.

"What do we do now?" Lyssa asked, appearing just behind him, largely coated in blood. She'd really turned out to be a fearsome warrior.

“We should kill them all,” Hannah hissed, emerging out of her wolf form as well.

“I agree,” another shifter said, rage written across his features.

“I would like to offer a suggestion.”

We all turned to see the ancient shaman and the *brujeria* walk forward, their heads held high and faces full of determination.

“Yes?” Mahlan asked, stepping forward out of his wolf form.

“Death simply begets death, especially when it comes to our kind. We suggest that they be forced to live the type of life they abhor.”

“Yes,” the shaman continued where his magical colleague had left off. “Their whole lives, they have used their power to abuse those with none. So they shall become none and be reliant on the mercy of those kinder than them.”

“Are you saying you can cut off their magic?” I asked, breathless.

“Only because they are in this state.” To my utter shock, they bowed to me and the succubus. “We owe that to you.”

“We should vote on it,” Mahlan said, fair-minded as usual.

“As much as we appreciate your attempt at diplomacy, there isn’t time. We have hours at most before they regain their energy. You have drained them thoroughly, but they are ancient magic users. Do not underestimate them.”

I, for one, was all for less death. But the part of me full of teeth and rage wanted them to suffer as they’d made so many others suffer.

“Do it,” I said with all the authority I didn’t have. But I looked at those around me, daring them to counter me. Suddenly, I realized I was carrying a lot more weight and power than I normally would have. I’d proven that almas could be the difference between losing and winning a war.

“Then it shall be done,” the shaman said.

The two ancient fae moved past us, and then I was swept up in yet another hug, kisses planted all over my face.

“Kaleb!” I objected, feeling myself blush. “Everyone can see us!”

“Good. I want everyone to know my mate is the woman who saved the day!” More kisses on my nose, my cheeks, and finally, my lips. “You were *incredible*,” he murmured, much more quietly. “I never knew you could do that.”

“Honestly? Neither could I.”

He kissed me again, so slow and tender that I almost floated away. “That’s silly, because I’m pretty sure you could do anything.”

I grinned at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and feeling his heartbeat against my chest. We were both absolutely filthy, but I didn’t care. My pack was safe. The fae were safe. After so much pain and strife, there would finally be peace.

“You know what?” I said, pressing my lips to his. “I’m beginning to think so, too.”

## Chapter 17

---

## *Savannah*

“We, the Council of the Fae, recognize that we have failed you.”

I tried not to fidget as nervous energy went through me. It had been a solid week since the final battle, and I was not prepared for the aftermath.

I’d read plenty of legends and fantasies, but none of them talked about the clean-up afterward. The council needed to be reworked entirely, and they’d lost seven members who needed to be replaced. That would take time, as every single person who applied needed to be thoroughly vetted.

And there were laws, mandates, and rules that needed to be put into place to stop any coup from ever happening again. Limits on how many of one species could be on the council, for one.

Another surprising addition was that they wanted to add a human.

Now, there were humans here and there who knew about the fae world, so it wasn’t an impossible task, but it certainly wasn’t one I expected.

But the few members of the council who were left seemed to be ardently making amends. I supposed they felt just as betrayed as we were. They’d already returned all the missing moonstones to their rightful home, and dispatched aids to heal, rebuild, and help the injured.

And then, there was the college.

That was the last thing I expected, but the council promised to build a campus designed for all fae to learn and hone their skills. How they were going to screen humans out of it, I didn’t know. But I was impressed by the idea.

After all, there was so much about our kind that had been lost to the sands of time. Including the fact that almas could channel their healing

magic to energize other fae and amplify their powers. That was kind of a big deal.

“But we have called you today not to mourn, or lecture, or beg forgiveness.”

Oh? I had no idea why we were summoned. All I knew was a letter had arrived telling us to meet at an ancient chapel buried far below the base of a quarry, along with nearly every fae in the city who was healthy or old enough to travel.

I was so over all the pomp and circumstance that I had almost skipped out on it. My little display of boosting ability had spread like wildfire, and us almas were finding ourselves in the spotlight. Other fae wanted to know more about us, and packs were figuring out what it meant for their almas' duties.

And then there was us, the almas ourselves. I'd had two separate meetings with all the lovely healers in our state and shared with them how I'd tapped into an ability we'd never known we had.

I didn't know if the history of this ability had been purposefully scrubbed from all records or if it was a mutation that Sam had stumbled upon. The boosting ability made sense, considering the power of our blood and its healing properties, but the why and how were still blurry. It was a mystery, that was for sure, but one for the future. At the moment, there was something else quite important happening.

“We are here to begin a new age, a new relationship, and to celebrate the love we fae are capable of!”

The shaman was getting really into it, and my curiosity was beginning to peak. At least it didn't seem like bad news. Not unless the shaman had a strange way of broaching the subject.

“That is why we wish to present, in joyous celebration, the meeting of two souls.”

Wait, was there a wedding? I was pretty sure if Emma and Theo were truly getting married, they would have said something.

“For too long, we have allowed ourselves to be separated upon arbitrary lines. We lost the lessons of peace and unification that once made us so strong.”

Amen to that. I knew it wasn't going to be an easy road back to unity, and we needed to be better than we were before, but I was eager for the

journey. Even if I was quite nervous about what it meant for the future of all almas.

The old man kept going, unaware of the busy thoughts in my head. “Parker of Silent Ridge, please step forward.”

All our heads snapped towards Parker, who was blushing brightly. He turned to Sam, who looked just as bewildered as I felt.

“What’s going on?” the green witch asked.

But Parker just took his hand and led him to the front of the crowd. We were dead silent with anticipation, and a tiny, flickering hope began to glow in my stomach.

Was what I thought was happening really be happening?

I found out when Parker got down on one knee, pulling a beautifully embroidered ribbon from his back pocket.

“Samuel Fischer,” he said, presenting the ribbon across his two palms. “I knew from the moment I met you that you would change my life.”

Oh my gosh. My heart thundered in my chest, and I swore I was going to cry. My hand reached for Kaleb’s, and his found mine, our fingers intertwining.

“And you have, more than I could have ever imagined. So, I ask you, my love, if you would do the honor of agreeing to this binding? To tie our souls together and eventually be my mate?”

Sam started crying, and I lost what little resolve I had left, happy tears flowing down my face. It was so *beautiful*. After so much hate and death, we were all getting our happily-ever-afters.

“Of course I do! I do, I do, I do!” Sam squealed.

A tremendous cheer rose from the crowd. Those greedy, corrupted council members had tried to end us, to steal our joy. But love won out in the end.

And it was breathtaking.

Turning to Kaleb, I pulled him down into a kiss, hoping he could feel the depths of my love for him. And all around me, I heard others crying, hugging, and kissing their loved ones. It didn’t matter that Parker was a wolf and Sam was a witch, just like it didn’t matter that the rest of us were fae.

Because finally, *finally*, we were united as one. Just as we always should have been. We were an unstoppable, amazing force—a people who were



meant to cover each other's weaknesses and work together for a better tomorrow.

And as I looked around at my pack, the loving faces and the beautiful souls, I knew it would be quite a tomorrow.

I couldn't wait to see what came next for the Silent Ridge Pack. Because no matter what, it was guaranteed to be an adventure.

[Get Her Fake Wolf Daddy Today!](#)



**Faking it with my best friend wasn't supposed to start a war...**

The plan was meant to be simple. I pretend to be Xander's girlfriend to stop his mother setting him up, because now that he's the alpha, she can't wait to secure the bloodline.

Only it turns out a human like me isn't good enough, and she sets him up, anyway.

That's when all hell breaks loose.

When Xander rejects the female shifter who is the daughter of their ally pack's alpha, wolf daddy's fangs come out.

Not only have we turned Xander's ally pack into an enemy, we've done something much, much worse.

We've fallen in love with each other...

[Get Her Fake Wolf Daddy Today!](#)

Get the latest news on releases!

[Click here to sign up!!](#)

# Healing The Wolf's Heart

# Silent Ridge Pack: Book 3

Skye Wilson

© 2023

## **Disclaimer**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and events are all fictitious for the reader's pleasure. Any similarities to real people, places, events, living or dead are all coincidental.

**This book contains sexually explicit content that is intended for ADULTS ONLY (+18).**